This chapter is from a paper presented in a symposium at the International Froebel Society Third Biennial Conference: Learning to Play – Playing to Learn.

The title of the symposium was: Whose play is it anyway? Adult perceptions of risk, danger and ‘appropriate’ outdoor play: a view from the 1910s and 2010s.

My intention in this paper is to examine elements of the discourse surrounding the play of working-class children current in the late nineteenth and early years of the twentieth century and in doing so I identify aspects of that discourse which link with contemporary twenty-first century theory surrounding play and playwork. When current literature (Rasmussen and Smidt, 2003; Elsley, 2004; De Visscher and Bouverne-De Bie, 2008) suggests that the impact of urbanisation and of segregation on children’s street play are recent developments historical evidence suggests that these have been issues for such play at least since the early nineteenth century. So, whereas Pieter Bruegel depicted children playing in the streets in 1560 in Children’s Games, by the beginning of the nineteenth-century voices demanding that children be swept from the street were becoming ever louder as the geography of urban spaces was being construed in accordance with a philosophy of ‘separate spheres’ (which of course was also applied to women).

A central feature of the discourse surrounding the street presence of young working-class children, dubbed street Arabs or gutter snipes, was often more concerned with their presence as threat than with their safety (Weiser, 1980; Brehony, 2003; Hendrick, 2003), with their presence prefiguring their later street lives as thieves and beggars. Today’s rhetoric highlights ‘risk’ but with ‘threat’ a powerful subtext.

I use the ‘sand pile’ as a metaphor for the refashioning of gutter play to serve as a referent to Granville Stanley Hall’s (1907) account of the use of a pile of sand by a group of young middle class American children when left to play by themselves. Hall describes how using this found material developed the children’s creativity, manual and socialisation skills (Hall, 1907). So, why was this play, which doubtless entailed getting dirty, acceptable when making mud pies in the street or playing with other found materials was regarded as inappropriate and required intervention? As recent commentators have argued the street – or the neighbourhood – is a social...
space where children learn a multitude of skills fostering their social and cultural development (Christensen and O’Brien, 2003; Rasmussen and Smidt, 2003; Gill, 2007; Guldberg, 2009). It goes without saying that over the centuries the street, as social and learning space for children, has undergone profound changes, reflected in adult attitudes to/representations of its qualities.

The discourse of nineteenth and early twentieth-century writers focused on the dirt and smells and the uncivilised behaviour of gutter play. In 1870 social commentator Thomas Archer asked:

Have you never stood to watch one of the poor little inhabitants of a low neighbourhood at play on the doorstep, with a couple of oyster-shells, two or three bits of firewood, and a supply of odorous dirt from the gutter by way of toys? There is something strangely suggestive in the sight; and while I look at it I seem to be in the midst of a large, light, and moderately – lofty room, with a pleasant bit of playground furnished with swings and hoops and a flower-bed. In the room a hundred-and-twenty little children are divided into three or four classes . . . In the third division there are our old playthings, the oyster-shell and firewood, but without the mud, the place of which is taken by a number of other things – pieces of metal, coal, leather, salt – all kinds of familiar objects, among which are gaily-coloured balls, cubes, and geometrical figures, drawings of animals, trees, and plants, and a pile of slates . . .

(Archer, 1870: 45)

In Archer’s representation, the materials of the children’s gutter play became imbued in the kindergarten with a pedagogic intention, part of a Pestalozzian object lesson and including the Froebel Gifts and Occupations; ‘Play’ is transformed into ‘work’ to achieve an adult-defined task. In the kindergarten ‘infant life is made bright and genial, and instruction is like a pleasant round game, carried on with zest and ardent gaiety’ (ibid: 46).

Five years later, Friedrich Froebel’s nephew, Karl, then living in Edinburgh, explained how his uncle’s kindergarten principles could lead to social amelioration (Froebel, 1875). Like Archer, Karl Froebel posited the kindergarten and its activities as a refuge from the horrors of the street capable of instilling ‘a living spring of culture’ which would ‘wash away animality’. Karl’s rhetoric was graphic:

Dirty children screaming instead of singing, rolling in the mud or dust instead of dancing . . . playing with fragments of bottles and dishes, with dirty pieces of wood, and disgusting bones, instead of bricks, coloured tablets, sticks, peas; with dead rats and mice, and with fish-tails, instead of flowers; making cakes of the black mud in the gutters, instead of modelling with wax or clay; tearing dirty papers, and washing dirty rags in puddles, instead of folding, plaitsing, weaving, etc . . .

