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Revisiting *Play School*:

A historical case study of the BBC's address to the pre-school audience

Su Holmes, University of East Anglia

Abstract

Although clearly recognised in broader institutional histories of British children's television as a significant moment in the BBC's address toward the pre-school child, *Play School* (BBC 1964-88) has not been the focus of sustained archival analysis. This arguably reflects the fact that a good deal of work on children's television in Britain adopts either an institutional or an audience focus, and the study of programmes cultures is often more neglected. This article seeks to revisit *Play School* using available historical documentation – including memos, scripts and press cuttings - from the BBC Written Archive Centre, as well as early surviving episodes (principally from 1964). In doing so, it seeks to explore how it fitted into BBC's historical address to the pre-school child, how it intersected with discourses on pre-school education, and the range of institutional and social contexts surrounding its emergence.

Key Words: *Play School* * Pre-school television * BBC * Child audience

Revisiting *Play School*:

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Existing work on British children's television, which has essentially been synonymous with the history of the BBC's output, has emphasised its particularly potent relationship with the ideals of public service (Buckingham et al, 1999, Oswell, 2002, Steemers, 2010). Focusing on pre-school television in particular, Jeanette Steemers notes how such programming has historically represented 'the perfect public service project, ticking ... all the right public service boxes in respect of promoting learning and stimulating creativity' (Steemers, nd: 7). Indeed, although the BBC's detractors have often seen fit to criticise the Corporation 'for its expansionist strategies in the digital realm, they ... [have been] rather more circumspect about criticising the [BBC's] ... involvement in the pre-school sector' (Ibid). Yet this suggestion of a special, 'natural' and intense relationship between pre-school television and public service broadcasting is somewhat at odds with the fact that, in the British context, pre-school television has received little sustained attention at the level of individual programme case studies (and work has often converged on particular high-profile titles such as *The Teletubbies* [e.g. Buckingham, 2002, Bignell, 2005, Briggs, 2006]). This is borne out by the fact that, whilst clearly recognised in broader institutional histories of British children's television as a significant moment in the BBC's address toward the pre-school child (Home, 1993, Buckingham et al, 1999, Steemers, 2010,), *Play School* (BBC 1964-88) has not been the focus of sustained archival analysis itself. On a popular level, it is far from culturally invisible: it remains a fondly remembered aspect of early childhood for many people who grew up in the 1960s-1980s; it appears in television's own popular histories of children's television; it can be nostalgically reviewed through 'classic' compilations, and it has been the focus of a considerable and detailed 'celebration' (Jackson, 2010). But aside from Maire

Messenger-Davies' (1995) textual comparison of *Sesame Street* (1969-) and *Play Days* (1988-97) (the latter of which succeeded *Play School* on the BBC and carried on much of its tradition), and the institutional references noted above, academic attention has been sparse. This is considerably different to the Australian context, where the Australian *Play School* (based on the British version) started in 1966 and continues up until this day. But appearing in journals on educational psychology or early childhood development (MacKinley and Barney, 2008, Harrison, 2011, 2012, Vliet et al, 2013), such articles have a somewhat different disciplinary focus, and ask questions – often what does television *do* to children - which find no easy fit with the concerns of Television Studies or Television History.

The academic neglect of the British *Play School* reflects the fact that a good deal of work on children's television in Britain adopts either an institutional or an audience focus, and Bazalgette and Buckingham's point in 1995 that children's programmes have been more neglected than the child audience (1995: p.5) remains pertinent today. Individual programmes are rarely given serious consideration (for exceptions see Bazalgette and Buckingham, 1995, Buckingham, 2002), particularly, we might add, those aimed at a preschool audience. This situation is then especially marked at the level of television history. British television historiography has seen a gradual but concerted move away from a critical and methodological context which prioritised large-scale institutional studies to one which includes the study of programme cultures, as well as a determination to excavate a range of popular genres which fall outside of the province of 'serious' drama (Holmes, 2005, 2008, Wheatley, 2006, Thumim, 2004). Nevertheless, children's programming has benefitted in quite limited ways from this historical turn to programme cultures, with notable exceptions being David Oswell's consideration of *Watch with Mother* within a wider institutional study of the BBC's invention of the young television audience (2002), and Amanda Beauchamp's (2013) doctoral thesis on *Blue Peter* (1958-)).

This neglect may be shaped by a range of factors, including the extent to which programmes aimed at the very young appear to 'frustrate' analysis, as well as the wider problem of access to the historical texts of British television and their associated documentation. But it is pertinent to observe here what Rachel Moseley and Helen Wheatley describe as the marginalisation of television's 'ordinary' and 'everyday' programming (2008: 156) in accessible archives and academic histories, an imbalance which frequently overlaps with the 'absence of texts traditionally coded as feminine' (Ibid). 'Old' children's television, in

popular histories at least, may well enjoy a more cult appeal in comparison with ‘women’s’ television. Yet it may suffer, especially when it comes to pre-school television, from a similarly gendered devaluation. Not only were female personnel frequently afforded significant roles in pre-school television production (whilst denied such opportunities in other generic spheres at the BBC), but the needs, welfare and everyday existence of the pre-school child have historically been tied to the maternal role - as the title of *Watch with Mother* attests. The production and scheduling of programming aimed at the pre-school audience has frequently been imbricated within historical assumptions about women’s role within the ideology of the family, and their wider relationship with private and public spheres.

