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The Possible Futures for Playwork Project – a thematic analysis

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Keywords: playwork literature, Possible Futures for Playwork, the Playwork Principles

Abstract

In 2008 a project funded by Play England asked the playwork field for their ideas on the ‘possible futures’ of playwork. The response included 23 ‘ideas papers’ which were originally intended to form part of the discussion on the future of playwork at a large-scale café style action event. Seven years on, this paper revisits these ideas papers by undertaking a thematic analysis on each paper to identify the main themes at that time. This analysis identified five main themes: uniqueness of playwork; professionalism of playwork; community-based aspects of playwork; relationship of playwork to the ‘wider world’ and threats to playwork. These themes are discussed in relation to the contextual factors that influenced playwork in 2008 and concludes with some provocations for the playwork field to consider for the future of playwork.

Introduction

The Possible Futures for Playwork project was an open invitation to anybody involved in the playwork sector to engage in a creative discussion to consider the future of playwork (Kilvington and Wood, 2010). It was sponsored and managed by Play England in collaboration with SkillsActive, the Joint National Committee for Training in Playwork (JNCTP), Play Wales, PlayBoard Northern Ireland and Play Scotland. The project was co-

ordinated by the late Professor Perry Else (Sheffield Hallam University) and was made up of a series of linked consultation events:

- A small-scale café style design event which took place in December 2007
- An invitation for playwork people to offer an 'ideas paper' on the future of playwork in January 2008
- An online discussion forum for playwork people to debate the content of the papers in March 2008
- A large-scale café style action event which was planned for June 2008 but did not take place (Else, 2008)

This paper focuses solely on the ideas papers, although the online discussion forum content was available for review. The rationale behind focussing on the ideas papers was three-fold. Firstly, as one of the original contributors of an 'ideas paper', I had been left wondering what has become of this work. Secondly, as the Possible Futures Project did not run the large-scale café style action event, the project ended abruptly. The papers reflect playwork thinking at a particular place in time and it would be interesting to identify the main themes that were perceived important for the future of playwork in 2008. Thirdly, the content within the 23 'ideas papers' are worthy of a revisit in considering the relevance of any emerging themes to playwork in 2015. This is particularly relevant as SkillsActive (the Sector Skills Council for Active Leisure and Wellbeing which includes playwork) are currently reviewing the National Occupational Standards for Playwork.

Contextual factors in relation to the Possible Futures for Playwork Project

The starting point for submission of the ideas papers was 22 January 2008 when the project was advertised on the Play England website and the following questions were used as prompts to generate ideas:

- Do you feel the playwork sector should be differently organised?
- What does playwork do well and how should we promote that?
- How do you feel playworkers should be trained or educated?
- Where should playwork fit within the government's children's workforce agenda?
- Do you feel that 'traditional' playwork is under threat?
- Should we work with parents to help develop more play opportunities?

(Play England, 2015)

These questions were influenced by four factors which made up the contextual knowledge which stimulated the Possible Futures for Playwork Project. These were the development of the Playwork Principles (PPSG), the BIG Lottery Funding for Play, the publication of Every Child Matters (2003) and the Children's Workforce Development Council. The following sections provide a brief explanation of each contextual factor and its relevance to the Possible Futures project.

The Playwork Principles

The Playwork Principles (PPSG, 2005) were developed from funding through the Welsh Assembly Government and facilitated by Play Wales, and superseded the two playwork Assumptions and twelve Values (Bonel and Lindon, 1996). The development of the Playwork Principles involved consultation with the playwork profession and was initially led by Bob Hughes, Gordon Sturrock and Mick Conway (Conway 2008), and the final version was constructed by the Play Wales Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group (PPSG). The eight Playwork Principles have been endorsed by SkillsActive and are still in current use to '*establish the professional and ethical framework for playwork*' (PPSG, 2005). Only five of the ideas papers made direct mention of the Playwork Principles, which were still in their infancy at the time of the Possible Futures project.

BIG Lottery Funding

2007-8 was an important time financially for play (and playwork), with the BIG Lottery Fund announcing in England that £155 million pounds and £13 million pounds in Wales would be spent on different aspects of children's play (BIG Lottery, 2015). The allocation of BIG Lottery monies to England and Wales was distributed in very different ways to provide children with play provision. In England, the money was used mainly by Local Authorities, whilst in Wales the funding was made available in the main through the voluntary sector. In England the BIG Lottery Children's Play Initiative was delivered within three pre-defined strands: the Children's Play programme (£123 million awarded): the Playful Ideas programme (£12 million awarded) and the Play England project (£15 million awarded) In Wales, £13 million was available with infrastructure project grants of up to £250,000 and play project grants of between £250,000 and £1 million (BIG Lottery, 2015).¹

The funding in both countries had a focus on open access play for children within their communities. The available funding and development of 'playranging', a form of mobile playwork provision which utilises the existing natural and human-built play spaces within local communities (Wavehill, 2013), is clearly reflected throughout the ideas papers.

