

Unpublished talk by Emily Charkin at History of Education Conference, November, 2011, Glasgow

'He swings where there is space': physical freedom as education in the Peckham Health Centre (1935-1950)

INTRODUCTION

CARD 1

My talk is about the history of a radical learning environment - the Peckham Health Centre (1935-1950). But it is also about breaking the historian of education, Depaepe's commandment that 'thou shalt not write a history for the present'.¹ My intention in writing and talking about the Centre is to give a historical account i.e. in context and acknowledging contradictions and multiple perspectives. However, my intention is also that this be a history which can speak strongly to the present. And this is why.

When my son, Frank, started at a 'good' local state primary school in London, adults liked to ask him which class he was in. Frank would reply cheerily 'I2 line up'. When he wanted to go to the toilet at this school, he had to hang a sign around his head on which was written 'toilet' and go to the toilets where they have, without controversy, introduced CCTV. Line up, take turns, sit quietly on the carpet, hands-up, use your finger to read, don't use your finger to read, go the toilet, don't go to the toilet, walk up the stairs that way, walk down the stairs the other way...the physical control of children is a defining feature of schools as we currently understand them. And the direction of that history (for as the philosopher Alisdair MacIntyre suggests, 'the exercise of practical relationship in communities always has a history and it is the direction of that history that is important'²) as represented in England by Academies and the so-called free schools - is towards more of the same. Our children are obese, disengaged, mentally ill and rioting. And we offer more of the same. This is why, I believe, we need histories which can challenge and inspire us in the present.

CARD 2

The time was 1935-1950. The place was Peckham in South London. The founders were a husband and wife team of doctors called George Scott Williamson and Innes Pearse. They were known as, 'the biologists'. They met in the pathology unit of a hospital. They became increasingly convinced that society was too preoccupied with the causes of disease at the expense of an appreciation of the nature of active health. They took a very, what we might now call, 'holistic' view of health with an all-encompassing view of human flourishing and potential. This starting point led them increasingly into the fields of child development, learning and education. It also led them to establish the Peckham Health Centre, the Peckham Experiment or 'the centre' as it was more commonly known by its members.

¹ M.Depaepe 'The Ten Commandments of Good Practices in History of Education Research' CHECK REF.

² A.Macintyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, (Chicago: Carus, 1999) 144.

CARD 3 - show photo of the building

So 'the Centre' opened in 1934. It was a striking modernist glass and concrete building, designed by an engineer, Owen Williams, according to Scott Williamson's clear vision of its purposes as a place in which the Biologists could not only study the nature of health but also create the conditions to nurture it. The Centre was run on the basis that members joined as a couple or a family, they had to pay a small subscription (so that it was not charity) and they had to agree to an annual health check or overhaul. In return there were facilities appropriate for all ages so that the whole family had, what the biologists called, 'opportunities for action'. The biologists' scientific agenda was to study 'free agents plus their self-created environment' they therefore adopted a policy of non-interference (for themselves and the staff at the centre) and insisted on radical levels of freedom - what they called a 'sort of anarchy'.

CARD 4

This freedom was extended to the children. When the Centre first opened this seems to have led to a degree of chaos as the children and teenagers whirled around the Centre damaging equipment and wreaking havoc. The biologists came under some pressure to introduce rules to deal with the children - they resisted - and eventually a 'spontaneous order' emerged. As well as avoiding rules, the Biologists began to believe that any kind of externally imposed activity such as the swimming lessons which they had laid on at the beginning, were unnecessary. They refer to the fact that 'noone wished to attend; they tore up the timetables and watched spontaneous and purposeful activity flower almost immediately'.

CARD 5

Show photo of trampolining, then climbing in the gym, then swimming pool.

Children (from school-age upwards) mainly used the Centre after school or on Saturdays; Innes Pearse describes how 'between 4 and 6 a steady stream of one to two hundred boys and girls enter the building ... it becomes alive with their activity'.³ This 'activity' included cycling, roller-skating and trampolining in the outdoor areas; climbing and swinging in the gymnasium; diving in the swimming pool to eating in the cafeteria to playing games or doing homework in the quieter study area.⁴

³ Pearse and Crocker, *The Peckham Experiment*, 192.

