

Understanding the adult role in the Play Cycle – an empirical study

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Abstract

Twenty years ago, the ‘Colorado Paper’ (Sturrock & Else, 1998) developed a theoretical concept of the Play Cycle and described a hierarchy of four levels of intervention which playworkers might use to support the Play Cycle: play maintenance; simple intervention, medial intervention and complex intervention. This study of 157 playworkers from around the world is the first to investigate playworkers understanding of the Play Cycle and focuses on their views their role in relation to the four levels of hierarchy and whether playworkers feel that the Play Cycle theory has any impact on their practice. This paper describes how knowledge of the Play Cycle has had a positive impact on playwork practice for the majority of respondents in three key areas; underpinning theory, more observant and reflective intervention in children’s play and re-evaluating children’s behaviour focusing more on the play maintenance and simple intervention. This study also found that, whilst medial intervention is considered to be part of the role of the playworker, the role of complex intervention is rarely considered. This paper discusses potential reasons for this and develops ideas for future studies in this area.

Introduction

Playwork is generally understood to be a profession which supports children in their play. Playwork Principle No. 5 states that “*The role of the playworker is to support all children and young people in the creation of a space in which they can play*” (Playwork Principle Scrutiny Group (PPSG), 2005). The third Playwork Principle states “The prime focus and essence of playwork is to support and facilitate the play process and this should inform the development of play policy, strategy, training and education” (PPSG, 2005, no. 3). Unlike other professions who work where children play,

playworkers are concerned with the process of play, rather than its outcome, with the phrase ‘process not product’ often being used in the playwork literature (King & Newstead, 2017).

Developed by two former playworkers, the late Professor Perry Else and Gordon Sturrock, the Play Cycle theory provides a theoretical description of the play process. This theory currently underpins professional playwork practice, featuring in elements of the knowledge and understanding within the National Occupational Standards for Playwork and various playwork textbooks. The Play Cycle consists of six components as follows: meta-lude (initial thought or idea); play cue (the signal to the world the child’s intent to play); play return (the return of the play cue by another person or object), the loop and flow (how the play cue and play return is processed), the play frame (the observed physical space or unobserved psychological space) and annihilation (the play ends). The ‘Colorado Paper’ also provides a theoretical model of the role of the adult within a four level hierarchy: play maintenance; simple involvement; medical intervention and complex intervention (Sturrock & Else, 1998). Sturrock and Else (1998) explain this hierarchy of adult intervention as “*operative involvement*” and “*reflective prompt*” (p. 99). In other words, rather than prescribing what level the practitioner should adopt, playworkers should use the model as a reflective tool to consider which level of involvement is appropriate within each and every Play Cycle. These four levels of intervention proposed by Sturrock and Else (1998) are play maintenance; simple intervention, medical intervention and complex intervention.

The Play Cycle is now firmly rooted within playwork theory, playwork education and playwork practice and its four levels of hierarchy have provided a rationale and description on how playworkers support the play process of children’s play. However, there is no empirical research on whether the Play Cycle theory has had any impact on playwork practice and how playworkers understand the four levels of intervention in relation to their role. This paper reports on the first examination of the Play Cycle theory in practice.

Method:

This study was granted ethical approval by the ethics committee within the College of Human and Health Science at Swansea University. An online survey was developed using the Qualtrics® questionnaire tool where playworkers participants had to click on an anonymous link https://swanseachhs.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_b9F7RUQO81eRH01. The online survey was made available between September and December 2017 and was circulated through a range of methods that included data bases, through local and national playwork networks and social media. The online survey was divided into three main components:

1. Demographics: current playwork practice; years of service and level of qualification
2. Understanding of the Play Cycle: how playworkers were introduced to the Play Cycle and their current understanding of the components of the Play Cycle (meta-lude; play cue; play return; play frame; loop and flow and annihilation)
3. Potential Influence of the Play Cycle: this included the adult role in the Play Cycle and if the theory has influenced playwork practice

This paper focuses on the third area of investigation, the adult role in the Play Cycle and if the theory has influenced playwork practice. The responses were analysed using a content analysis (Cole, 1998) and thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Firstly, playworkers were asked to write down what they thought was the adult role in the Play Cycle. The responses were analysed using a content analysis. Elo and Kynag (2007) define a content analysis as “*a research method for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context*” (p. 108). The context was based on the four levels of hierarchy (Sturrock & Else, 1998) which formed a categorization matrix (Elo & Kynga, 2007) used to code the responses.