This article seeks to revisit *Play School* using available historical documentation – including memos, scripts and press cuttings - from the BBC Written Archive Centre, as well as early surviving episodes (principally from 1964). The most famous iconography from the programme is arguably represented by its collection of toys (Big Ted, Little Ted, Humpty, Jemima and Hamble); its promise to take us through ‘three magic windows [which]... open wide. To show both town and countryside’ (script 1), as well as the iconic *Play School* house (‘A house... with a door. One, Two, Three, Four...’). Whilst not ignoring these iconic aspects, I want to focus here on what is less known about the programme: how it fitted into BBC’s historical address to the pre-school child, how it intersected with discourses on pre-school education, and the range of institutional and social contexts surrounding its emergence. In this regard, unlike Beauchamp’s (2013) study of *Blue Peter*, this is not a diachronic nor longitudinal analysis of *Play School*, which would in any case be very difficult in the space allotted here. My focus in this article is institutional, contextual and aesthetic, and the archival and conceptual interactions between these spheres.

Institutional Imaginings

Messenger-Davies observes how ‘pre-school television is unusual in having producers who see it as part of their job to be thoroughly well-informed about their audience’ (1995: 16). Discourses about the young audience – their needs, pleasures, composition and viewing context – often circulate in explicit terms in the institutional and cultural debates surrounding the construction of pre-school television culture, and this is particularly useful from a historical point of view as they form a visible part of the archival traces that are left behind. As suggests, in examining the construction of children’s programming, we are essentially exploring the discourses (or ‘fictions’) (Oswell, 2002: 47) used to imagine the child viewer, a

conception which in turn compliments the idea of childhood itself as a construction which is invoked in different ways across cultural, political and economic cultural sites (Aries, 1962, Holland, 2004). That is not to suggest that television companies or broadcasters – including the BBC – don't undertake empirical research into the pre-school audience (see Steemers, 2010). Rather, it is to suggest that it is still necessary to mobilise and draw upon discursive constructions of the child in the planning, development and execution of the pre-school programme (which ultimately has to address a broad concept of the hypothetical viewer). Furthermore, and as will be discussed with regard to *Play School*, despite constantly discussing and debating the programme's address and appeal toward the pre-school viewer, the BBC relied upon a discursive imaginings of its audience for some time before any empirical research was undertaken. It is precisely in these imaginings that the BBC's institutional and cultural address to the pre-school viewer is at its most rich and most apparent.

The BBC's Children Television's Department, under the Headship of Freda Lingstrom, was set up in 1950, and it began programming for pre-school viewers almost immediately. *Andy Pandy* (1950-70) was launched in July that year, and was later joined by *The Flowerpot Men* (1952-4), *Rag Tag and Bobtail* (1953-65), *The Woodentops* (1955-57) and *Picture book* (1955-73) with programmes ultimately alternating on weekdays under the title of *Watch with Mother* (see Oswell, 1995, 2002). Although the scheduling of this 15 minute slot shifted a number of times in the 1950s and 1960s, moving from mid to late afternoon and sometimes morning, it was originally conceived as responding to 'the need for young ones to enjoy their own television before the older and more boisterous members of the family come home from school'.¹ As Oswell outlines, *Watch with Mother* effectively signalled the invention of the pre-school audience within the institution of broadcasting, marking the recognition of its distinctiveness within the wider category of the child audience (1995: 37), although it is important to acknowledge here (in addition to previous forms of pre-school media found in books and magazines) that BBC radio's *Listen with Mother* began earlier that same year. Comprised of stories, songs and rhymes, *Listen with Mother* was broadcast daily at 1:45pm (before the start of *Woman's Hour*). The ideological framework of *Watch with Mother* is considered in more detail below, but it is clear that prior to 1950, the pre-school audience was seen as a rather indistinct and neglected precursor to the more institutionally visible school-age listener or viewer, with less complex needs and tastes.

That is not to suggest that the BBC's conception of the older child viewer was stable, secure or clear. As David Buckingham et al observe with regard to the 1950s, 'for many who worked at the BBC, the child audience was less an object available to the shaping strategies of power than an elusive and recalcitrant set of groupings to whose preferences broadcasters were ... subject' (1999: 16). They refer here to the famously difficult decade of the 1950s, and institutional histories of children's television often fit the received historical narrative in which ITV's populist (and 'mass') programming trounces the BBC's paternalistic and middle-class fare, forcing the Corporation to reappraise the ways in which it had conceived of and addressed its audience. Although such a dichotomous conception of the BBC and ITV is often inadequate to capture the complexity of popular programme production and viewer address at this time (see Holmes, 2008), it is clear that the 'main battleground' for ratings was seen to be the older child and the family audience (Buckingham et al, 1999: 21). This is suggested, for example, by the fact that the pre-school programming on both BBC and ITV - ITV also scheduled a 15 minute slot for pre-schoolers called *Small Time* -² remained remarkably static in the 1950s, against a backdrop of more tumultuous change for the BBC in children's television production more generally.

It was not really until the 1960s that pre-school television visibly expanded beyond the small segments of *Watch with Mother* and *Small Time*, and *Play School* began in black and white on 21st April 1964 at 11am (from 1968 it was also repeated on BBC1 at the start of children's programme time). The launch of the programme coincided with, and was also made possible by, the advent of a second channel being awarded to the BBC. But the advent of BBC2 was not the only new institutional context here. In 1964, the BBC's Children's Department was placed within the new structure of the Family Programmes Department (see Buckingham et al, 1999: 29). Acknowledging the tendency for children to watch and enjoy many adult programmes, the new structure was intended to be less paternalistic, protectionist and prescriptive and much 'more responsive to the social dimensions of childhood and family life' (Ibid). Children were to satisfy their desire for fiction by watching programmes produced as part of the main family schedule, whilst non-fiction television for children would be catered for by the new Department, which would also take over the provision of pre-school programming (Buckingham et al, 1999: 29).

