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Exploring synergies between playwork as reflexive practice and constructivist grounded theory.

Abstract

Charmaz (2014, p. 344) suggests that ‘a reflexive stance informs how the researcher conducts his or her research, relates to the research participants and represents them in written reports’. As playworkers, we position ourselves outside of children’s play, as observers looking in, often, though not always, trying to make sense of what we observe. How we interpret children’s play, our interventions and those of our peers and colleagues, is influenced by our own lived experiences, our biographies and the history we bring to the play setting. This article explores the place of reflexivity in playwork and proposes that when researching children’s play from a playwork perspective a Constructivist Grounded Theory approach responds to some of the unique characteristics of playwork and the ambiguity of children’s play.

Keywords: Grounded Theory; Playwork; Constructivist Grounded Theory; Play Research; Reflexivity; Reflexive Research

Introduction

It was during the second year of a part time PhD, researching the commissioning of children's play services, that I first adopted constructivist grounded theory as an approach. The PhD study did not research children's play as such, rather it focused on the provision of playwork services. As the initial data was gathered and analysed, my positionality as a playworker and its impact on the data analysis could not be ignored. As Gilgun (2010. p.2) suggests, 'our own experiences and perspectives influence every aspect of the research we do'. This article discusses constructivist grounded theory and positions it as an appropriate method for researching from a playwork perspective. This assertion is built on the premise that because both constructivist grounded theory and playwork practice are inherently reflexive, there is an alignment between the two disciplines of both research and practice.

Constructivist Grounded Theory

Grounded Theory methodology was originally pioneered by Glaser and Strauss in the late 1960's, following the publication of their seminal text *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (1967). Their book aimed at 'improving social scientists' capacities for generating theory that will be relevant to their research' (p. vii) and to move researchers from simply verifying existing theories, to theory creation through the collation and analysis of data obtained through social research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 2016). In essence, grounded theory is a method of undertaking qualitative research, which seeks to generate conceptual frameworks and/or theories which are grounded in the data. The method involves an iterative process of data collection and analysis, undertaken simultaneously to inform and influence future data collection (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 2) described grounded theory as, 'the discovery of theory from

data systematically obtained from social research' and the term refers to both the method of analysis, and the product of the research process (Charmaz, 2008; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007).

Since the publication of *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* in 1967, there has been a split between the objectivist approach of Glaser and the pragmatist foundations of Strauss, and subsequently Strauss and Corbin (1990). Whilst there are a growing number of interpretations and applications of the original method (Mruck & Mey 2007), there are currently three main orientations of grounded theory. These are: classical grounded theory, also known as Glaserian; Straussian grounded theory; and constructivist grounded theory (Nagel, et al., 2015; Bryant, 2017).

Based on the original methodologies of Glaser and Strauss, constructivist grounded theory, is a 'contemporary version of grounded theory' (Charmaz, 2014 p. 342). Its epistemological roots lie in the understanding that realities are constructed through an interrelationship between the researcher and research participants, actively constructing the world in which they live and work (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008).

Charmaz became dissatisfied with the positivist, objectivist and social constructionist approaches to grounded theory and in 1993 she proposed her thinking regarding constructivist grounded theory. She suggested that to this point, the existing approaches didn't acknowledge or reflect upon the subjectivity brought to the research, by the researcher (Charmaz 2008, 2014). Constructivist grounded theory, unlike other iterations, 'locates the research process and product in historical, social and situational conditions' (Charmaz, 2017 p. 34). As Nagel et al, (2015) explain, the constructivist grounded theory approach allows the researcher to recognise that the way in which individuals perceive reality varies, and that there are many ways in which the same phenomenon can be experienced by different observers. They highlight that constructivist grounded theory enables the researcher to

