

JNCTP



Is Play the Common Core?

**A discussion paper for JNCTP/East
Region Conference, 9 May 2006**

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Introduction

The [Children's Workforce Strategy] is about our plans to create and support a world-class workforce which is increasingly competent and confident to make a difference to the lives of those they support.

Every Child Matters: Change for Children (2005)

Many of us in playwork share the Government's desire to have a have a "world-class workforce which is increasingly competent and confident" – however I am increasingly of the opinion that our world view as workers with children is very different to that currently being explored by the UK Government. In this discussion paper I will set out a framework that explores competence at all levels and points towards the significance of a play-centred approach in our work with children.

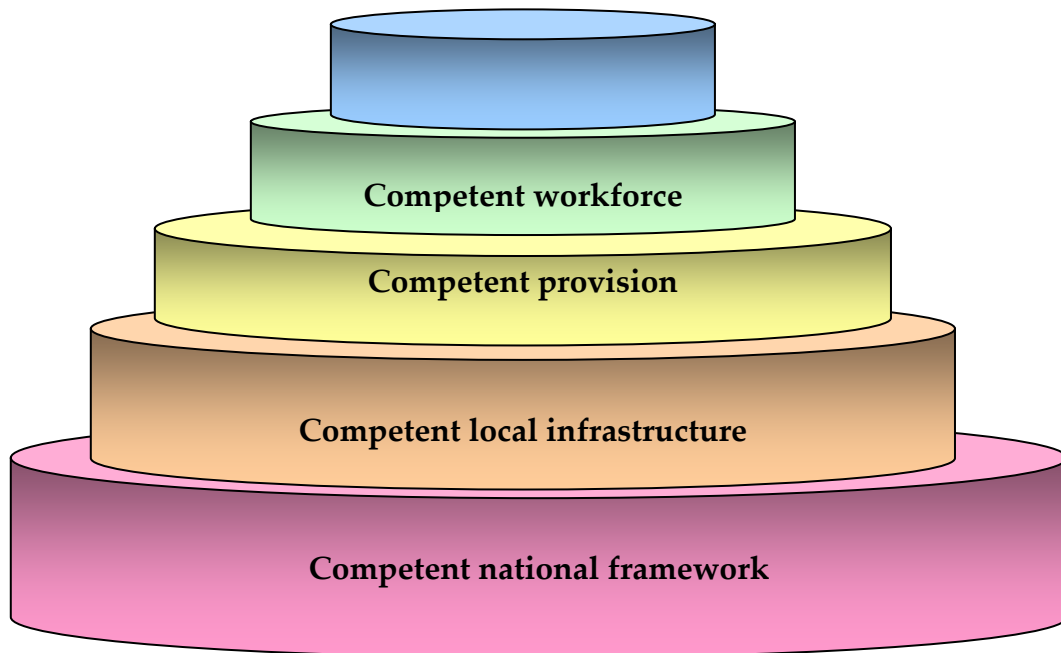
A competence framework

When I hear talk of a competent work force and the common skills needed, I need to fit the concept into a holistic model that makes sense to me. [In this paper, I have taken the definition of competence as being 'adequately qualified physically and intellectually'.] For me, the term 'competent workforce' captures the Government's intent of a collective of people across many disciplines working together to 'make a difference to the lives of those they support'. A 'competent workforce' also hints at being located within:

- Competent provision
- Competent infrastructure
- Competent national framework

Each level is inter-related with and inter-dependent on the others as shown in Graphic 1. Ideally these links would be apparent across many disciplines, which I'm sure is the Government's overall intention.

Graphic 1



We can see the steps Government has taken in these directions. Examples include the merging of services for children and young people with the move towards children's trusts, the development of children's centres and extended schools. More locally in play, we have the three-year Big Lottery funding and the national infrastructure work being led by the Children's Play Council.

