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What Is Unique about Playwork?

Fraser Brown

Early in 2017 the Playwork Team at Leeds Beckett University was asked to contribute a Playwork chapter to the forthcoming *Cambridge Handbook of Play* (Roopnarine & Smith 2018). Towards the end of our chapter we highlighted the elements of playwork practice that we identified as being unique to the playwork profession. We argued that none of the other members of the children's workforce can claim to do these things. The following Paper is intended to supplement and enlarge upon that aspect of the Playwork Team's chapter (Brown, Long & Wragg 2018).

The Unique Elements of Playwork

- A conceptualisation of the child that actively resists dominant and subordinating narratives and practices
- A belief that while playing, the 'being' child is far more important than the 'becoming' child
- An adherence to the principle that the vital outcomes of playing are derived by children in inverse proportion to the degree of adult involvement in the process
- A non-judgemental acceptance of the children as they really are, running hand in hand with an attitude, when relating to the children, of 'unconditional positive regard'
- An approach to practice that involves a willingness to relinquish adult power, suspend any preconceptions, and work to the children's agenda
- The provision of environments that are characterised by flexibility, so that the children are able to create (and possibly destroy and recreate) their own play environments according to their own needs
- A general acceptance that risky play can be beneficial, and that intervention is not necessary unless a safety or safeguarding issue arises
- A continuous commitment to deep personal reflection that manages the internal relationship between their present and former child-self, and the effects of that relationship on their current practice

1. A conceptualisation of the child that actively resists dominant and subordinating narratives and practices

The rest of the children's workforce in the UK prioritises adult agendas - teachers follow the National Curriculum; social workers focus on child protection, etc. Playworkers are the only people who don't regard it as their role to offer children social and moral instruction. Our priority is to provide children with play opportunities that they otherwise would not have. The following extract from my book, *Play and Playwork: 101 Stories of Children Playing* (Brown 2014, p.42) illustrates this point.

Nicolae's Play Cues

Author's Observation

I once watched a playworker playing with a 10 year old boy called Nicolae, in a Romanian hospital ward. The pair were engaged in a game of chase. Nicolae was chasing the playworker, but seemed to want her to chase him. As they were running round the cots, Nicolae stopped at a table and banged it noisily twice with his hand. The playworker kept on running; having missed the play cue she had just been given. Nicolae resumed his chase. Next, he knocked over a mattress, and clasped his hands to his face in mock horror. He even said 'oh dear!' This was a much more obvious play cue, and yet the playworker missed it altogether and continued to run away from him. That left Nicolae with no option but to take his cue from the playworker, and so he started to chase her again. Almost immediately he ran past the playworker's coat, which was hanging from a door handle. He stopped and put his hand into the coat pocket, pretending to steal something. At last the playworker got the message, and started to chase him. Nicolae yelled excitedly. He allowed himself to be caught quite quickly, and the pair ended up rolling around on the floor with Nicolae giggling triumphantly.

There are many lessons to be learned from this short story, and indeed some of these were explored in the aforementioned book. However, the reason for recounting the story on this occasion is not to explore the complexity and sophistication of Nicolae's play cues (see Sturrock & Else 1998), but rather to focus on the playworker's eventual reaction. Once she has appropriately interpreted his play cue, she engages in a spot of rough and tumble with him. A teacher would almost certainly have felt the need to offer a bit of moral education, "Now Nicolae, you mustn't put your hands into other people's pockets", or possibly a more forceful statement about thieving. Either way, the adult agenda would have taken over, as opposed to the mutual fun and laughter of the playworker's approach.