acknowledge and recognise their experiences brought to the research *a priori* - as Noerager Stern (2007, p. 117) puts it, 'one can not unknow what one knows'.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity has historically been associated with social sciences, given the importance placed on the recognition of the influence of self on social science research (Fook & Gardener, 2007). Over time, reflexivity has been increasingly embedded in practice by health and human service professions (Fook & Gardener, 2007; D'Cruz et al., 2007), because of the level of uncertainty associated with these occupations (D'Cruz, Gillingham, & Melendez, 2007). Reflexivity is generally accepted as an inherent aspect of the constructivist grounded theory method (Gentles, et al., 2014; Neill, 2006; Mruck & Mey, 2007) and it is considered by Bryant & Charmaz (2007, p. 609) to involve the 'researcher's scrutiny of his or her research experience, decisions, and interpretations in ways that bring the researcher into the process'. Thornberg (2012, p. 254) explains that through engaging in constant reflexivity, the researcher acknowledges 'prior knowledge, perspectives and privileges' rather than 'pretending to be without preconceptions'.

In 1999 Bleakley suggested that the term 'reflective practice' could be considered as a 'catch-all title for an ill-defined process' (p. 318). Whilst the discussion about what reflection as distinct from reflexion continues, it is important to offer a definition of the terminology in the context of this article. Here, reflection is considered as being different from reflexion. From a practice perspective, reflection is 'an in-depth review of events' (Bolton & Delderfield, 2018 p. 9) taking place at various points during the experience, be that before, during, or after (Kilvington & Wood, 2018). Reflexion, however, involves questioning: '... our own attitudes, theories-in-use, values, assumptions, prejudices and habitual actions: to understand our complex roles in relation to others' (Bolton & Delderfield, 2018, p. 10). From a research perspective, Olmos-Vega, Stalmeijer, Varpio, & Kahlke, (2022, p. 1) define

reflexive research practice as involving self-conscious critique, appraisal and evaluation of how individual 'subjectivity and context influence the research processes'. They explain multiple purposes of reflexive practice from various research orientations which can include neutralising, acknowledging, explaining or capitalising on the influence of researcher subjectivity. Finlay & Gough, (2003) suggest that reflection occurs across a continuum from reflection at one end, to reflexion at the opposite, with critical reflection existing somewhere in between.

Reflexivity as a focus on self-awareness, is replicated across research literature. For example, Engward & Davis, (2015), suggest that reflexivity looks more deeply, developing a self-awareness of the researcher's influence on the research environment and vice versa. However, there are inconsistencies, often with varying interpretations of the application of reflexivity depending on the perspective or focus (Mruck & Mey, 2007; Gough, 2003; Gentles et al 2014; Engward & Davis, 2015; D'Cruz, et al., 2007). Whilst debate exists across fields of sociology, ethnography, nursing, human geography and organisational research about the role and function of reflexivity in social research (Mruck & Mey, 2007), Gough (2003, p. 23) suggests that 'at the very least, reflexivity implies that the researchers make visible their individuality and its effects on the research process'.

Fook & Gardener (2007, p.28) discuss reflexivity in terms of recognising that it is 'all aspects of ourselves' that influence the way in which knowledge is created. In the context of reflexivity, they are not specifically focused on the creation of knowledge from a research perspective, but on the day-to-day ways in which individuals create knowledge which then informs professional practice;

In this sense, the idea of reflexivity alerts us to the fact that knowledge does not necessarily exist in some independent form, separate from our experiences and own sense of who we are. We are often

responsible for interpreting, selecting, prioritizing, sometimes seeing and not seeing, and using knowledge in particular ways that are to do with a myriad of things about ourselves and our social and historical situations.

(Fook & Gardener, 2007, p. 28).

Charmaz (2017, p. 35) advocates the necessity of reflexivity as a constructivist grounded theorist. She identifies that this ‘methodological self-consciousness’ encourages scrutiny of the way in which the researcher conducts their study. This means asking probing questions of the relationship between the researcher and their participants, and the data and the research process more generally. As such, Charmaz’s approach differs from that prescribed by Glaser and Strauss in their original text in 1967, as she recognises the role played by the researcher. She suggests that when constructivist grounded theorists analyse and develop the decisions they take throughout the research process, they gain control over both the focus of the study and the next step in their analysis or methodology (Charmaz, 2008). As healthcare professionals, Nagel et al., (2015) highlight the significance of the constructivist grounded theorist being reflexive in their research practice, recognising reflexivity as central to their profession. As is proposed here for playworkers as researchers, they too felt that because of the reflexive nature of constructivist grounded theory, it was ‘complementary to the nature of [their] disciplines’ (ibid, p. 368).