'Routine and purpose mixed with fun': Educational Explorations

The magazine programme was established as part of programming for older children by the late 1950s, and it was often seen as something of an ideal public service project, enabling producers to combine factual and educational information with entertainment in an economic form (Beauchamp, 2013). So the task with *Play School* was to think about how the possibilities of the magazine programme might address a pre-school audience. Some of the earliest BBC discussions of what became *Play School* centred on the idea of ‘Home School: a preliminary plan’,³ developed by Maria Bird and Freda Lingstrom (who had previously co-created both *Andy Pandy* and *The Flowerpot Men*). But with the title ‘Home School’ being seen as too didactic, ‘Home’ was eventually replaced with ‘Play’.⁴ This change speaks to a wider historical narrative in which the BBC have always claimed that the purpose of their children’s output is primarily recreational and not educational, and they have clearly distinguished it (on both radio and television) from the requirements of school’s broadcasting (Oswell, 2002: 32, Messenger-Davies, 1995: 20).

Yet although the two parts of *Play School*’s title might appear to have been diametrically opposed, they were not so as conceived by the BBC, given that it was constantly reiterated that play was ‘the child’s first school’⁵. Indeed, the insistence that very young ‘children find information entertaining’⁶ meant that *Play School* could present the aims of educating, informing and entertaining as entirely synonymous. At the same time, a wider examination of the internal memos, particularly relating to the early genesis of the programme, suggests a more overt educational agenda which had to be carefully ‘balanced’ with the rhetoric of entertainment. This is indicated by Bird and Lingstrom’s initial suggestion for the opening of a programme like *Play School*:

Opening song: with easy words and a catchy theme tune sung ‘off’ as a nice girl comes into the set. For want of a better term, ‘teacher’ being inappropriate, she will be referred to as N.G [nice girl] in these notes. Two minutes should be allowed for song, greetings and general chit-chat while children settle down. This would lead into the first item which, generally speaking, would be ‘hard work’, such as counting or letters.⁷

Although ‘hard work’ appears in inverted commas, and there is a clear rejection of the term teacher, this suggests the conception of a traditionally educative purpose as central to the

programme. Such ‘hard work’, however, was clearly intended to take place within an eclectic range of pleasurable, physical, practical and moral frameworks, including:

Music and Movement

Recognition of tempo...

Playing on the floor – i.e. crawling like bears, swimming like fishes

Jumping about – just that. This is the equivalent of ‘break’, to blow off steam to music, or time to go to the loo.

Stories...

Learning shapes

Nature

Getting about – horses, rickshaws... etc. (film with live commentary)

Clean and good – i.e. washing hands, blowing noses

Bouncing balloons...

Days of the week

Tying bow

Being tidy

Christmas cards.⁸

The emphasis on a ‘break’ and thus the suggestion of a clear schedule was realised in the painstakingly pencil-drawn chart provided by Bird and Lingstrom which blocked out segments of activity, like a timetable, for each day of the week. This was commensurate with the BBC’s emphasis on *Play School* as a form of television nursery which deliberately set out, at a time of poor nursery provision, to ‘offer some of the experience that a good nursery school can provide’⁹, or what the second Executive Producer, Cynthia Felgate, described as ‘routine and purpose mixed with fun’.¹⁰

The iconography of the early set plays out this synthesis. The often minimal set was made up of multiple spaces and sets which were used for each parts of the programme. These included spaces which housed the programme’s clock, the windows, the story chair, the pets, the dressing up corner, the science corner and the toy cupboard, as well as less distinct spaces which featured activities with the programme’s toys, or housed the physical performances of the presenters. Other spaces appeared to be more temporary, or used for specific items. In the second episode, for example, the two presenters, Virginia Stride and Gordon Rollings, sit in

front of two large blackboards. Although there are large over-sized letters behind the presenters on the set, the blackboards display large drawings of animals, suggesting an association of childish and cartoon fun. The presenters then proceed to ask ‘[Do] you know the [rhyme]... about the fish?’, before breaking into ‘1,2,3,4,5, once I caught a fish alive....’, with the camera panning back to reveal a goldfish bowl positioned between them (22 April, 1964). With regard to the Australian *Play School*, Helen Martin describes how the set ‘functions as a bridging space between the warm familiar comfort of the home environment and the more multi-purpose, group efficient environment of the kindergarten or day care centre’ (1993: 119), becoming a recognisable sense of ‘place’ for the young viewer over repeat viewings (Lury, 2005, see also Beauchamp 2013). The iconic *Play School* house which appeared at the start of the programme, and which ultimately became the programme’s logo, furthered this fusion: we enter the *Play School* space through what looks like a domestic house, yet find its spaces much more expansive, flexible and communal once we are inside.

The connection with the referent of the nursery operated at more than simply a conceptual or aesthetic level: *Play School* made substantial use of external expertise when it came to educational and psychological discourses on the young child, with the first Producer, Joy Whitby, visiting infant schools and nurseries, and appointing expert nursery advisors (such as Nancy Qualye, who read and commented on every script) before the programme began. Yet the use of such external expertise was not in itself new. The BBC had been aware that, with the growth of television in the 1950s, they were likely to come under the increasing scrutiny of both educational and psychological gazes (ibid 56). The planning of *Andy Pandy*, for example, had drawn upon a range of external expertise in recognition of the considerable anxiety surrounding the very provision of television for the pre-school child (Oswell, 2002: 70).