2. A belief that while playing, the 'being' child is far more important than the 'becoming' child

For many years I used to say that children 'learn and develop *through* play'. Eventually I realised this phrase carried the strong implication that the purpose of play was to create better adults. Not only does this under-value the wide-ranging and very immediate benefits of play, but it also perpetuates the dominant and subordinating narratives mentioned in No.1 above. I now suggest that children 'learn and develop *while* they are playing'. This is a significant difference as it lays more emphasis on the idea that play has immediate short-term value. This thinking lends itself to the fundamental playwork understanding that play has autotelic, as well as developmental value. Thus, the role of the playworker is one of facilitator and enabler, rather than teacher or leader – hence the professional title was changed in the 1970's from playleader to playworker (Chilton 2018). The role of the playworker is neatly summed up in the final sentence of this extract, from a book by the creative artist John Portchmouth:

'I don't remember how it started. There was me, and sand, and somehow there was a wooden spade: and then there were castles! I don't even remember asking how to do it; the need was big enough, and the way was there. Or maybe I'm not remembering exactly; perhaps I only found what someone had provided ... someone who had anticipated the need. ... It helps if someone, no matter how lightly, puts in our way the means of making use of what we find'

(Portchmouth, 1969, p.7).

Portsmouth's parents took him to the beach and gave him a bucket and spade. They did not tell him what to do with the tools and materials they had provided. They had faith in the natural creativity to the playing child. To a substantial degree, playworkers have to adopt a similar approach. Their priority is to facilitate the child's immediate world, not to lead the child into a proscribed developmental future.

3. *An adherence to the principle that the vital outcomes of playing are derived by children in inverse proportion to the degree of adult involvement in the process*

Here is an illustration of how inappropriate an adult's intervention can be. It is taken from the 101 Stories book mentioned above (Brown 2014, pp.54-55).

Treasure Hunt

Kitty Press – Playworker

Josh (3 yrs) walks into the classroom and asks, 'Where's Rosie?' He smiles when he sees her and walks over to her. They bounce up and down, facing each other. Rosie (3 yrs) takes some books from the table and drops them on the floor. 'Let's go for a walk with books!' she says. Holding hands they walk around the classroom carrying the books. 'We are walking, we are walking,' they proclaim.

'Let's make a map of where we've been' says Josh. They get paper and crayons and scribble a map. Then Josh rolls up his paper into a tube. 'Roll your paper,' he tells Rosie. 'Let's go looking for treasure.' Rosie can't roll her paper and asks me for help. I suggest that Josh helps her. 'Okay,' says Josh. They hold the 'telescopes' to their eyes and walk around the tables chanting, 'Treasure! Treasure!'

Rosie says, 'I am Princess Rosie.' Josh says, 'I am a Pirate.' Rosie collects a basket of beans (from the 'transferring exercise' equipment) and tips these onto the floor. She asks me to help her dig for treasure.

At this point the teacher chastised Rosie for tipping the beans on the floor, and told Josh to 'go and do something more constructive.'

Clearly the children were doing very well by themselves – having fun, developing their social skills, being creative, solving little problems, learning about maps and telescopes. Indeed, it is arguable that this story provides a good example of the way in which play by itself can enable a child to enter their 'zone of proximal development', as Vygotsky (1978) calls it. Far from being 'constructive', the teacher's intervention was actually destructive.

4. *A non-judgemental acceptance of the children as they really are, running hand in hand with an attitude, when relating to the children, of 'unconditional positive regard'*

Western societies, especially their media outlets, tend to depict children in one of two ways – as little innocents in need of protection, or as little devils in need of discipline. On the one hand we are urged to smother the child with love – on the other hand we are cautioned to be watchful and suspicious of their antics. Neither of these stereotypes is accurate, nor are they helpful. All human beings are unique, which means it is important that playworkers do not fall into the trap of stereotyping the children in any way. We have to approach the children with an open mind, adopting an unprejudiced, non-judgemental approach – an approach that Fisher (2008) has termed 'negative capability'. Above all, drawing on the thinking of the humanist psychologist Carl Rogers (1961) and the play therapist Virginia Axline (1969), playworkers need to adopt an attitude of *unconditional positive regard*. The playwork environment should be characterised by "respect,

understanding and openness on the part of the playworker – an environment where the child is free to express their feelings completely” (Brown 2018). The playworker is a selfless helper, whose role is to satisfy the child’s basic play drive, while developing a trusting relationship with the child. The playworker who adopts an attitude of unconditional positive regard is not deterred by any negative behaviour on the part of the child. Instead they offer continual “acceptance of and enduring warmth towards the children” (Mearns and Thorne, 1988, p.59 – slightly paraphrased).