Reflexive Playwork

The foundations of the playwork profession are said to have emerged from the Danish junk playground movement of the 1940’s (Cranwell, 2003). Playwork is considered to offer a unique approach to working with children (PPSG, 2005; Play Wales, 2016; Delorme, 2018; Brown, et al., 2018) where playworkers ‘neither direct nor organise play’ (Play Wales, 2021, p. np). The role of a playworker is to support children in the creation of an environment in which they can play (Brown, Long, & Wragg, 2018), which is more nuanced than may first

appear. As Play Wales identify, ‘those practicing playwork are required to respond to sometimes subtle, complex cues and signals, and to keep an open mind without jumping to conclusions or prejudging a situation’ (Play Wales, 2021, p. 32). The inherent reflexivity apparent in a playwork approach, appears to stem from some of these unique characteristics which are discussed further below. From a research perspective, reflexivity is explained as being ‘tied to the researcher’s ability to make and communicate nuanced and ethical decisions amid the complex work of generating real-world data’ (Olmos-Vega, Stalmeijer, Varpio, & Kahlke, 2022, p. 1). It enables researchers to consider their positionality within social situations as it allows questions to be considered and awareness to be heightened in relation to power, identity and subjectivity (Dean, 2017). This is particularly pertinent in a playwork context – where playworkers work with playing children, where they seek a more equitable distribution of power by resisting subordinating narratives of adult – child relationships (Wragg, 2016) (discussed further below). Delorme, (2018, p. 179) highlights the complexity of the role of a playworker whom, she suggests, have an ‘inherent understanding of the value of play in its own right, without any adult-centric agendas’. Reflexivity also offers an opportunity to explore factors influencing playwork espoused theories versus playwork theories in use, exposing any inadvertent agendas, which Delorme (2018) suggests, helps playworkers to prioritise a child’s right to play freely.

Brown (2018), discussing the work of Sturrock and Else (1998), suggests that for playworkers to effectively support the playing child, they ‘must develop a consistent interpretative or analytic perspective out of which to issue their responses’ to the playing child. Read any narrative accounts of playwork practice and the complexity of this process becomes apparent. The chapter written by Bullough, Pugh, & Tawil, (2018) about their experiences at the Welsh Adventure Playground ‘The Land’, is a case in point. Here, they capture highly complex, interpretive examples of playworker responses to children’s play

behaviours. As Olmos-Vega et al. (2022) imply, the authors are able to communicate ‘nuanced and ethical decisions amid the complex work’ not of research in this case, but of playwork practice. These complex narratives are clearly informed by the authors’ personal and professional experiences and capture the unique characteristics of playwork practice as discussed further below.

Whilst reflexive practice is extensively discussed within popular playwork texts (for example, Palmer, 2010; Kilvington & Wood, 2010, 2018; Hughes, 2003, 2012), the term is rarely used. Though Palmer (2003) acknowledges the difference between reflection and reflexion, the authors listed above discuss ‘reflective’ playwork practice to describe practice indicative of what is described here as ‘reflexive’ practice. Despite the relative absence of explicit reference to reflexivity in the playwork literature, one might argue that playwork practice is inherently reflexive, as implied in the Playwork Principles and elsewhere. The Playwork Principles, the ‘professional and ethical framework’ (PPSG, 2005) for the playwork sector, suggest, ‘Playworkers recognise their own impact on the play space and also the impact of children and young people’s play on the playworker’. Whilst this playwork principle is directly addressing issues of reflexivity, the terminology hasn’t entered the everyday playwork parlance. Despite this, it is recognised that, both in terms of playwork research and practice, practitioners bring their own ways of knowing to the play setting (Russell, Lester, & Smith, 2017).