The programmes in *Watch with Mother* had certainly fused entertainment, education and information. But it was *Play School* – in marked contrast to the early BBC debates about the pre-school child’s broadcast ‘needs’ being simply conceptualised - that really marked the start of a BBC pre-school programme adopting a particular educational philosophy. As Christopher Williams explained in a favourable piece on the programme in the notable title of *Arts in Society* in 1969, *Play School* puts into practice ‘precepts and methods widely accepted in progressive nursery schools’.¹¹ In the early institutional discussions about the programme, the names of particular educational theorists, such as Frederick Froebel, were mooted as

offering appropriate and aspirational frameworks through which to conceptualise *Play School*'s address. This is indicative of the extent to which, owing to the broader interest in the educational philosophy of authors such as Froebel, Maria Montessori, Rudolph Steiner, Susan Isaacs and Margaret McMillan (see Curtis, 1986), an awareness of the educational value of play had become more widespread in the 1950s and 1960s (see Kwon, 2002). Froebel, for example, argued that the focus 'of play at this age is the core of the whole future, since in them the entire person is developed and revealed in the most sensitive qualities of the mind' (cited in Curtis, 1986: 3). Such a philosophy is reflected in the subsequent exhortation from *Play School*'s second Executive Producer, Cynthia Felgate, in the magazine *Home and Family* when she insisted that:

There is no directive to learn but constant encouragement to play... Formal education cannot start until the foundations have been laid We suggest that the child may experiment with water, shapes and textures – find out, make, build, watch and enquire. But most important of all, we offer ideas that may stimulate wonder, thought and imagination.¹²

The insistence that there is 'no directive to learn' again highlights the ambiguous role afforded to the educational status of the programme in its popular circulation (a defensive mechanism which was perhaps particularly acute after the advent of commercial competition). There is also question, however, about who was there to facilitate such enquiring adventures now 'Watching with Mother', at least where *Play School* was concerned, was no longer so clearly exhorted by the BBC.

Play School: Watching Without Mother?

The invocation of a maternal presence with *Watch With Mother* was a clear response to the social and institutional anxieties about the very concept of television for young children as well as a 'concern about [its] ... effect on the proper mode of conduct in the home' (Oswell, 2002: 70). The idea that pre-school television might 'set the mother free to get about her business' (Ibid) prompted anxieties about television acting as a substitute for 'properly' attentive maternal care, and as Steemers observes, it was the viewing context - imagined as cosy, domestic and regulated - that was important here, perhaps even more so than the programme material itself (2010: 21). It appeared that the imagined domestic and thus

ideological context had changed considerably by the time *Play School* was launched, and as the initial press released for the programme explained, although ‘most children are probably watching the programme on their own, *Play School* also aims to help parents with ideas for the entertainment and satisfaction of their children’¹³. That is not to suggest that the concept of the pre-school viewer was wholly naturalised or accepted by 1964: many letters or press comments indicate that the very idea of under 5’s watching television was still a source of contest and debate, and press discourses in the mid 1960s positioned *Play School* as what Messenger-Davies describes more widely as ‘the acceptable face of television to a public not always convinced that watching TV is good for children’ (1995: 17). But the press release nevertheless marks out a shift. The fact that parents (and not just ‘Mother’) might receive ‘ideas’ from *Play School* suggests that they are close enough to the set to be inspired by its pre-school pedagogy, but it is not considered ideologically necessary, nor socially appropriate, to present co-viewing as the norm. Furthermore, unlike the earlier *Andy Pandy* in which, although not physically present, the ‘mother is signified as outside of, and constitutive of, the diegetic space’ (Oswell, 2002: 63), *Play School* itself was less ideologically specific in its invocation of parent-child relations, with presenters aiming to emerge as ‘friends’, and references being made to a parent, rather than simply ‘mother’, when the need for adult assistance was invoked. *Play School* was also one of the first pre-school programmes to use both actual children on screen (the outside broadcast films which were seen through the programme’s windows), as well as male presenters (Messenger-Davies, 1995: 14), a move which marked a break with the explicit gendering of the pre-school sphere. Yet the apparently ‘progressive’ transition here cannot be accepted to face value. The recognition that *Play School* in part emerged as a response to poor nursery provision in the mid 1960s formed a *staple* discourse in the BBC’s promotion of the programme and its popular circulation, yet the political backdrop regarding gender here was rendered all but invisible, emerging only in fragments or traces of evidence.

The bid to close the nurseries which had sprung up to accommodate women’s wartime work were rapidly closed down in the post-war period, creating a context in which public provision reached a new low in the 1960s (Lewis, 2013). Especially when compared to other European countries, the male-breadwinner family model continued to structure social policy until well into the 1970s, and the belief that a mother should be at home with their child survived the increasing numbers of women entering paid employment and the passing of equal

opportunities legislation (Ibid: 251). Thus, although the number of women with young children in paid employment rose in the 1960s, this was not matched by a shift in child-care policy as part of a labour-market strategy (Randall, 1995: 346). Furthermore, the role of ‘Bowlbyism’ – the popularisation of John Bowlby’s views on attachment psychology and the pressure this put on the mother to remain the primary carer for their young child – has been widely seen as playing a key role in stifling the emancipation of British women at this time (Thomson, 2013: 87), with views on the dangers of maternal deprivation reaching a mass audience through popular media forms (Ibid). As Jane Lewis explains, the apparent need of ‘children in “satisfactory” homes to be with their mothers made [nursery] provision for all working mothers undesirable’ (2013: 260).

When the Ministry of Health assessed nursery provision between 1962-4 it differentiated between families in which the woman was ‘constrained to work’ and those in which she chose to. But the criteria for the former was very specific (families living in poverty, single parent families, or those effected by illness) (Lewis, 2013: 243). This left a large number of mothers (of whatever class) who went out to work needing to seek childcare provision in the private sector; the voluntary sector in terms of the playgroup movement, or via help from informal family networks (Ibid). Furthermore, yoking the provision of nursery funding to the circumstances of the individual mother marginalised the importance of the educational value of nursery education (which might have contributed to the case for universal access).