The second part of the study asked playworkers to state what impact the Play Cycle has had on their professional practice. The responses were analysed using the thematic framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) which has been used in other playwork research (e.g. King & Waibel, 2016).

Sample

The online survey was open to all playworkers currently working in playwork worldwide. This included playwork practitioners, playwork trainers, playwork lecturers and volunteers. The total number of participants completing the online survey was 157 and a breakdown of their current playwork role is shown in Table 1:

[Table 1 Here]

The data analysis has treated as one sample set. The rationale in providing the breakdown of current playwork role is to indicate that the Play Cycle is used in both practice, training and education.

Part 1: Adult Role in the Play Cycle

A categorization matrix was developed based on the hierarchy of intervention within the ‘Colorado Paper’ (Sturrock & Else, 1998) and the definitions provided by Sturrock, Russell and Else (2004). Each response for what the participant considered to be the adult role was coded against Play Maintenance; Simple Intervention; Medial Intervention and Complex Intervention. The agreed definitions of each level of the hierarchy of intervention are taken from Sturrock, Else & Russell (2004) and shown in Table 2:

[Table 2 Here]

The responses from the online survey could reflect one or all four of the levels of hierarchy. For example, one response stated “*To observe it, add resources or alter spaces to maintain flow, return cues, spark play by preparing spaces that facilitate play*” which reflects three aspects of play maintenance (observe), simple involvement (add resources) and medial intervention (return cues). Two researchers independently coded each response using the categorisation matrix and a percentage agreement for the number of times each level of hierarchy was scored was calculated. This

percentage agreement used the equation: $\text{score for each individual hierarchy} / \text{total score for all four hierarchy} \times 100$ and the percentage agreement is shown in the Table 3 below:

[Table 3 Here]

From the total number of times each researcher coded for the four levels of hierarchy, there was a difference of 36 where Researcher 1 total number of codes was 209, compared to Researcher 2's total of 235. However, it was evident the use of the categorisation matrix to code the playworker responses had a good percentage agreement between the two researchers. Play maintenance was the most commonly stated adult role and consisted of 39% of the total codes for Researcher 1 and 40% for Researcher 2. This was followed by simple involvement, where the adult role is acting as a resource. For Researcher 1, this simple involvement made up 32% of the total coding compared to 40% for Researcher 2. For medial intervention, where the adult is active in the Play Cycle, Researcher 1 coded this 22% of the total coding compared to 25% for Researcher 2. The least common role stated by the participants was that of complex intervention, coded 7% of the time for Researcher 1 and 9% for Researcher 2.

As the coding of each response could be coded for one, two, three or all four adult levels of hierarchy, (e.g. play maintenance, simple involvement, medial intervention and complex intervention). This reflects the role the playworker has in supporting the Play Cycle, where for one child very little involvement of the adult is required, for other children this could be a more active role. In addition, this makes undertaking an inter-rater reliability test between the two researchers difficult as there are a possible 15 coding combinations. For this reason, a Cohen Kappa inter-rater reliability was undertaken on responses where both researchers only used a single code, that is play maintenance, simple involvement, medial involvement and complex intervention only. From the 157 participants, only 26 responses were coded to a single type of intervention.

Cohen's Kappa (k) inter-rater reliability statistical test compares scores from two independent researchers and provide a score from -1 to +1, where +1 is a perfect agreement between each rater (McHugh, 2012). Landis & Koch (1977) provide a guide to the Cohen's Kappa value where < 0 is a poor agreement, 0.0 – 0.20 is a slight agreement, 0.21 – 0.40 is a fair agreement, 0.41 – 0.60 is a moderate agreement, 0.61 – 0.80 is a substantial agreement and 0.81 – 1.00 is an almost perfect agreement.