There are multiple examples where reflexivity as a praxis exists across the playwork sector, though it is rarely articulated as such. A brief review of playwork texts and blogs¹ demonstrates that reflexivity happens in abundance. Take, for example, Guilbaud, (2015)

¹ There are various examples of playwork blogs, though the two, where reflexive practice is frequently exemplified include Joel Seath’s ‘Playworkings’ blog (available from: <http://playworkings.wordpress.com>) and Morgan Leichter-Saxby’s ‘Play Everything’ blog (available from: <http://playeverything.wordpress.com>)

who begins to explore playwork identities, through interviewing students and practitioners across the playwork sector. The narratives offered by the participants highlight childhood and life experiences, which brought practitioners to the playwork profession and which then inform their practice.

A further example is Kilvington & Wood's most recent edition of *Reflective Playwork*. In this, they discuss issues of cognitive dissonance and how 'deeply held attitudes and beliefs' (2018, p. 158) can inform practice and how they should be questioned and challenged in order to incorporate playwork in practice. Kilvington & Wood (2018) offer various 'reflective' accounts. These accounts shared by Kilvington & Wood (2018) bring the author's own '... attitudes, theories-in-use, values, assumptions, prejudices and habitual actions' which Bolton & Delderfield (2018, p.10) describe as reflexive strategies.

Hughes' IMEE Protocol for Reflective Practice (1996) is also inherently reflexive. Developed as a method of evaluating the quality of play environments, this model explores the 'Intuition, Memory, Experience and Evidence' (Hughes , 2012, p. 41) of playworkers, to inform their assessment of a play environment from a child's perspective. Hughes (2012) suggests that IMEE supports playwork practitioners to review personal and professional experience and use theory and literature to inform the judgements made. In his book, Hughes provides an insight into a number of play environments, assessing the quality of them from his own perspective, often informed by his play experiences as a child. His accounts are insightful, describing a very personal perspective of play environments, his own experiences of play as a child and the interactions and behaviours experienced within these spaces;

My first feeling, my intuition, was that it was a beautiful space and a wonderfully diverse environment for playing... It felt a good place to go, to me, somewhere the child in me would have chosen to play too.

(Hughes, 2012, p. 227)

When considering reflexivity from a playwork *and* a research perspective, it is Fook & Gardener's (2007) characterisation of reflexivity discussed above, that resonates with the assertion that playworkers should consider their impact on the play space and also the impact of children and young people's play on the playworker (PPSG, 2005). Reflexivity happens when playworkers are aware of how their lived experiences influence the way in which they are 'interpreting, selecting, prioritizing, sometimes seeing and not seeing, and using knowledge in particular ways' (Fook & Gardener, 2007, p. 28), when they are going about their day-to-day practice of supporting children to realise their right to play. It offers an opportunity for playworkers to become alert to how they interpret and respond to children's play informed by their social and historical perspectives. Aligned with the Playwork Principles (PPSG, 2005) reflexivity in research terms is, as Gentles, et al (2014, p.1) identify, a 'generalized practice in which researchers strive to make their influence on the research explicit'. This offers opportunities to review practice to ensure that it is aligned with the professional and ethical framework for the profession.

Finlay (2003) offers five variants of reflexivity which she introduced to help practitioners distinguish between the different approaches to reflecting on practice. Most relevant to this discussion include reflexivity as introspection, reflexivity as intersubjective reflection, and reflexivity as social critique (Finlay, 2003, p. 6). These are relevant to researching from a playwork perspective given the unique characteristics of playwork discussed by Brown et al. (2018). Brown et al. (2018) assert that these eight unique characteristics of playwork as listed below, set the profession apart from other sections of the children's workforce and the process of reflexivity, underpinning an approach to practice, is apparent in these characteristics. The authors suggest that playwork is characterised by the following elements:

- 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.