Every Child Matters

¹ For a more comprehensive look at playwork and the factors that influenced each of the UK countries, see the chapters of Voce (Play England), Greenaway (Play Wales), Beattie (Play Scotland) and Kane (PlayBoard, Northern Ireland) in *Foundations in Playwork* (Brown, 2008).

Every Child Matters (2003) was a UK Government publication that was published in response to the tragic death of Victoria Climbié, based on five outcomes that were considered important to children and young people. These five outcomes were: be healthy; stay safe; enjoying and achieving; making a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being. The five outcomes of *Every Child Matters* meant that any service that involved children had to demonstrate how these outcomes would be met. The services for children delivered by the organisations and the funding had to align with the five outcomes. Although a UK Government document, Wales did not adopt the five outcomes of *Every Child Matters* (2003) but instead developed their own policy, *Children and Young People: Rights to Action* (WAG, 2004). This Welsh policy document consisting of seven core aims based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989). *Every Child Matters* was referred to in six of the ideas papers, whereas only one paper made reference to the Welsh document.

Children's Workforce Development Council

The fourth and final contextual aspect was the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC), which was set up in 2005 in order to support delivery of the *Every Child Matters* agenda with a focus on integrated working (UK Parliament, 2015). Integrated working was defined as *"when everyone supporting children and young people works together effectively to put the child at the centre, meet their needs and improve their lives"* (CWDC, 2008: p2). Although playwork was not a direct focus of the work CWDC, it did have major implications where playwork dovetailed with other professions which worked with children and young people. For example, the provision for play in after school clubs which included younger children could result in a tension between the early years understanding of play and the playwork understanding of play.

Methodology

The 23 'ideas papers' submitted to the Possible Futures for Playwork project can now be considered as archival documentation, and for the purposes of this study were considered as individual historical texts representing the thoughts of the individual contributors at that time. Prior to beginning the thematic analysis, the idea was to start with a 'blank slate' and a simple research question of 'What were the Possible Futures for Playwork in 2008?'

After the thematic analysis had been undertaken and completed, access to the original Yahoo Discussion Group was obtained² which not only contained all of the 'ideas papers' but also an analysis that had been compiled by Perry Else (2008). The thematic analysis of the 23 'ideas papers' will be discussed first. The results will then be analysed in relation to the contextual factors and Else's 2008 analysis in order to provide a triangulation (Denzin, 1979) in the research process.

It should be noted here that the thematic analysis of the twenty-three 'ideas papers' did not need ethical approval as the papers are publically available from the Yahoo Discussion Group and other websites.

Data Analysis

The data analysis used the process of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis involves the reading, and re-reading of texts to identify themes and subthemes (Bernard and Ryan, 2010). This process initially involved the reading of each paper and noting down themes as they emerged, these initial themes being the key points the author was raising or the concepts that were being discussed. There was no limit to the number of themes for each paper to ensure as many ideas as possible were identified.

² Thanks to Eddie Nuttall for providing access to the archive material.

The second stage was to compare the themes from each paper for repetitions and similarities, or what Lincoln and Guba (1985) term 'exemplars'. Exemplars, where the same theme or closely related themes were grouped together, were further collapsed combining two or more themes into a new single theme (Lichtman, 2010). This process continued until no new themes emerged. The next step involved the process of reading each paper with the modified set of themes to ensure that no ideas had been overlooked. At this point no new themes emerged and the process was deemed to have reached saturation point (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olsen & Spiers, 2002).

Results

Five themes, each with their own subthemes, emerged from the analysis and are shown in

Table 1:

Theme	Sub-Themes
Uniqueness of Playwork	Holistic Approach Playwork perception of play
Professionalism of Playwork	Professional Body Education and Training Reflective Practice
Community-Based aspect of Playwork	Diversity of Provision Social Interaction
Relationship of Playwork to the Wider World	Play Policies/Strategies Multi-professional Work
Threats to Playwork	Isolation Lack of Identify Misunderstanding

The next part of this paper discusses the themes identified by the thematic analysis in relation to the relevant ideas paper(s), using concepts and direct quotes from the authors of each of these papers. When using a thematic analysis on historical documents, it is important to consider the contextual knowledge of the time (Reissmen, 2008), and the contextual factors identified earlier in this paper are therefore also discussed in relation to each theme. The themes are not in any particular order of importance although an indication of the number of papers related to each theme is provided.