The 26 six responses coded by both researchers to one level of hierarchy showed the Cohen's Kappa was Kappa = 0.49 ($p < 0.001$), 95% CI (0.25, 0.74), which suggests a moderate agreement. Given that this was a small sample of 26 from a total of 157 responses, this indicates a good level of agreement for coding the four individual levels of intervention from the categorisation matrix.

Part 2: Impact of the Play Cycle on Playwork Practice

The second part of the study was to investigate the broader question of whether the Play Cycle theory had influenced playwork practice. The analysis for this was undertaken using a thematic analysis which involves the reading and re-reading of texts to identify common themes (Bernard and Ryan, 2010). The framework by Braun and Clarke (2006) involves six stages:

1. Phase 1: familiarising yourself with your data
2. Phase 2: generating initial codes
3. Phase 3: searching for themes
4. Phase 4: reviewing themes
5. Phase 5: defining and naming themes
6. Phase 6: producing the report

First of all, the initial data was read through by one of the researchers. Next, phase 2 and 3 of Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework were undertaken to generate draft themes by grouping the initial

codes. The second researcher then reviewed the themes (Phase 4) by independently coding the responses into the themes developed in phase 3. Responses could be placed in one or more themes.

Phase 1 and 2 generated 19 initial codes from the data. The initial codes were then grouped together to form themes, or what is termed as collapsing the data (Lichtman, 2010) for phase 3 (searching for themes) and phase 4 (reviewing themes) resulted in five draft themes (Reinforced Practice, Changed Practice, View Play, Provides Underpinning Theory and Nothing). Percentage agreement for the theme Provides Underpinning Theory and Nothing were good, but this was not the case for the other three draft themes. A review of the themes resulted in those themes being replaced by new ones (see Table 4).

Once the second researcher had completed the process, both researchers added up the number of responses in each theme. By using the equation $\frac{\text{total code for individual theme}}{\text{total coding for all themes}} \times 100$, it was possible to compare how many times each individual theme was coded by each researcher. This enabled an inter-rater reliability check between the two researchers. The results are shown in Table 4 below:

[Table 4 Here]

Although Researcher 2 had a total number of coded themes 15 more than Researcher 1, the percentage number of each individual theme was very close between the two researchers. There was no more than a 3% difference on the percentage coding between each individual theme.

The thematic analysis was started before the online survey had finished, when 126 participants had completed the online survey. Once an agreement of the themes had been reached, the remaining 31 responses were coded using the agreed themes. If any new themes emerge at this stage, then the process had to start again by returning to phase 2. If no new themes emerge, it can be considered that

the analysis had reached data saturation (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson & Spiers, 2002). No new themes emerged from the remaining 31 responses and therefore it was deemed that the data had reached saturation point (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson & Spiers (2002).

Results

Part 1: Adult Role in the Play Cycle

The results from the on-line survey showed that playworkers felt that their role was primarily one of play maintenance (observing and reflecting), followed by simple involvement (acting as a resource) and medial intervention (invited to be part of the Play Cycle). Very few playworkers understood their role to be involved in the children's play cycle as a play partner (complex intervention). Potential implications of these findings are explored in the 'Discussion' section below.

Part 2: Impact of the Play Cycle on Playwork Practice

The thematic analysis found that the Play Cycle theory has had an impact on playwork practice in three key areas: it has provided underpinning theory for playworkers, it has changed adult assessments of children's behaviour and it has changed the way in which adults respond to children. However, it should be noted that, whilst most respondents stated that the Play Cycle has had a positive impact on their practice, this was not the case for all respondents, as shown in Table 4. For one participant, potential application of the theory was hampered by the language used by the authors of the theory,

“Honestly, not a great deal – I find the language used to describe its concepts a little too academic”.