(Froebel, 1875: 12–13)

The promoter of evening play centres, Mrs Humphrey Ward, (Mary Ward), described the odours and filth of the streets in both her fiction and social commentary – and I have Kevin Brehony to thank for these references. Ward described the ‘dirty children’ as:

bursting out of grimy houses. The street was filthy, the clothes of the children to match. There was no occupation; the little souls were given up to ‘the weight of chance desires’; and whatever happiness there was must have been of a perilous sort.

(Ward, in Trevelyan, 1924 cited in Brehony, 2003: 94)
In her novel *Marcella* Ward powerfully articulated the poverty of working-class life and the consequences for children’s play opportunities:

*filthy gutters and broken pavements . . . the sinister squalor . . . the air heavy with odours . . . The children squatting or playing amid the garbage of the street, were further than most of their kind from any tolerable human type*  

*(Ward, 1894, cited in Brehony, 2003: 94)*

So, what did the Free Kindergartens present as an alternative to gutter play and what did they hope to achieve? The research for this paper entailed a critical examination of the discourse and practice of two institutions founded in London by Esther Lawrence, second Principal of the Froebel Educational Institute, the Michaelis Free Kindergarten, Notting Dale (1908) and the Somers Town Nursery School, St Pancras (1910).

In its Prospectus, the Michaelis Free Kindergarten described conditions in the streets as ‘degraded and degrading . . . Indeed, our horses and cattle are often better cared for than the young human lives which are growing up in stunted and depraved form in hundreds of our streets’ (Michaelis Free Kindergarten. Prospectus 1908). The second Annual Report of the Somers Town Nursery School presented a typical argument in support of its work – and again the language is worth noting:

> [W]hen one thinks of children spending the delicate and impressionable years of their lives in undesirable surroundings, untrained and uncared for, and probably acquiring degrading habits which tend to vice and crime, one can only be thankful for opportunities of helping even a few children in districts where such help is sorely needed.  

*(Somers Town Nursery School, 1913: 6)*

Looking back in 1933 the Nursery School’s Superintendent, Kathleen Stokes, recalled ‘The first few children had literally to be picked from the gutter . . .’ (Stokes, in *The Link*, 1933: 34). While travelling around London seeking suitable premises, Esther Lawrence echoed Froebel in proclaiming ‘[w]e must go into the streets and show the children how to play’ (Lawrence, cited in Reed, 1945: 6). Lileen Hardy, who founded St Saviour’s Child Garden in Edinburgh’s Canon-gate, then a notorious slum, in 1906, recognised some benefits from street play but at a cost:

> Their] only nursery is the street, and what they have there, though it may develop their wits, too often does so at the expense of finer qualities. Their imagination may be stimulated, but it is in an undesirable direction, and not beautifully, as a child’s imagination should be stimulated.  

*(Hardy, 1912: 85)*

For those children thus ‘picked from the gutter’, what were their experiences and what kind of ‘play’ replaced their previous activities – which were not play? The answer is suggested by an analysis of the language used in the Annual Reports of the Michaelis Free Kindergarten and Somers Town Nursery School to record the children’s activities and the behavioural traits of personal responsibility, cleanliness and social skills they were imbibing:

> They are trained to be useful . . . it is interesting to see them sweeping or dusting a room, washing their dusters and dolls’ clothes, polishing the furniture, their shoes and anything which needs polishing. On Friday morning the “silver” is cleaned.  

*(Somers Town Nursery School, 1911–12: 1)*
The children, small though they be, are becoming increasingly responsible for house-
work . . . Cleanliness and tidiness are all-important.'

(ibid: 2–3)

[T]he children play happily and peacefully by themselves with toys, learning the lesson of
giving and taking unselfishly.

(Somers Town Nursery School. 1916: 2)

The children at St Saviour’s were absorbing similar messages – and here Hardy’s assumptions of
what constitutes normal childhood reflect a classed view, with experiences far removed from
those enjoyed by her young charges:

[the kindergarten] teaches them cleanliness, order and obedience; and it restores to them,
by leading them into the land of games and of fairy-tales, something of their share of the
heritage of happy normal childhood.