⁴ Pearse and Crocker, *The Peckham Experiment*, 51

CARD 6 - photo

The defining feature of the Centre for the children was the free way in which they were able to inhabit the space, use the equipment and interact with other children and adults. Dorothy Batten, whom I interviewed about her memories of the Centre, recalled an 'abiding feeling' of freedom. This 'feeling' is echoed throughout formal and informal accounts of the Centre, with repeated use of words such as 'spontaneity', 'lively orderliness' and 'freedom'. Child members recall 'the joy of having so much bright space to run around in',⁵ the 'freedom of choice of many activities'⁶ and that 'within reason we could do what we liked'.⁷ The photographs and home video⁸ also reinforce this 'feeling'; the children are barefoot and often naked, not in lines, mainly unsupervised, in light open spaces, involved in physically free activities. Even in the Centre school, children were encouraged to express what the Biologists called the 'physical exuberance natural to any young animal'⁹ with the first part of the morning dedicated to free play on the bicycles and rollerskates before settling down to quieter activities. And throughout the day, Henrietta Trotter, a helper in the school whom I also interviewed, recalls her first impressions of the children 'just getting on with it.'

CARD 7

The physical freedom of the child did not just reflect a different approach to discipline. The Biologists observed that this freedom was an essential condition for the learning and flourishing of the child - not just physically but mentally and emotionally as well. Innes Pearse gave an example of how the school children, free to move around the whole Centre, went up to a man reading poetry in an arm-chair, sat with him a while until he responded to their interest by reading aloud some of the poetry; this led the children (and their families) to write some poetry themselves.¹⁰ They observed, that the children, given appropriate freedoms and 'opportunities for action' would attempt action at the moment appropriate to their individual development.

Freedom was not only *how* the child learnt but also *what* the child learnt. According to the Biologists, visitors were struck not so much by the children's freedom but by their ability to use that freedom well.¹¹ Pam Elven, who was a teenager at the Centre, claims that 'the Centre taught her and others 'how to live'¹² and another member suggested, 'it helps us keep growing wherever we may be'.¹³

⁵ Testimony by ex-member in an email to John Beasley 11 November 2006, Southwark Local History Archives.

⁶ P. Elven, 'It Seems Only Yesterday'.

⁷ Adge Elven cited in Stallibrass, *Being Me and Also Us* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1989), 128.

⁸ Black-and-white silent amateur video, 1949, Wellcome Archives SA/PHC/H.2.

⁹ Pearse and Crocker, *The Peckham Experiment*, 200.

¹⁰ I. Pearse, *The Quality of Life* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1979), 108.

¹¹ Souvenir brochure for the film, 'The Centre', 1949, Southwark Local History Archives.

¹² Pam Elven, written testimony, 'It Seems Only Yesterday', 3 September 2009, Southwark Local History Archives, 71.

¹³ Elsie Purser letter 'What the Centre Means to Me', Wellcome Archives SA/PHC/C/6/3.

CARD 8

As a historian I was concerned with revealing some of what Quentin Skinner, historian of ideas, calls the 'battles'¹⁴ behind the apparent certainties of accounts offered by advocates of the Centre. For example, it can be argued that the constant visibility of the children to other adult members and staff (the building was designed to maximise this kind of transparency) meant that they were constantly under the surveillance of what Foucault has called 'the gaze'. SHOW SLIDE OF BEING WATCHED

While acknowledging this power dynamic, I would argue that the intention and quality of the 'gaze' in the Centre meant that the children's experience of freedom is still a valid story to tell. The Biologists watched in order to observe and measure, rather than change, the actions and behaviours of the members.¹⁵ The Biologists also encouraged others adults to watch the children in a less controlling way - for example persuading parents that 'no child left alone in these circumstances will attempt what it cannot safely achieve'.¹⁶ Dorothy Batten recalled how her mother, who was anxious about her son's climbing, was advised by Williamson to 'not look' rather than restrict the child.¹⁷ The gaze at the Centre was based on a view of the child as robust, capable and responsible; a gaze, which sought to learn, empower and liberate rather than control, judge or help.

CARD 9

My other work as a historian was to situate the ideas which informed the Centre within their wider context. The emphasis on the freedom of the child had much in common with the progressive movement of this period. Indeed George Scott Williamson declared himself a 'student of Dr Montessori' on the basis that she was the 'first to notice that the potentialities of the child needed liberation and cultivation in an atmosphere of freedom'.¹⁸ However, the Biologists rejected the notion of a 'child-centred' approach claiming that 'there is a good deal of talk these days of a children's world, but let us make no mistake about it, the child has no wish to be relegated to a world of its own'.¹⁹ It is noticeable that Williamson makes no reference to Isaac's influential work in child development in London during the 1930s; this may reflect his antipathy to the therapeutic ideas of Klein which she championed. Instead, the Biologists favoured a model of social learning within the family and wider community. They claimed that 'the children are constantly circulating freely amongst the adult society which presents them with an orderly framework in which they meet not chaos, but effort, taste, selection, skill and all the other attributes of a mixed community in action'.²⁰

¹⁴ P. Rabinow (ed), *The Foucault Reader* (London: Penguin, 1984), 6; and Q. Skinner *Visions of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 7.