5. An approach to practice that involves a willingness to relinquish adult power, suspend any preconceptions, and work to the children’s agenda

Following on from the previous factor if we are to treat the children’s play with due respect then we have to be able to respond to their agenda, and in particular any play cues they might present. The following reflection provides an excellent example of a playworker responding to the children’s play cues (Brown 2014, p.42-43).

The Troll

Katherine Press – Playworker and Montessori Teacher

It is snack time, and picking up on the relaxed atmosphere, I lie on the floor in the middle of the children while they have their snacks.

Gerry: “Look Katherine has fallen asleep!”

I open one eye and look at Gerry

He laughs and runs back to his seat.

Martin: “That’s not Katherine - it’s a troll”

I then begin to snore loudly: zzzzzz....

The children laugh and start to get excited.

Two children come over with their apples and put them on my tummy.

As I move to get the apples the children run back to their seats.

I pretend to eat the apples but sit up and start to sniff

“I think there must be children moving around!,

I can smell children when they move close to me!

Yum yum!”

They all scream and run back to their seats.

Lisa creeps into the home corner.

“Let’s get some pretend food for the troll”

She puts the food on a plate and pushes it towards me.

I sniff again “Oh yuck that’s not my food. My food’s children!”

Lisa laughs.

Then Jodie gets a teddy from the cuddly toy box.

She creeps up to me with the toy and puts it by my head.

“Here you go Mr Troll, I got you a teddy”

She sits back.

I slowly start to stroke the teddy.

I start to smile and cuddle the teddy bear.

I sit up slowly and still cuddling the teddy I walk out of the classroom.

I come back in as Katherine.

“Hello everyone I just saw a really funny troll holding a teddy, did you?”

The children start to tell me about their adventure with the troll and how he could smell them and wanted to eat them if they moved! Not one single child said that the troll was me.

The action of 'lying on the floor in the middle of the children is clearly the action of a playworker. Not many teachers would do such a thing. However, from the point at which Martin says "That's not Catherine - it's a Troll", the playworker is responding to the children's cues – with a really beautiful outcome. Indeed, it would be possible to write a whole book about the final sentence.

6. *The provision of environments that are characterised by flexibility, so that the children are able to create (and possibly destroy and recreate) their own play environments according to their own needs.*

The following extract refers to an event that occurred on an adventure playground that I managed in the late 1970's. It provides a good example of the value of applying this approach. Although adventure playground life has changed considerably since then, the lesson of that weekend remains as powerful as ever today (Brown, 2014, p.132).

Bonfire Night

Author's observation

By the end of the first summer the children had created an amazing chaotic tapestry of dens and climbing frames, a boat swing, a sand pit, etc. The playground was in a state of constant change, but always developing into something more and more wonderful. Not everyone agreed. My father visited when the children had a craze for building 'tower' dens. He said "It looks a bit like a concentration camp." However, in my eyes the playground was a creative wonder. So, imagine my horror when I arrived on Saturday 4th November to find children and parents tearing the whole thing down to make the "biggest bonfire there's ever been". It seemed like reckless and wanton destruction of a year's work, and all for the sake of a couple of hours of excitement. In truth I have never seen a bonfire like it before or since. It lit up the night sky like a Millennium beacon. Our plans of cooking potatoes on it came to nothing, because you couldn't get within 20 metres of it. It was still burning the next day, and for two days after that. We eventually had to get the fire-brigade to come and put it out. All that was left were the charred embers of a once beautiful thing.

But, that was my mistake.

We struggled our way through the cold nights of winter, but as soon as the days started to lengthen the children were out again rebuilding their playground. Of course this year's playground was completely different, and after another end-of-year bonfire so was the following year's.

Abernethy (1977) suggested we should see the adventure in adventure playgrounds as being in the mind of the child. Too often playworkers feel protective of the adventurous structures, with the result that successive generations of children have less opportunity to impact on the play environment, and consequently feel less possessive about 'their' playground. This is fundamentally bad practice. Adventure playgrounds should be an ongoing blank slate on which children can explore their own ideas. If the structures stay the same over many years the playworkers are effectively adulterating the children's play (Delorme 2018). The annual bonfire made sure that could not happen at the Colliery Adventure Playground.