However the term 'a competent workforce' also suggests that we need competent practitioners – people skilled and knowledgeable to do their job. The skills identified for the common core – child and young person development, safeguarding children and promoting the welfare of children, effective communication and engagement, supporting transitions, multi agency working and sharing information – are common within playwork as they are some other professions. We could argue that a playwork-centred approach enhances the effectiveness with which some of these skills are carried out. But for now, it is in the level of competence required that we find a variance from the stated aim of a "world-class workforce". In the Children's Workforce Strategy (2006), we find the aspiration set as follows:

...The greater the proportion of workers in a setting trained **up to level 3 (equivalent to A level)**, and the higher the level of skill, knowledge and qualification held by the person leading practice, the better the outcomes for children. ¹ (my emphasis)

A "world-class workforce"

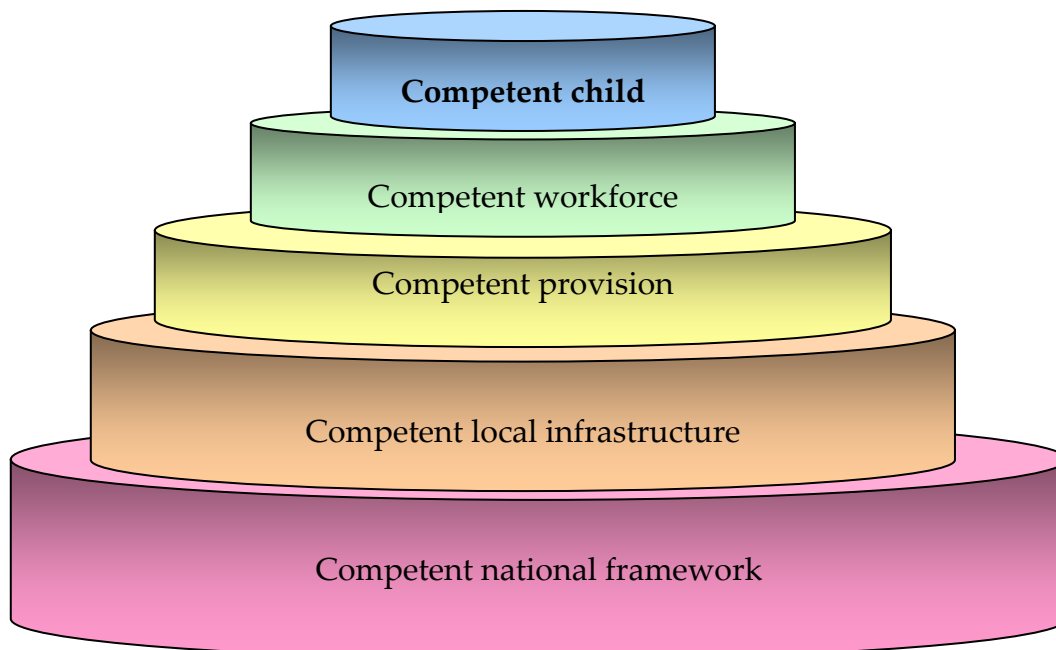
In Sweden, the 'world class' standard is Level 6, or degree level:

To qualify to teach in pre-school, pre-school classes or the first years of compulsory school as well as leisure-time centres [play centres], you will need 140 credit points, (1 credit point = 1 week of study, one academic year = 40 credit points) or 3½ years of study. ²

Here I am quoting Brigit Andersson who spoke at JNCTP's London conference in 2004. For those of you not there, Brigit explained how in Sweden childcare was based on theories about children's development and pedagogical (child leader) activities support the child. They see learning and development as a continual process and play is a key part of that. The focus in the leisure-time (play) centres is on children's development of social competence and skills. Play is seen as highly relevant for the children from their own perspective, not from the adult perspective. And most centres are located within schools. Much of this infrastructure now sounds familiar from the new developments we are seeing in the UK, though I know that play has only recently being recognised as a key part of this overall provision.

Back to the model; we have one more layer to complete – the topmost, the one that is key and is supported by all the others. It is the competent child.

Graphic 2



It is here that the current Government vision is at odds with a world-class vision.

Views of children

In the UK, we have three views of children. As described by Moss and Petri (2002) there is a dominant view of children that relates to them as “private and dependent, needy, weak and poor;”³ this view could be categorised as the ‘vulnerable’ child. Another view is that they are ‘robust’; resilient, streetwise, and make their own decisions without reference to adult agendas. The third is that they are ‘small

people'; citizens capable of making their own decisions, aware of their responsibilities.