(Brown, et al. 2018, p. 717)

Relevant to Finlay’s (2003) process of reflexivity as introspection is the final characteristic of playwork. If playworkers are to manage ‘the internal relationship between their present and former child-self’ (Brown et al. 2018, p. 717), then Finlay (2003) would suggest that reflexivity as introspection encourages the researcher to probe (but not wallow in) their own personal experiences. It offers opportunities to review interpretations and gain greater insight, identifying the links between the claims they make, their personal experiences

and the social context in which the research and/or practice takes place. Charmaz (2014, p. 156) suggests that researchers often start, knowingly or otherwise, from their own ‘preconceptions about what a particular experience means and entails’. It is common practice for teaching and training in playwork to begin with an exploration of participants’ ‘play memories’, encouraging participants to think about their overriding memories of play as a child², to support an increased awareness of the value and importance of play and its characteristics.

This does not suggest that there is a homogenous, shared understanding of what play is, based on experiences of play during childhood. Brian Sutton-Smith’s book, *The Ambiguity of Play* (1997) provides a source of ponderment in relation to reflexivity³ when researching children’s play from a playwork perspective. Playworkers do not enter the field with a shared and consistent understanding of play or of the practice of playwork, despite having the Playwork Principles (PPSG 2005) as the professional and ethical framework for playwork practice. As a diverse sector, operating across a wide range of settings across the UK (and beyond), there is much debate yet little agreement about what it is that the playwork sector does and how the varied epistemological foundations influence understandings of playwork practice and of children’s play (Kilvington & Wood, 2018, Guilbaud, 2015, Brown, et al., 2018⁴).

What individuals *do* enter the field of playwork and/ or research with are their own, personal experiences of play - be that their own childhood play or recent observations of the

² see, for example, Kilvington & Wood’s invitation to recall childhood memories in their 2018 text ‘Reflective Playwork: For All Who Work With Children’ page, 8.

³ Though not in terms of reflexivity as discussed by Sutton-Smith (2017), where he uses the term to describe reflexive action – something involuntary or instantaneous.

⁴ As an example of a recent ‘disagreement’ within the field, see Gordon Sturrock’s critique of Fraser Brown’s paper, produced following the launch of The Playwork Foundation in November 2017 and subsequent comments. <https://playworkfoundation.org/2018/01/26/fraser-browns-unique-characteristics-of-playwork-a-response-from-gordon-sturrock/>

play of perhaps their sibling, child, or through their work, for example. These issues of individual biographies result in different value and interpretations of children's play (Gonzalez-Mena, 2008) and the literature presents various explanations and evidence of how perspectives on children's play differ. For example: across gender lines, Warash, et al., (2016) found, that mothers and fathers differed in their preference for, and promotion of different types of play with their children; and Sandseter, (2014) found that male and female practitioners differed in their attitudes towards children's risky play. Generational differences are highlighted by Harris (2017). Cultural differences in understandings of play are presented by Kinkead- Clark & Hardacre (2017) and the variation of professional training and education, influencing perspectives on play, is highlighted by van der Aalsvoort, et al., (2015).

Given that the way in which practitioners understand children's play influences practice (McInnes, Howard, Miles, & Crowley, 2011), taking a reflexive stance would encourage the playworker and the researcher to question their perspectives and therefore their practice. This would help to highlight issues where preconceptions risk biasing the research findings, or as discussed below, negatively affect the children's play.

This process of introspection, or deep personal reflection, is not new to the playwork field and it is apparent throughout playwork theory and literature. For example, Sturrock and Else (1998) identified adulteration as being when the power and privilege experienced by adults, contaminate the child's play experience. This can occur in various ways dominating the play scenario: becoming over-involved, allowing a need to 'teach' children to shape adult/child interactions, or when playworkers unconsciously allow their own 'unplayed out material' from their past, to take precedence in children's play (Sturrock & Else, 1998, p. 21). To avoid this adulteration, Sturrock & Else suggest that playworkers should work with their colleagues to highlight and reflect on instances where adulteration occurs. They discuss

practice, which is reflexive, that playworkers have a responsibility to ‘speak accurately about their feelings, ideas, affects and vulnerabilities’ (ibid, p.22). Charmaz (2014) would suggest that in constructivist grounded theory terms, a heightened awareness of these preconceptions, can only benefit the process of analysis, moving and transforming both the research and the researcher as a consequence.