This should not be taken to imply that all playwork projects should be destroyed at the end of every year. Clearly, this has to be decided by the children, not the playworkers. However, it should be

made clear to the children that the project is flexible enough to allow them to manipulate the environment to fit in with their needs, and even to destroy it and start again if they want to.

7. A general acceptance that risky play can be beneficial, and that intervention is not necessary unless a safety or safeguarding issue arises

The Eccleshill Adventure Playground, Bradford (UK) makes it clear that its fundamental philosophy is reflective of Else's (2009, p.157) 'three frees' concept, i.e. an adventure playground should be free of charge, offer freedom of choice regarding the activities, and the children should be free to leave when they wish. The playground's policy statement clarifies the implications of that approach more specifically.

Eccleshill Adventure Playground Play Policy Position Statement

Eccleshill Adventure Playground recognises children's play as a bio-psychological drive and legal entitlement. The playground strives to give all children the opportunity, at their own discretion, to engage in the full range of play types by creating a rich and stimulating environment, and by practicing a facilitative, non-directive approach.

The playground responds to the child's instinct to experience risk in their play, and whilst facilitating opportunities to do so in compliance with relevant health & safety and risk management policy and procedure, acknowledges that an element of real danger must be present for such opportunities to be truly beneficial to the child's development. Therefore it is inevitable that, on occasion, some children attending the playground may incur injury.

For many people this is a statement of the obvious – accidents are part of everyday life, and that obviously includes times when children are playing. However, playworkers believe something more than that – namely that risk-taking is fundamentally beneficial in the longer term. This factor is about the playworker's role in providing play opportunities that enable children to challenge themselves in every aspect of life - social, physical, cognitive, etc. Unfortunately, much of the discussion around the topic has tended to focus on the physical aspects of risk-taking, which is far too limited in scope. After all, risks appear in every aspect of life. The playworker has to walk a daily fine line between freedom and protection. On the one hand we must guard against over-protection, which merely means children never get to test boundaries and learn about their own limitations. On the other hand, it would be irresponsible to allow children to put themselves in harm's way. Clearly, playwork is not about deliberately creating dangerous environments, but without the opportunity to test their limits children will not be able to learn how to cope with danger when it arises.

8. A continuous commitment to deep personal reflection that manages the internal relationship between their present and former child-self, and the effects of that relationship on their current practice.

The final unique element represents a coming together of two widely accepted strands of playwork thinking, i.e. Hughes's (2012) exhortation to playworkers to engage in 'reflective analytic practice, and Sturrock and Else's (1997) warning that playworkers should not bring 'unplayed out material' into the work place. Hughes recommends a systematic approach to reflective practice, using something he calls the IMEE Protocol (1996). He suggests that playworkers can assess any playwork environment using four criteria - Intuition, Memory, Experience, and Evidence (IMEE). Thus,

*Their own intuitive judgements of what a 'good' play environment should be like;
their childhood memories of play environments they were frequently attracted to;
their experience of what kinds of play environments work from their professional*

perspective; and what scientific evidence might exist to support their

(Hughes 2012, p.226)

While reflecting on their practice, and perhaps more importantly during their practice, playworkers must take great care not to allow their own unresolved issues to get in the way. Otherwise we run the risk of 'adulterating' the play environment. The concern of Sturrock & Else is:

There is a danger that the play aims and objects of the children become contaminated ... by the worker's own unplayed out material ... Here the frame of the child's play comes to focus on the unplayed out material of the playworker's own history and past, the children solely bit players, second bananas, on the stage of the playworker's drama or narrative ... There is a danger of multifold contamination in this situation

(Sturrock & Else, 1997, p.20)

Freud tells us that children often use their play to come to terms with traumatic events in their lives, so it is quite wrong for any of the playworker's personal issues to get in the way of that process. Thus, it is essential that playworkers commit themselves to engaging in on-going, deep and honest personal reflection on the nature of their work and of themselves.

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