As we have seen, *Play School* was valued as offering a stimulus to engagement ‘that the best Nursery School might provide’, so this educational value of nursery *was* foregrounded here. But in other ways, the gender politics of the domestic sphere emerge as the hidden ‘private’ in *Play School* discourse. The remaining archival evidence on *Play School* includes, for example, a number of letters, mainly from mothers, who say that the programme indeed functioned as a form of televisual nursery in an environment where external facilities were sparse. So one mother from Shropshire with children aged 2 and 4 explained how it was ‘definitely the best thing on television for my [children].... ‘specially since we have no nursery school in the vicinity’.¹⁴ Indeed, a closer reading of the internal memos on the programme suggests that there *was* an internal assumption – despite the apparently ‘progressive’ politics of the press release – that mother would provide at least a distanced form of supervision when *Play School* was screened. For example, the gendered split between the feminised (private) world of domestic childcare and the masculine (public) world

of work could not be more explicit in the suggestion that ‘We must ask a grown-up for an old newspaper to put down ... so father doesn’t come back to find the paper he hasn’t read covered with red paint ...’¹⁵. Equally, and even more strikingly, one critic described the aim of *Play School* as ‘quite simply, to provide some stimulation for housebound children who are forced, through lack of nursery schools and playgroups, to spend all day with mums...’¹⁶. Although the mother is acknowledged here as the primary care-giver in what is presented as a somewhat stifling domestic context, it is the *child* that is positioned as the ‘prisoner’, effecting a reversal of the image of the incarcerated housewife (suggested, for example, by Hannah Gavron’s book *The Captive Wife: Conflicts of Housebound Mothers* in 1966), that was to become more prominent with the growth of second wave feminism in the following decade. By the late 1960s, the concept of the home as ideal environment for the development of the child was increasingly under fire (not only from feminism but also alternative psychological viewpoints) (see Thomson, 2013: 95). *Play School* in part emerged to address an audience which was available to view television *en masse* as a result of the post-war idealisation of maternal, domestic care, whilst the promotion of the programme as a televisual nursery involved a suppression of the ideological struggle surrounding the care of the pre-school child and its relationship with the maternal role.

‘A block of flats in the city...’: searching for the *Play School* Class

Work on British television history has increasingly begun to focus on questions of gender – from the gendered dimensions of programme culture to personnel - challenging the previous dominance of class as the key analytic framework in historiographies of British television (Thumim, 2004, Andrews, 2012, Irwin, 2011, Moseley, Wheatley and Wood, 2014). In this respect, foregrounding the importance of the gendered context for *Play School* (discourses of which seem to emerge as the obvious *unsaid* in the discussion of the programme), has both a scholarly and political importance. In comparison, discourses on class were far more open and self-consciously debated with regard to the conception of *Play School* and the institutional imagining of its audience.

The BBC Children’s Department held a meeting in 1960 to discuss the impact of ITV on the Corporation’s provision of children’s programming, and discourses of class were clearly woven into this dialogue. The meeting highlighted how the BBC often felt compelled to respond to what they perceived to be a blunt and inaccurate caricature of the (class) contrast between the two channels, even whilst they were open about their own perceived limitations

and ‘failings’ in this regard¹⁷. When the new Family Programme’s Unit was launched, Doreen Stephens promised that its children’s programmes would be ‘less fixedly middle class’¹⁸ – a claim that emerged from her critique of the apparently cosy and middle-class nature of *Watch with Mother*. (There was also evidence of the BBC training a careful eye on ITV’s pre-school productions, ranging across Anglia TV’s adaptation of *Romper Room* (1964-76), and Associated Rediffusion’s launch of *Play Time* (1965-7) – the latter of which they saw as an inferior *Play School* copy). Certainly, the desire for *Play School* to be socially representative was evident from the start of the BBC’s deliberations, and there was the suggestion that with regard to the presenters, ‘Their backgrounds, accents and personalities ... [should be] varied’. Although the early episodes come across today as very ‘RP’ with regard to the tone of presenter address, *Play School* later followed the policy of ‘employing one presenter with a standard accent and one with a regional, but more often a class, dialect’ for each episode.¹⁹

In the production memos and surrounding documentation, the BBC’s idea of who they were addressing wavered between firm declarations of an open epistemology (the suggestion that they had no fixed idea and recognised the diversity of childhood experience) to a greater emphasis on certainty and homogeneity in which it was possible to speak of the child viewer, and the experience of childhood, in definite terms. So it was carefully outlined how: ‘Only one basic assumption is made, that the viewer is between three and five years of age. His environment is not known, nor his home atmosphere [sic], relationships or opportunities, but all the alternatives are considered constantly’.²⁰ At the same time, statements about child development, pleasures and preferences were made quite freely. So ‘Dressing up materials that children of this age particularly enjoy are a swishing cloak ... gold paper crowns set about with wine gum jewels, handbags, high-heeled shoes and hats....’,²¹ or ‘personal play with dolls and puppets is satisfying to all children but particularly to disadvantaged children ...’²². Discussions about the audience for *Play School*, at least in terms of socio-economic profile, were often careful and speculative rather than prescriptive and firm although, as the above comment suggests, when discursive allusions to the programme’s viewership *were* apparent, they were more likely to err on the side of deprivation and disadvantage.

So there was the suggestion, for example, that with regard to *Play School*, there ‘may not be a caring adult around to bring [the child]... to the programme regularly and therefore he is spoken to directly and encouraged to want to watch and participate’.²³ This may again

highlight assumptions regarding class differentiation given that, as we have seen above, there was an implicit internal assumption that a mother *was* around to facilitate viewing, perhaps suggesting the view that it was in the less affluent home that *truly* lone viewing occurred. As Oswell has outlined, the range of discourses from the late 1950s onwards which debated the ‘effects’ of television on the young suggested ‘how the discourse of the child audience was formed in relation to two strategic objectives of making middle-class parents conscious of their responsibilities and of making broadcasters assume responsibility for the irresponsibilities of working-class parents’ (2002: 127). Although the influential *Television and the Child* (Himmelweit et al, 1958) found no empirical evidence to attest to the idea that the supervision of children’s viewing was greater in the middle-class home (1958: 44, in Oswell, 2002: 127) (and it should also be noted that the study dealt primarily with school-age children), the BBC’s image of the *Play School* viewer above nevertheless indicates how discourses of class were central to the development of institutional and public knowledges about child viewing (Ibid).