When discussing the BRAWGS continuum, Russell (2008) encourages playworkers to become attuned to their practice across a continuum, one that operates from a didactic approach to the opposite, which she suggests is one of chaos. She discusses how playworkers have to work to find a ‘ludocentric’ (Russell, 2008, p. 87) balance, supporting children’s play rather than serving adult agendas, dominant at either extreme. Russell explains that her initial thinking evolved to recognise ‘feelings and emotions rather than just behaviour’ (ibid, p. 87).

Given the focus of the BRAWGS continuum on emotional responses, this offers a playwork model for reflexivity, both reflexivity as introspection, exploring the personal experiences and associated meanings, and as intersubjective reflection (Finlay, 2003). Finlay (2003) explains that reflexivity as intersubjective reflection requires researchers to review the way in which unconscious processes, such as emotional responses, shape the relationship between the researcher and the research participants. As Kilvington & Wood (2018, p.11) highlight, meeting the play needs of each child, irrespective of their individual needs and preferences is challenging, especially when trying to ensure that practice is reflective of the playwork principles and that ‘our protective and educative adult buttons’ are not pressed, resulting in adulteration as discussed above. Russell suggests that:

if we see children playing in a way that makes us *feel* that we need to assert our adult authority, then our internal responses will be non-ludic. Our emotions, our gut response and our intent will all be to control, stop or redirect the play in some way

(Russell, 2008, p.87)

The employment of an approach which offers 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’ (Brown et al. 2018, p. 717) can support practice which enables this to occur. Brown (2018, p. 100), drawing from the work of Humanist Carl Rogers (1961), suggests that the role of a playworker is that of a ‘selfless helper, whose task is to satisfy the child’s fundamental need to play’ and he applies this term of ‘unconditional positive regard’ to the attitude of the playworker towards playing children. Ultimately, observations of children’s play and the conclusions drawn, both from a research and practice perspective, are shaped by our own ‘cultural categories’ (Altheide & Johnson, 2011, p. 519) and it is therefore important to begin to critique these.

Finlay identifies ‘reflexivity as social critique’ (2003 p.12) as a variant of reflexivity, which shines a light on power and privilege (Engward & Davis, 2015). It offers opportunity to use ‘experiential accounts while situating these within a strong theoretical framework about the social construction of power’ (Finlay, 2003, p. 14). Brown et al. (2018, p. 717) suggest that playwork adopts an ‘approach to practice that involves a willingness to relinquish adult power’ and as Wragg (2013, p. 287) identifies, playworkers should resist the tendency to ‘assume a position of superiority and control’ over a child’s world, setting aside adult prejudices. Hart (2008) identifies this approach as being unique to the profession of playwork and that rather than working with children from a position of power, playworkers work horizontally [collaboratively] with children. Hart explains that;

I don’t know of other professions that do that. Social work, and youth work are generally supposed to do that but they often have this double problem of being the ones that are adjudicating children; they have a power relationship to the Government.

(Hart, 2008, p.1)

Wragg (2018) cautions against conflating this more equitable sharing of power between playworker and child with affording equal status. Wragg (2018, p. 32) highlights that children, because of their biological immaturity, are more vulnerable than adults and are ‘therefore in need of greater rights of protection from themselves and others’. Playworkers operate in contexts which are bounded by regulations, policy and practice that places adults as being responsible for the environments in which they work. English after school clubs, for example must be on the compulsory childcare register, which places requirements upon the setting to meet ‘relevant legislation’ (Gov.uk, 2022). Playworkers operating in all settings retain their duty of care (Barclay, Bazley, & Bullough, 2016) for playing children, a status which carries with it significant power. Russell (2008) suggests that an awareness of the playworker’s position of power enables them to avoid dominating children’s play (Russell, 2008). It is proposed here that the process of reflexive practice, provides the framework for bringing this awareness to the fore, informed by the professional and ethical framework for the playwork sector. Wragg, (2018, p. 32) explains that the way in which playworkers equalise power between adult and child, is through playworkers valuing the child’s immediacy, recognising the child as ‘a competent social actor possessing specific skills and abilities *because not in spite* of their immaturity’ (emphasis added by author).