(Hardy, 1912: 85)

Also, noteworthy is the diminution of the children’s freedom, where the autonomy of their
street play street has given way to permissions and allowances:

When children are first allowed to wash and clean and polish they make a great “mess” and
disorder seems to be the order of the day . . . [but] gradually give way to cleanliness and order
(Somers Town Nursery School, 1911–1912: 1–2) [emphasis added]

The open spaces of the street were now boundaried by the space limitations of the kindergar-
tens and by circumstances determined by:

Whenever the weather is fine the children spend a great part of the day in the small garden
(ibid: 2) [emphasis added]

[T]he children are allowed to use the garden . . .
(Michaelis Free Kindergarten Report, 1908, Child Life, X: 110) [emphasis added]

Photos demonstrate how space limitations restricted the scope of the activities, while the found
objects of the street gave way to manufactured materials for ‘painting, drawing, building and
other forms of handwork . . . suitable for the use of little children’ (ibid), including, of course,
the Froebel Gifts. So, children at the Michaelis Free Kindergarten enjoyed brush-painting
but with little room for large arm movements. Similarly, children built with Froebel’s Gifts,
but had little room for large scale construction. Exploring the mud of the gutter and making
mud pies was replaced by digging in the garden – with the emphasis on horticulture, planting
bulbs for example, but photos from St Saviours and other nursery schools show this was not
an activity which involved getting dirty. Other digging opportunities were provided in the
sand pit – again vastly limited compared to the open spaces of gutter and street. Like Thomas
Archer, Margaret McMillan recognised the value of the kind of junk materials children played
with in the street – once within the suitable environment of the nursery school. She reported
how popular with the children were the surplus materials left by the builders and other junk
materials at her Rachel McMillan Open Air Nursery School in Deptford and linked this with
their previous freedom:
Our green plots and ordered walks are good and right, but who does not remember that he once liked to play in a big place, where there were no walks at all, and no rules. Therefore, a Nursery garden must have a free and rich place, a great rubbish heap, stones, flints, bits of can, and old iron and pots.

(McMillan, 1919: 47) [emphasis added]

The Michaelis Free Kindergarten summarised its intentions with regard to the children in its Prospectus (1908) as follows:

1. To see that the children are clean and adequately fed, and to train them in habits of cleanliness.
2. To occupy them indoors and out of doors in a manner suited to their childish years, thus adding to their happiness, intelligence and usefulness during childhood, and in afterlife.
3. To aid the progress of morality, order and freedom through the concerted action and general influence of the Kindergarten.

Concluding comments

Arguably, the intentions of the organisers of the free kindergartens and nursery schools replicated, albeit in a very different context, Froebel’s claim that he learnt from watching children at play and developed activities based on this but harnessed to both pedagogical and political aims. However, as Jones et al (2005) have pointed out, such hijacking of children’s play can be viewed through a Foucauldian lens as a regulatory mechanism whereby working-class children’s street culture is suppressed in the interests of a normalising/civilising agenda. We can see this in what emerges from the discourse and practice discussed in this paper which reflect concerns about the appropriate environment for children’s development. They also shed light on views about the inadequacy of working-class parents to bring up/supervise their children, with the potential for an undisciplined urban population and workforce.

In G. Stanley Hall’s account, the sand pile was located in a rural setting and, importantly, the children were middle class – although playing on their own they were being supervised from a distance and otherwise lived highly regulated lives with appropriate behaviour modelled by their parents. Their play, outside a formal setting such as a kindergarten or school, was construed as socially and educationally improving. In contrast, the urban gutter play of working-class children was characterised as dirty; the street was an inappropriate and unregulated space for young children, where experiences were socially damaging, to themselves and to society at large and of dubious educational value.

Although gutter play undoubtedly embodied risk, with indisputable health issues, the removal – or ‘rescuing’ – of children from the street nevertheless entailed the rejection of the cultural play space of the working-class child where they imbibed the specificities of class identity. In place of the gutter, the child was relocated in a miniature version of the rural idyll embodying Romantic and Froebelian conceptions of appropriate environments/activities for children’s development, no matter that these clashed with the actualities of the children’s lives. Here middle-class kindergartners could model appropriate behaviour and shape children as useful obedient future workers and as parents. At the same time, many of the features and positive potentialities of children’s gutter and street play – for socialisation and identity development, for imaginative and creative play – were replicated in the free kindergarten but endowed with respectability once reframed within a middle class pedagogical and political project.