If we see children as 'private and dependent, needy, weak and poor' we are inclined to act as protectors and to offer didactic (taught) solutions to their 'problems'. Alternatively, if we see children as 'robust' – independent, wilful, strong and forceful – we try to act as controllers and to offer punitive approaches to control their behaviour. We see the results of this in the rise of statements for children, prescriptions for Ritalin,TM Anti Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) and MosquitoTM - the new noise generating machine that only people under 21 can hear.

A view of children as competent

Moss and Petri argue for an understanding of the 'rich' child:

Within our alternative discourse, children are understood as citizens, members of a social group, agents of their own lives (although not free agents, the constraints of society, the duties of citizenship all come into play for children as for adults), and as co-constructors of knowledge, identity and culture, constantly making meaning of their lives and the world in which they live.⁴

This vision, seeing children as 'co-constructors', echoes that from Reggio Emilia, the small Italian region that has inspired work with children around the globe:

The curriculum is not child centred or teacher directed. The curriculum is child originated and teacher framed... We have given great care in selecting the term 'negotiated curriculum' instead of emergent or child-centred curriculum. We propose that 'negotiated curriculum' better captures the constructive, continual and reciprocal relation among teachers, children and parents and better captures the negotiations among subject matter: representational media and the children's current knowledge.⁵

Innovations in Early Education

Loris Malaguzzi from Reggio takes this further:

This [work] opposes any prophetic pedagogy which knows everything before it happens, which teaches children that every day is the same, that there are no surprises, and teaches adults that all they have to do is repeat that which they were not able to learn.

Loris Malaguzzi, The Hundred Languages of Children⁶

And more poetically:

The child is made of one hundred.

The child has a hundred languages, a hundred hands, a hundred thoughts, a hundred ways of thinking of playing, of speaking. A hundred always a hundred ways of listening, of marvelling, of loving, a hundred joys for singing and understanding, a hundred worlds to discover, a hundred worlds to invent, a hundred worlds to dream. The child has a hundred languages (and a hundred hundred hundred more) but they steal ninety-nine.

The school and the culture separate the head from the body.

They tell the child: to think without hands, to do without head, to listen and not to speak, to understand without joy, to love and to marvel only at Easter and at Christmas.

They tell the child: to discover the world already there and of the hundred they steal ninety-nine. They tell the child: that work and play, reality and fantasy, science and imagination, sky and earth, reason and dream are things that do not belong together.

And thus they tell the child that the hundred is not there.

The child says: No way. The hundred is there.

Loris Malaguzzi (translated by Lella Gandini)⁷

This approach argues for a holistic approach to working with children, for dialogue and interaction with children, an approach that we can argue is common in playful relationships with children.

A play-centred approach to work with children

In *Towards Ludogogy*, the paper that Gordon Sturrock, Wendy Russell and I co-wrote, a new way to position our response to children is offered. This was originally proposed to describe approaches to playwork⁸; however we suggest it may also have an application in any context for working with children. Our continuum suggests that the optimum position is one of dynamic tension between two extremes as shown in Graphic 3.

Graphic 3



This 'play-centred' (ludocentric) position allows for a variety of responses:

.... it is possible for adults to operate at different points along the continuum depending on a number of variables that include: context; role; expectations of other adults; our own worldview, morals, emotional responses to children; our level of understanding about play – to name but a few. ⁹

The relevance of play

We should also remember that play is not just a children's phenomenon, it is present throughout life and is in the creativity and energy of many different kinds of people. In looking to the greatest minds it is possible to find many examples of playfulness and playful approaches from every discipline of human activity.

In *The Creative Process*, Ghiselin (1952)¹⁰ shows how Jung, Nietzsche, Einstein, Picasso and Henry James amongst others describe their most creative processes in terms that relate to the playful experience. Pat Kane in his book *The Play Ethic* (2004) has this to say about the new paradigm:

The Play Ethic shows how play is fundamental to both society and to the individual, and how the work ethic that has dominated the last three centuries is ill-equipped to deal with the modern world.¹¹

The relevance and importance of play in the twenty-first century is growing and it is timely that this influence comes to bear on the current developments in services for children.