Theme 1 Uniqueness of Playwork

The uniqueness of playwork, and how playwork focuses on the process of play rather than on using play to meet outcomes, was reflected in six papers, and was also one of the two key themes identified by Else (2008, p.3) who described the uniqueness of playwork in terms of its relationship with play:

“Playwork is about process of playing, not about outcomes, is child-centred in the truest sense of that phrase; control is with playing child and adults support that, aiming to intervene only in extreme circumstance and always with a spirit of reflection. Playwork has a ‘complex simplicity’ that requires a balance of intuition and judgement from practitioners if they are to support the play process without adulteration and so remain play-centred.”

The playwork focus on the process of play is explained in Russell’s (2008) paper: “*play is a response to and an action upon the physical and social environment on the here and now*” (p2), where children have autonomy (Nuttall, 2008), self-organisation (Russell, 2008) and personal control (King, 2008) in their “*free, freely chosen, freely developed play opportunities*” (Harrop, 2008: p1). In this regard, playwork was considered important in supporting children’s holistic development (King, 2008, HHRT, 2008), contributing to the play

health of children (King, 2008, Roberts, 2008) and the regulation of emotions (Russell, 2008).

The playwork focus on the process of play, rather than using play to meet outcomes for children, clearly reflects definitions of play within the national play strategies of the time, such as the Play Policy for Wales (WAG, 2002), as well as how play is described in the Playwork Principles (PPSG, 2005).

Theme 2 Professionalism of Playwork

The second theme that emerged was professionalism. The need for a professional body to oversee playwork job descriptions, person specifications and the pay and conditions of playworkers was mentioned in ten papers. Conway (2008) stated that current playwork job descriptions had not “*kept up with the pace of developments in play and playwork theory and practice*” (p1), and Taylor (2008) believed that it was possible to earn more money “*as a cleaner than as a manager of an after school play centre*” (p1). A professional body was needed, as stated by Milne and Rix (2008), in order to “*maintain standards, to promote staffing, to protect and plan for the future*” (p1) to be able to deliver the playwork methodology (Newstead, 2008). A professional body for playwork, the Association of Playworkers was set up in early 2000, although by 2002 it no longer existed and currently playwork still does not have a professional body which solely represents the entire profession.³

As well as the potential for establishment of a professional body, another aspect of professionalism that emerged from the ideas papers was the need to develop existing training and education and to increase postgraduate programmes in both Masters and Doctoral qualifications (Snell, 2008, Taylor, 2008). Such an increase could see the

³ The Register of Playwork Professions operated by SkillsActive supports playworkers who hold a playwork qualification. <http://www.playworkregister.org/>

development of playwork from a “*grassroots movement to the proven researched image/model*” (Morton, 2008: p1). Within training and education the skill of reflective practice was highlighted. Reflective practice, another sub-theme of playwork professionalism, is referred to as a unique selling point (USP) by Kilvington, Knight and Sexton (2008) where they state working in playwork is a ‘*reflective, non-interventionist approach*’ (p.2). Professional practice is thus defined by the capacity of the individual to engage in reflection on their work practices.

Theme 3 Community-based aspect of playwork

The theme of Community was identified in twelve papers which described a diversity of different types of spaces used by children for play (Morton, 2008; Deevy, 2008), or what Newstead (2008) termed the playwork service. The diversity of play space within communities relates to both indoor space, such as community buildings and schools, as well as outdoor provision such as parks, open spaces and even the street. Whether the play space is indoor or outdoor, the importance of children having ownership and control of the play space was identified (Nutall, 2008). Plummer (2008) stated “*What playwork does well is that it provides an opportunity for children to play in a natural way without being constrained*” (p1), where the playworker acknowledges that it is the child’s community play space and does not control how and where children play. Taylor (2008) sums this up as playwork being ‘*grounded in the community*’ (Taylor, 2008: p3).

The community-based aspect of playwork also relates to the social interaction which occurs in the play space. Playwork within the community not only involves child-child interaction but can also involve adult-child relationships (Russell, 2008), and Snell (2008) goes further in stating that playwork can reconnect adults with children. The community-based aspects of playwork also supports the important aspect of inclusiveness (Taylor, 2008; Wilson, 2008). Sutton sums up the role of playwork as providing what he terms “*community cohesion*” (p1), as it addresses many of the issues which can affect communities, such as anti-social

behaviour and the importance of children being active participants in the community (Snell, 2008).