The comment about the apparently ‘lone’ child viewer being spoken to ‘directly’ by *Play School* also indicates how what was conceived as the programme’s very focused address was in part built on certain assumptions regarding class, or at least the heterogeneous nature of the audience. It was stated that the team of presenters (itself seen as an innovation at the time) were ‘chosen for their ability to present the material lightly and with a directness that avoids condescension’,²⁴ and the group initially included Virginia Stride, Gordon Rollings, Rick Jones, Carole Ward, Brian Cant, Judy Kenny, Marian Diamond, Eric Thompson, Julie Stevens and Dibbs Mather (Jackson, 2010: 60). Although the programme was not broadcast live, it was shot in real time, and it conceived of itself as addressing ‘one child in a room’ (Messenger-Davies, 1995: 28) – an impression to which its conversational mode of address was key. As Paddy Scannell has outlined, the impression of intentionality in which *I am spoken to* is central to the sociability of broadcasting, even though the ‘I’ that ‘is addressed by radio and television’ is necessarily ‘me-or-anyone’ (1996: 13). In this regard, it would be odd to position *Play School*’s claim to address the singular child as innovative or new: rather, the difference was one of emphasis, and the extent to which the viewer addressed by *Play School* was ‘pervasively embedded’ in the programme’s textual address (Ibid). *Watch with Mother* programmes such as *Andy Pandy* and *Picture book* - which had involved direct address to the child viewer - were apt to address their audience in the plural (‘Do you remember [Andy Pandy’s] swing children?’), only then occasionally alternating this with a

singular address ('Have you got a swing in *your* garden?') (episode 1). The function of the voice-over here was also principally to mediate between the on-screen characters and the child audience at home (Oswell, 2002: 64), arguably reducing the impression of a direct and intimate interaction between addresser and addressee.

Yet in *Play School*, the rhetoric of a direct, intimate and personal style of speech was central to the textual fabric of the programme, giving the impression that each item was intended as a conversation of which the presenters were only one side. So as presenter Gordon Rollings explains in one edition (also giving the impression that items unfolded casually and without prior planning): 'I think I'll try to be a policeman now. Would you like to be a policeman with me?'. He then checks a few seconds later with a direct look to camera: then, 'Are you doing it?' (23 April, 1964). One critic noted approvingly how there was 'no pushing or harring'²⁵ in *Play School*, and children were indeed often gently encouraged to participate. So with regard to the view through the different shaped windows, Virginia Stride would look and then tentatively suggests: 'You can look too ... if you want to?' (21 April 1963). In this regard, production techniques were developed to facilitate and enhance the centrality of these personal interactions: sequences were often filmed predominantly with one camera, and pauses (after questions), and slow zooms and fades (in between sequences) offered spaces for response and comprehension by the young child viewer (see also Harrison, 2012).

One of the functions of the broadcast 'me-and-you conversation' (Scannell, 1996: 41) (which in actuality is a 'me-or-anyone' address (Ibid:13)), is precisely to replace the specificities of difference with an apparently seamless community of address. So whilst the text of *Play School* was claiming to explore activities that *all* children enjoy ('would you like to be a pig in a farmyard?'), the internal memos explained how many of the viewers were anticipated to be 'leading extremely limited lives...'.²⁶ The story in *Play School*, that was often acted out by the presenters (with costumes) rather than simply read, was also seen as crucial because 'Reading is not a natural activity for the large bulk of the population mostly because they have never discovered that books and stories are worth bothering with'.²⁷ The programme's nursery advisor, Nancy Quayle was rather more direct in her equation of educational and social impoverishment in her insistence that 'it's very difficult for an adult to realise the complete ignorance of a three year old in a semi-literate family, very, very high in a block of flats in a city...'.²⁸

The 1960s is widely perceived as a time when class structures and stratifications were increasingly blurred in Britain, not least of all due to rising prosperity and the cultural and economic impacts of consumerism (Marwick, 1982). In this regard it is notable that, at a time when what constituted class, and the relational boundaries between classes was the subject of concerted debate, the BBC seem to treat these categories as *self-evident*, secure and clear (with little or no need to explain internal definitional criteria). The fact that it is class which constitutes the main definitional category in the BBC's Audience Research Reports at least supports a view that, as a currency through which identities were positioned and valued, 'class was very far from losing its traditional significance in British society' (Marwick, 1982: 201). As Chris Jenks notes with regard to 1960s Britain for example, in the context of full employment, economic expansion and investment in public provision, 'education became viewed by government and populace alike as a crucial investment in the future collective good' (1996: 43). Expansions were seen in school (and university) education and economic investments reached for improved quality. At the same time, studies in the sociology of education blossomed (Ibid: 44), often highlighting how, despite the appearance of improved prosperity and educational opportunity, educational achievement remained clearly yoked to *social* distribution. Efforts were made to reduce class-based inequalities in educational achievement, and there was a move to elevate the performance of 'working-class students by engaging more directly with the culture of learners' (Buckingham et al, 1999: 36).

This highlights the extent to which class was seen as a visible and central problem in social policies on education in the 1960s, and the BBC's awareness of educational inequality permeated the discussion of *Play School* on a number of different levels. The BBC's suggestion that *Play School*, as a form of televisual nursery, had a role to play in countering social deprivation (Buckingham et al, 1999: 36) clearly complements such thinking.