¹⁵ Staff could measure the children on a range of criteria as outlined in their Research Programme in 1949 (such as physical measurements e.g. height and weight, and observation of appetitive phases, descriptions of parent's involvement).

¹⁶ Pearse and Crocker, *The Peckham Experiment*, 85.

¹⁷ Interview with Dorothy Batten conducted by Emily Charikin on 22 April 2010.

¹⁸ Quarterly Meeting of the Montessori Society, Report of Lecture, 31 October 1938, Wellcome Archives SA/PHC/D2/4, 1.

¹⁹ Pearse and Crocker, *The Peckham Experiment*, 203.

²⁰ Pearse and Crocker, *The Peckham Experiment*, 197.

CARD 10

This emphasis on community as well as freedom suggests that the Centre should be situated within a social anarchist tradition. For anarchists, according to Judith Suissa (philosopher of education), humans are not 'born free' but become free through social living. Therefore freedom is not the primary value but is to be valued alongside 'solidarity and reciprocal awareness'.²¹ This corresponds with the dual values in the Biologists' description of the free gym. READ OUT p192.

This emphasis is distinct from the individualistic tendencies of the child-centred progressive movement. It offers a view of children and education which is distinct from the 'loggerheads' of child-centred progressive ideas and subject-centred liberal ideas which have dominated histories of educational ideas. The purpose of education, in this context, is not towards the pursuit of 'fixed ends'²² nor is it towards the 'transformation of those being educated'²³ but instead, in the spirit of anarchism, it is 'one of the many arenas of human relations in which we constantly experiment with our ends, our goals'.²⁴

CARD 11

The closure of the Centre in 1950 due to lack of funds was not because it failed as a place in which children could flourish: Pam Elven, who was a teenager at the Centre, remembered the shock of its closure as 'like a death in the family'. It did not fail because the children were free. Its closure does, perhaps, raise questions about the viability of its ideas in the economic and social contexts which prevailed. However, in the current crisis, it increasingly seems that perhaps it is those economic and social contexts which need to be questioned. The physical freedom of the children in the Peckham Centre is an example of how the history of education can challenge some of the contemporary assumptions, by which we are bewitched, about the nature of children and what it means to 'educate'. It challenges our 'pessimistic value systems' which represent children as victims in need of protection or 'demons' in need of control.²⁵ Instead it offers a view that children, parents and communities (including working-class) are robust, responsible and capable of change. It challenges our 'forms of life' through its 'seemingly ordinary events and situations':²⁶ that up to 200 children could be free to move around a building without rules and that a three-year-old could decide when she was ready to climb the bars in the gym and be allowed to 'practise carefully getting to the top, without interference'. (SHOW SLIDE)²⁷

²¹ J. Suissa, *Anarchism and Education: A Philosophical Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2006), 3.

²² P. Standish, 'The Nature and Purposes of Education', in R. Curren (ed.), *A Companion to the Philosophy of Education* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 221-31, at 229.

²³ K. J. Brehony, 'Progressive Education Revisited; From the Particular to the General, the Continuous to the Discontinuous', *History of Education*. 30/5 (2001), 413-32, at 432.

²⁴ J. Suissa, 'The space now possible: anarchist education as utopian hope' in L. David and R. Kinna (eds), *Anarchism and Utopianism*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 241-56.

²⁵ H. Hendrick, 'Optimism and Hope Versus Anxiety and Narcissism: Some Thoughts on Children's Welfare Yesterday and Today', *History of Education*. 36/6 (November 2007), 747-68, at 768.

²⁶ I. H. Pearse and L. C. Crocker, *The Peckham Experiment* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1943; 6th impression, 1947 used here), 206.

²⁷ Interview with Henrietta Trotter conducted by Emily Charkin on 13 March 2010.

CARD 12

I wrote an article about the peckham Health Centre in the Comment is Free section of the Guardian. I am not arguing that we could or should adopt the same 'view of human nature' and the same 'form of life' as were practised in the Peckham Health Centre, 1935-50. I simply argue that we urgently need these kinds of stories from the past to remind us that the 'line up' is not the only path: that freedom might be a condition of learning rather than a reward for good behaviour meted out in 'golden time' at the end of the week; that as Quentin Skinner suggests 'we are freer than we sometimes suppose'; and that therefore we could choose again whether we should take the path in which children and their families can 'swing where there is space'.