Theme 4 Relationship of Playwork to the 'wider world'

The fourth theme is titled the relationship to the 'wider world', where the 'wider world' is the world outside the playwork field, and this theme was found in six papers. This theme centres on the need for play policies and strategies (Deevy, 2008, Sharpe, 2008) which provides the opportunity for multi-professional development both within and outside playwork. Andrews (2008) states that this approach needs to be embedded within local authorities, utilising the identification of play champions (a designated person to promote the importance of play across professions), and identifies the need for the development of play partnerships (Plummer, 2008), which are seen as a way of providing the opportunity for multi-professional development of play. An understanding of play from different professions is key to multi-partnership, particularly where playwork may take place in non-playwork environments such as hospital play (HHRT, 2008), and where the profile of play can be raised through cross agency working through the practice of playwork (Harrop, 2008).

Theme 5: Threats to Playwork

The fifth and last theme is the threats to playwork, which was found in five papers. Three main threats that were identified were; playwork isolating itself, having a lack of identity and being misunderstood (Roberts, 2008, Plummer, 2008, Gladwin, 2008). The isolation could be a result of playwork's distinctiveness (Harrop, 2008) which may cause a tension between practice and non-play related policies, such as health and safety (Gallagher, 2008), the five outcomes of Every Child Matters (Russell, 2008) or OFSTED (Kingston, 2008). This resistance and mitigation against legislation by playworkers could be, according to Brown (2008), damaging to playwork in the long run. The lack of identity compounded by a

continued lack of common language between theorists and practitioners (Brown, 2008) may be the cause of playwork still being a fragmented profession (Sharpe 2008). Furthermore, misunderstanding of the profession of playwork by others who assume that children do not want adults involved in their play spaces could make playworkers redundant (Kingston, 2008).

Ironically, the first four themes that were identified in the thematic analysis for the future of playwork could, in part, contribute to the theme of the threats to playwork. The uniqueness of playwork, as Gladwin (2008) stated in his paper, could run the risk of playwork staying “*lonely and isolated on its ice floe*” (p2) by hanging onto its “*enigma status*” (Roberts, 2008, p1). The increased need for research (Taylor, 2008) could alienate the practitioners from the theorists, and, rather than identifying a shared language (Brown, 2008), could result in more confusion from theory to practice (Milne and Rix, 2008; Wilson, 2008). In addition, there is also the risk of playwork being ‘*absorbed into other disciplines*’ (Kingston, 2008; p1). The focus of children’s play in the community may result in the playworkers perception of play being different to that of other adults in the community, possibly resulting in tensions between the two parties (Snell, 2008).

In his commentary on the ideas papers, Else (2008) identified two themes: the unique nature of playwork and the structures necessary to deliver playwork. These themes are similar to the results of the thematic analysis undertaken for this study. Else argued that playwork should be part of the children’s workforce, but retain its uniqueness, and that the playwork infrastructure should be developed to support this;

“The Playwork sector should be part of the Children’s Workforce but should retain its values and unique approaches; they have value for children, staff and the whole community. There are risks and challenges in this approach but also more opportunities for playing should be developed and sustained. Each area should have

a play champion and play partnership to support these developments. Training, which should be ‘learner and work-base centred approach, experiential and reflective, issue-based, innovative challenging, exciting and fun’, should be offered to all those working with children in their play, in settings and in the wider community. Training should be a balance of current theory, supported by research, and practical skills. All training should be to a standard that is recognised within a wider framework so that career progression, pay and conditions may be improved to help meet the governments’ requirements for a ‘world class workforce’. This framework should include all related professions such as hospital play staff, play rangers, play wardens and perhaps social pedagogues or even ‘ludocentric ludogogues’ (play-centred play-leaders). All job descriptions should be fit for purpose and be rooted in the Playwork Principles and current theory.”

The themes of professionalism of playwork, the community-based aspects of playwork and the relationship of playwork to the ‘wider world’ are clearly embedded in Else’s second theme, as are a number of threats to the development of playwork as a unique approach to working with children.

Discussion

From the five themes and twelve sub-themes identified, it was evident the themes reflected the contextual factors of the time. Some of the authors made direct reference to one or more contextual factor, whilst others alluded to them. The links between the themes and sub-themes to the contextual factors are shown in Table 2 below:

Themes	Sub-themes	Contextual Factor
Uniqueness of Playwork	Holistic Development Playwork Perception of Play	Playwork Principles
Professionalism of Playwork	Professional Body Educational and Training Reflective Practice	Every Child Matters

Community based aspect of Playwork	Diversity of Play Space Social Interaction	BIG Lottery Funding
Relationship of Playwork to 'wider world'	Play Policies/Strategies Multi-professional work	Workforce Development
Threats to Playwork	Isolation Lack of 'identity' Misunderstood	Playwork Principles Every Child Matters BIG Lottery Funding Workforce Development

Table 2: Themes, sub-themes and contextual factor

Some of the themes identified in the Possible Futures for Playwork ideas papers have been reflected in playwork over the last seven years, particularly as the contextual factors relevant in 2008 have changed in 2015. The following section discusses these themes and includes six provocations for further consideration.