Brown (2018) suggests that this equalisation of power between child and playworker results in relationships rooted in trust (Brown, 2014). Reflexivity offers an opportunity to explore this positionality within a social situation – within the play environment and within the playworker/child, researcher/researched relationship. Dean (2017) suggests that it provides opportunities to critique how these positions arise and how they can become embedded within a social context.

In a research context, reflexivity is frequently employed to address these power differentials between powerful researchers and less powerful research participants or populations (Dean, 2017). Jackson (2017) highlights an example where the same can be applied to playwork practice. In her analysis of power distribution between the ‘playworkers’ and children in an afterschool club, Jackson, (2017) details the dominance of adult power in the play environment, affecting the children’s use of the space and the incongruence between espoused playwork theory that positions children as ‘autonomous active social agents’ (Brown, et al, 2018, p. 717) and ‘playwork’ practice observed in the setting. Jackson highlights the negative consequence of these power imbalances which appear inherent in the non-playwork practice of the staff and makes recommendations for reflexivity to disrupt some of the negative habitual working practices. If the team of playworkers at this setting were to follow Dean’s (2017) suggestion of employing a reflexive approach, they could consider how the power structures between those with power (playworkers) and those without (the children) have become embedded within the setting and begin to identify the subjectivities of the perspectives of the playworkers and the children.

Conclusion

As playworkers and as playwork researchers, there is a need to identify methods and methodologies which are sympathetic to our approach to working with children, and also our unique viewpoint – how playworkers view their relationship with children. As summarised above, whilst not all playwork practice is reflexive, reflexivity is inherent in the professional and ethical framework for playwork. Reflexivity is also inherent in constructivist grounded theory and it is because of this, that constructivist grounded theory lends itself as a method for researching playwork practice and provision and because grounded theory was always meant to have implications for practice and result in social action (Bryant, 2017). To coin a phrase used by Bryant (2017), there appears to be ‘fit’ and ‘grab’ between the constructivist

grounded theory approach to research and playwork practice because of the inherent reflexivity in both.

Reflexive practice is considered to be integral to qualitative research, ensuring quality research practice through continuous reflection on how the actions, values and perceptions of the researcher impact upon the research (Engward & Davis, 2015; Lambert, et al., 2010). It appears that the playwork profession, its theory, practice, and underpinning principles are making a similar case. Gough, (2003, p.21) proposes balance between researchers offering 'flat, unreflexive analysis and excessive, hyper-reflexive analysis'. In the case of playwork and its professional and ethical framework, this means somewhere between playworkers considering their 'impact on the play space and also the impact of children and young people's play on the playworker' and 'playworker's response to children and young people playing is based on a sound up to date knowledge of the play process, and reflective practice' (PPSG, 2005).

Through a process of reflexivity, playworkers as practitioners and as researchers, have the opportunity to become aware of their power, feelings and emotions, and take action to ensure that the influence of any preconceptions are considered when engaging in research and/or practice. Echoing Mruck and Mey's sentiments, reflexivity offers the opportunity for playworkers and researchers alike, 'to rethink, ground [and] justify' their research and practice decisions (2007 p. 519), avoiding adulteration and the biasing of children's play.

Kilvington & Wood (2010, p. 2) suggest that reflective practice is 'one of the most important processes of playwork', though the proposition here is that it may actually be *reflexive* practice, which is critical to effective playwork practice. Whilst playwork literature is replete with examples of reflexivity, the term has not seemingly passed into the lexicon.

For qualitative research studies, particularly in the case of grounded theorists, Engward & Davis (2015) suggest that findings may reflect the disciplinary context that the

researcher brings to their field of research and as long as playwork is practiced in accordance with the professional and ethical framework – the Playwork Principles (PPSG, 2005) - then it could be asserted that constructivist grounded theory offers an approach, sympathetic to the unique characteristics of playwork. Ultimately, constructivist grounded theorists offer interpretive understanding of what is going on, accounting for the unique context in which it occurs (Charmaz 2008).

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare

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