Furthermore, their decision to go out and observe the audience *watching* the programme in homes or play groups - whilst a move to 'conquer' the unknowability of the audience by rendering them literally visible (Ang, 1991) - suggests a bid to understand how empirical responses might differ across region, socio-economic culture, and viewing environment.

The significance of class, and the desire to consider the class-based differentials in the audience, is also suggested by discussions about aesthetics, props and wider materials. So there was an emphasis in the *Play School* memos about items not looking too new and bright, first because it may not match the domestic spaces and consumer habits of many of the

viewers' families, and second because 'most schools and institutions have had heavy cuts in expenditure so the use of new material is curtailed everywhere. Parents are also loathe to spend freely on paper, crayons etc. for their children'.²⁹ This also fitted in with the desire for *Play School*'s address toward and impact on the pre-school viewer to extend into the domestic sphere, an audience imagined, as Buckingham et al observe, 'as one engaged in constant creative action, stimulated by the ordinary materials of the home and by television's kindly pedagogy' (1999: 32). As Oswell observes, 'How to Do' programmes for children were attractive within a public service context as the emphasis on activity helped to counteract long-standing Reithian anxieties about the spectre of a 'passive' broadcast subject, seeking to connect the child – with regard to *Blue Peter* for example - to 'an external world in an active form of citizenship and public participation' (2002: 49). In *Play School*, the 'ordinary' materials of the home (cardboard boxes, blankets, bottles and so forth) were used in 'making' sessions as well as play activities with the toys, presumably in a bid to render the replication of such play both accessible and tangible.

Sometimes, however, this bid to offer an inclusive address was observed to be structured by contradiction and tension in ways which fractured the programme's apparently general address. So as Felgate explained, 'The setting of *Play School* is bright and clean – and the presenters – warm and friendly. These factors can lead some critics to suggest that the programme is aimed only at children with similar environments...'.³⁰ Indeed, as Paul Jackson notes, the programme was initially accused of having only 'elegant middle-class toys' so Hamble (a name apparently taken from the class connotations of 'Humble'), 'a nondescript, rather battered doll was introduced a year later as the kind of doll the less privileged child might own' (2010: 57). Yet Hamble's status as the most undesirable toy in the production of the programme has become part of the popular mythology surrounding *Play School* (she was the least likely to stay sitting up), and the fact that she was colloquially and privately known as the 'tart with the heart' (Ibid), suggests a less egalitarian envisioning of the programme's 'family' than that promised in the memo above.

It was not until 1968, so 4 years after *Play School* began, that the BBC conducted sustained and organised research into its audience composition, in a series of reports that also included *Listen with Mother*, *Watch with Mother*, *Jackanory* (1965-96) and children's programmes on ITV series on any given day.³¹ In seeking to investigate 'the ontology of actual children' (Oswell, 2002: 69) watching *Play School* as distinct from producer intentions and textual

address, this revealed that the BBC programmes, particularly *Play School* and *Listen with Mother*, attracted a higher proportion of middle-class viewers than ITV, seen by the BBC as conforming to the general pattern for their programme culture. The *Play School* figures need to be treated with caution given that not all homes had sets that were equipped to receive BBC2, the channel on which the programme was screened, and viewers needed to convert their existing sets or purchase a new one at some cost (see Briggs, 1995: 405). But although this (limited) empirical evidence may have questioned or undermined the BBC's early constructions of the under-privileged *Play School* viewer as the most important point of contact (a conception which complimented the emphasis on the programme's social value, as well as the very ethos of public service), such discourses remain important in offering a snapshot of how the Corporation conceived of the pre-school viewer at this time, and the ways in which this could shape every aspect of a programme, from set, aesthetics to textual address.

Conclusion: *Show Me Show Me* echoes of *Play School*

This analysis was not intended to produce a metanarrative about *Play School*'s role in understanding the development of BBC pre-school television in Britain, although it has intended to offer insight into this significance from a historical perspective. In view of the fact that it remains a well-known children's programme in what is clearly still-living popular memory, as well as the fact that it was flagged as significant within existing institutional histories, *Play School* was chosen in part because it appeared to exemplify the marginalisation of historical (and archival) programme case studies within the study of British children's television. Its popular resonance above undoubtedly includes my own popular memory, and some of my earliest memories of viewing television as a child include waiting – with some anticipation – to see which 'window' the programme would take me through that day. But part of the impetus for this article was less nostalgic than contemporary. When watching television with my young daughter, I am struck on a daily basis by the programme's lasting legacy: although the more prolific schedule of pre-school programming on CBeebies no longer boasts a clear flagship magazine programme for pre-schoolers, the channel's *Show Me Show Me* (2009-) - my daughter's current favourite - is in many ways a modern version of *Play School*, with its range of toys, its (telescopic) gaze into the public world out there, its ingenious use of household items to create stories and themes, constant

inclusion of the invisible child viewer ‘within’ the text, and its emphasis on the physical performances of its two presenters (Chris Jarvis and Pui Fan Lee). In writing this, I think about my own judgements about what my daughter watches, and how I am implicitly reassured by the programme’s aim for children to learn through play, to make, to do and to enjoy. Perhaps I am comforted by the fact that, in what is spoken about as a rapidly changing cultural and technological landscape for children, my daughter is essentially watching – in this instance - what *I* watched, albeit via the time-shift facility of Sky+, and after, not instead of, a full nursery day.