Playwork and the wider world

In 2008 the BIG Lottery Fund made money available to support community-based play projects in England and Wales. Local Authorities in both countries produced and developed their own play strategies. By 2009 England (DCFS/DCMS, 2009) had joined Wales in producing a national play strategy, with Northern Ireland and Scotland beginning initiatives to develop their own national play policy or strategy. So the theme of relationship to the 'wider world' was evident with the development of the national play strategy and local play strategies in England. This involved the support of Play England, and incorporated additional professions and disciplines to playwork in its construction. Then in 2010, the change in structures of the government saw austerity measures brought in by the coalition government, resulting in a drastic cuts in funding in England and the abandonment of the National Play Strategy and Every Child Matters (McKendrick et al, 2014). However, on a positive note both Northern Ireland (Office for First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), 2010) and Scotland (Scottish Government (SG), 2013) now have their own play strategies and the play policy and play policy implementation plan is still in existence in Wales. If playwork is to

develop within a UK framework it would be interesting to test the five themes within each of the UK countries. This could be facilitated through the four national play associations (Play Wales, Play England, Play Scotland and PlayBoard NI). If the five themes (and sub-themes) are relevant across the UK then this provides a potential framework for the future of playwork internationally. *Provocation: How effective are play policies and strategies in promoting playwork to the 'wider world'?*

Developing the profession of playwork

The promotion of playwork as a profession and the development of a single professional body to represent playwork is still on-going. The demand for a playwork body to support playwork as a profession is still considered important (Voce and Benjamin, 2015). The promotion of playwork practice at a national UK level remains with four organisations Play Wales, Play Scotland, Play England and PlayBoard in Northern Ireland. The idea of a single professional body is important to the sector and having seen a recent attempt fail in the early 2000, maybe the current developments with the Register of Playwork Professionals will succeed. *Provocation: How relevant are the themes and sub-themes identified in this study across each of the countries the UK?*

The professionalism of playwork could benefit from play being a statutory requirement, as a statutory requirement provides more support for both play and playwork. The relevance of national play policies and strategies has been demonstrated in Wales (WAG, 2006), where the development of local play strategies and a play sufficiency assessment tool has provided the necessary foundations to help justify the need for playwork, both within the statutory and voluntary sector.

The current qualifications for playwork across the UK have seen some developments in the last seven years with an increase in students from the playwork field undertaking Masters and Doctoral qualifications. Two prominent authors from the playwork field have been

appointed professors at English universities (one of playwork and the other of play). However, many of the undergraduate playwork qualifications have ceased or have integrated into other child related programmes of study, such as childhood studies. There is currently an increased need for qualitative and quantitative research to justify the uniqueness of playwork which could contribute to playwork education and training, and also a need for inter-professional support from other disciplines who value play as part of their professional practice. *Provocation: How can playwork research be undertaken without a funding infrastructure, and what are the implications of playwork research for the professional status of playwork?*

Playwork's community focus

The funding that was available to increased mobile open access play provision in communities in England and Wales has now ceased. Many of the open access playranger projects have been terminated, or are running on very tight 'shoestring' budgets.

Provocation: How can playwork still support what Sutton (2008) termed community cohesion in the future without the funding that was available in 2008?

The uniqueness of playwork

The Playwork Principles (PPSG, 2005), which claim to describe the uniqueness of playwork, are now over ten years old, and have received both support and criticism from within the playwork field (see Conway, 2008, Brown, 2008). The focus of play as a process within playwork practice does differ from many other professions, which contributes to the uniqueness of playwork, but play is not the sole property of playwork. *Provocation: How relevant are the playwork principles to playwork practice today? How can the uniqueness of playwork support other professions and contexts where play takes place?*

Conclusion

This paper described a thematic analysis undertaken on the twenty-three 'ideas papers' submitted to the Possible Futures for Playwork Project in 2008. The intention of this study was neither to continue nor to finish the project that Perry Else started when he was the co-ordinator of the Possible Futures of Playwork Project, but rather to review the aspirations of playwork academics and practitioners in 2008 in order to provide a platform for future deliberations. This study identified five themes that were considered to be important for the future of playwork in 2008. In 2015 these themes provide a potential starting point for further discussion and research, and the provocations are intended to stimulate thinking about the future of playwork in the UK.

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