A playwork view of children

As shown in the playwork principles agreed in 2005,¹² playworkers already see children as 'rich' and as competent:

Children and young people can determine and control the content and intent of their play, by following their own instincts, ideas and interests, in their own way for their own reasons.

This contrasts with the current view expressed through the language of Government documents, where children, young people (and families) are seen primarily as customers and at best as passive citizens. If we are to build a truly "world-class workforce which is increasingly competent and confident," we need to build a world-class vision that is more open and more holistic than that being currently developed. While this may seem optimistic, my view is based on many years working with first rate playworkers, care professionals, early years practitioners, teachers and artists who share a common view of children; a view that is flexible, improvisational and playful.

The implications of a play-centred approach

Adopting a play-centred approach has implications all through the holistic model that supports the competent child. I have made a start at addressing them as follows:

Level of operation	Implications
Competent child	<p>The competent child is independent but also interdependent.</p> <p>The competent child is competent as a family member, a pupil, a consumer or a citizen. But more basically and more importantly, the idea of the competent child is intimately linked to the view of children as rational "beings"; children in their own right, without direction from an adult agenda.¹³</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Children and young people can determine and control the content and intent of their play, by following their own instincts, ideas and interests, in their own way for their own reasons.¹⁴</p> <p>Their development is continuous and holistic; they learn about feelings as well as mathematics, about culture and politics, about using bodies and using minds, about risk and resilience, about art and science, about themselves and how to relate to others.</p> <p>Children are seen and heard; they are listened to as citizens in their own right – able to comment on the services that are provided for them.</p>
Competent practitioner	<p>The competent practitioner is likewise an independent and interdependent person.</p> <p>Ideally skilled to Level 6 and understand about 'multiple intelligences' (Gardner 1983¹⁵) and the many ways children interrelate with the world.</p> <p>They provide a setting that is open and accessible to all children with appropriate regard for who they are, where they come from, how they look and how they behave.</p> <p>They are competent with emotional and cultural literacy themselves and are word smart, reasoning smart, picture smart, body smart, music smart, people smart, self smart and nature smart.</p> <p>They also recognise the boundaries established by the current legislative framework.</p> <p>Playwork practitioners work to the playwork principles: They understand that all children and young people need to play and that the impulse to play is innate; that play is a process that is</p>

Level of operation	Implications
	<p>freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. They know the prime focus and essence of playwork is to support and facilitate the play process. For playworkers, the play process takes precedence and playworkers act as advocates for play when engaging with adult led agendas.¹⁶</p>
<p>Competent workforce</p>	<p>The competent workforce is a balanced group of people that work with children in variety of settings that support them.</p> <p>They recognise professional boundaries but work hard to blur the distinctions. They operate to an agreed common core of competences with a common value base. Flexibility, imagination and creativity are supported; mistakes are infrequent and seen as learning opportunities for everyone.</p>
<p>Competent provision</p>	<p>The competent provision is a balanced range of settings that cater for children’s care, education, leisure time and play activity. Provision is locally accessible and within the economic means of users. Provision for play is freely accessed and with freely-chosen activities by the children. Competent provision provides a rich environment for children.</p>
<p>Competent local infrastructure</p>	<p>The competent local infrastructure supports learning, teaching and development for the entire workforce. Both the city wide and regional infrastructure understands and supports the needs of the workforce and children. For example, play strategies, playwork training strategies link to workshops, service or organisational development plans, and local funding opportunities.</p> <p>Everyone in the system is supported towards autonomous action and ‘lifelong learning and development’ within the playwork context.</p>
<p>Competent national framework</p>	<p>The competent national framework of opportunity ensures that all settings and providers offer the necessary range of opportunities for children from a playwork perspective. For example, by offering guidance on playwork interpretations of legislation and social policy, national qualifications, national funding.</p> <p>A ten-year vision of development aims to ensure that all practitioners are qualified at least to Level 6, with a variety of routes to qualification that meet different learning styles.</p>

Summary: Is Play the Common Core?

While a play-based approach does not offer a universal panacea to all the issues the UK faces in raising children, taking a playful look at the current proposals offers a more balanced perspective that may help meet the stated aspirations, be good for the workforce and for the children we aim to support.

Perry Else, May 2006

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