But as explained in the introduction, my aim here was also to focus on what is less known about the programme by exploring new archival evidence, whilst it has also, of course, been necessary and useful to engage with what is already ‘known’. Indeed, one of the challenges highlighted in researching of *Play School* is the difficulty of exploring a programme that is understood by its own institution as significant or canonical: the BBC material was replete with diachronic appraisals of its import and significance (for both internal and external use), and these discourses overlap with, and become part of, its popular and mythical history. I have aimed to look critically at these discourses, whilst also seeking to recognise innovation and intervention with regard to the BBC’s previous history of pre-school programming. Before BBC radio began *Listen with Mother*, Derek McCulloch, subsequently controller of *Children’s Hour* on radio, stated that the very young child was likely just happy with a ‘twinkly tune or certain sound effects, particularly domestic animals and domestic noises normally associated with the home’ (cited in Oswell, 2002: 1). Although this conception necessarily privileged the aesthetics of sound, the contrast with *Play School’s* more developed educational philosophy makes clear how it recognised the pre-school viewer as a complex (and often varied) entity that required the same consideration and exploration as the school-age child. There is also evidence to suggest that it marked a significant moment in the particular sociability (Scannell, 1996) of pre-school television’s address to the child, and in the effort to weave this address into the very fabric of programme text itself.

With regard to discourses of class, more research would need to be done on the history of pre-school television to ascertain whether the efforts to offer a socially representative address that (internally) – in fact – often directed more attention to the less affluent child, is part of a larger institutional pattern. But this is precisely where case studies have the ability to speak

back to wider institutional histories of the BBC's conceptions of public service which, especially with regard to class, continue to exercise a significant influence on the field (Holmes, 2008). The BBC's suggestion that 'every child between three and five should get something of value from [*Play School*]... but what this is will depend on the circumstances of the individual child',³² suggests a nuanced and reflective approach that later audience research in Cultural Studies might be proud of, and the constant and apparently genuine interest in reaching children outside of a middle-class 'norm' is notable. At the same time, such comments were themselves laden with problematic assumptions about the deprived, shadowy and clearly 'other' environment of the less affluent home, which resonate more clearly with received ideas about the Corporation's class elitism and bias.

One critic noted in 1966 how *Play School* was 'very much a place children go to, not a place where they permanently exist'.³³ Some 50 years after the programme began, there remain few empirical traces of these visits, and the BBC documentation tells us only how they were imagined, from particular institutional points of view. Nevertheless, these discourses enable our own (partial) imaginings of the institutional, textual and cultural horizons within which *Play School* was *first* conceived. In further foregrounding the critical and methodological value of the historical programme case study, a diachronic analysis may attest to the fact that the 'House with a Door', can reveal so much more.

¹ Freda Lingstrom to C.P Television, 25th February 1952. File T2/184 *Watch with Mother* (WAC).

² Scheduled on weekdays at 12:15pm, and alternating between puppetry, story time, rhymes and simple narratives, ITV's conception of the pre-school audience was not dissimilar from the BBC's *Listen with Mother* and *Watch with Mother* - even if the framework of maternal co-presence (and vigilance) was not explicitly presented as part of its textual, ideological and institutional framework.

³ 'Home School: A Preliminary Plan, tentatively offered by Maria Bird and Freda Lingstrom. Undated, T2/315/1 *Play School*.

⁴ The first executive Producer, Joy Whitby, is more often seen as the primary creative force behind the programme, but it is clear from the memos that ideas were already in development prior to her intervention.

⁵ ‘Play School: the basic aims of the programme’, undated and unauthored, T2/315/1 *Play School*.

⁶ Doreen Stephens, cited in ‘Watching without mother’ by Mavis and Geoffrey Nicholson, *The Observer Magazine*, 18th December, 1966.

⁷ ‘Home School: A Preliminary Plan’

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Cynthia Felgate, article draft for ‘Home and Family: the Journal of the Mother’s Union’, March 1973. T2/316/1 *Playschool* celebrations/ history.

¹⁰ Quoted in ‘*Play School* is age 15’, *Nursery World* 19 April, 1979. BBC Press cuttings box P684

¹¹ Christopher Williams, ‘Children’s Television’, in *Arts in Society*, 21 August 1969. BBC Press cuttings box P684.

¹² Felgate, article draft for ‘Home and Family’.

¹³ BBC press release: ‘*Play School* for the under fives’, 14th April 1964, T2/315/1 *Play School*.

¹⁴ Cited in *Play School: the basic aims of the programme*’.

¹⁵ Transcript of a ‘recorded interview with Nancy Quayle – *Play School* advisor for over 15 years’, undated, T2/315/1 ‘*Play School* – aims/objectives’.

¹⁶ Quoted by Hunter Davies in the *Sunday Times*, 11 March 1966, ‘*Play School: the basic aims of the programme*’.

¹⁷ ‘Report of a meeting held on Tuesday 22nd November, 1960’, T16/45/3 TV Policy Children’s Programmes File 3

¹⁸ Cited in ‘Watching without mother’.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Cited in ‘*Play School: the basic aims of the programme*’.

²¹ A Survey of the place of *Playschool* and *Watch with Mother*’.

²² Ibid.

²³ A Survey of the place of *Playschool* and *Watch with Mother*'.

²⁴ 'Play School: the basic aims of the programme'.

²⁵ Hunter Davies in the *Sunday Times*, 11 March 1966, 'Play School: the basic aims of the programme'.

²⁶ Play School: the basic aims of the programme'.

²⁷ A Survey of the place of *Playschool* and *Watch with Mother*'.

²⁸ Transcript of a 'recorded interview with Nancy Quayle'.

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³⁰ Felgate, article draft for 'Home and Family'.

³¹ 'Programmes for Young Children: October 1966-June 1968', LR/68/1047.

³² A Survey of the place of *Playschool* and *Watch with Mother*'.

³³ Davies, *Sunday Times*, 11 March 1966, in 'Play School: the basic aims of the programme'.

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