Another respondent stated:

“The concept of the Play Cycle had less of an impact on my work than other concepts and reading. I don’t always see how the Play Cycle is implemented in reality, as so many situations differ and do not conform to the cycle.”

Provides Underpinning Theory

The Play Cycle has provided underpinning theory for playworkers and a common language which has clearly been useful in developing both practice and playwork education. Practitioners commented that the theory has given them some language with which to describe play and enabled them to explain their practice to themselves as well as to others;

“Yes, the impact of playwork theory and knowledge has influenced the way I think about play. It now underpins the way I talk and inform about play.”

“I believe that I have always understood the Play Cycle, without it being named. Perhaps I am fortunate for knowing the ‘rules’ before the ‘rules’ were invented. Allowing children to play messily, imaginatively, riskily whilst always having fun is natural to me.”

For those delivering playwork training and education, the Play Cycle theory has provided an observational tool which enables playwork students to reflect on practice, as reflected in the following comment:

“Yes! I teach L3 playwork and find in many settings adulteration occurs far too often. I get them to observe their peers and reflect on their findings. Amazing outcome”.

The Play Cycle theory has also provided an observational framework which has helped playworkers to reflect on how play contributes to children's development. For example, this comment reflects social development *"has given a valuable insight to how children and young people instigate play, involve others and conclude play in their own way"*, whilst another playworker stated *"by allowing children to have self-directed play opportunities and to facilitate learning based on their interests"*. Practitioners reported being more observant in observing play cues, play returns and the way children play as a result of being aware of these elements of the Play Cycle. The Play Cycle is a useful tool to encourage staff to reflect on their practice, for example; *"Used the concept to induct new members of staff or to remind people working with children to consider different ways of thinking"*.

Changed Practice

The Play Cycle theory has changed adult practices when working with children. Playworkers reported changes in whether and how they intervene in children's play as a result of being aware of the Play Cycle theory. As one respondent put it, *"the Play Cycle has enabled me to intervene with children on a more subtle level"*, and another stated *"Be able to stand back and let it (Play Cycle) happen naturally"*. Another significant area of changed practice was that the theory enabled practitioners to re-think how the play space was set up;

"In the past, I would prefer to help them group up, set toys for them to play. But now I know they have their ways to invite friends, play in their ways, not to interrupt them".

Children's behaviour

The third theme to emerge was that practitioners viewed children's behaviour differently as a result of knowing the Play Cycle theory. Playworkers viewed children's play behaviour differently, which appears to have created a shift in the way that they act and interact with children. Many respondents

felt that the Play Cycle has enabled them to see children's behaviour in a different light, re-framing children's actions from negative to positive behaviour. Interpreting children's behaviours through the lens of the Play Cycle has resulted in practitioners seeing play where other adults might see as behaviours which "*sometimes can be viewed as aggressive behaviour by others*". As one respondent put it, "*the huge range of possible play cues (and returns) can also look like 'bad behaviour' to many adults helps me explain to them (playworkers) that they are misinterpreting what they see*".

Knowledge of the Play Cycle theory has enabled playworkers to focus on the play behaviour as it happens, rather than continuously intervene in children's play in order to respond to negative behaviour. Respondents reported that behaviours which might once have been regarded as inappropriate were re-framed by the Play Cycle theory as normal and acceptable play behaviours, which lessened the need for adult intervention and correction. Some respondents observed how helpful this alternative lens was when working with children with atypical development, leading to a better understanding not only of the children's play needs, but of the children themselves, "*Yes as it has helped when supporting children with autism helped develop an understanding of play more; helped understand play behaviours – i.e. seeing play not negative behaviour*".

Discussion

What is evident from this study is playworkers have found the theoretical concept of the Play Cycle useful to their professional practice in relation to their role in supporting play and the potential benefits for children. This has potential implications to other professional areas that are involved in play. In 2009, the then Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) outlined guidance for early years practitioners in the Early Years Foundation Phase, where a continuum of adult support included "Child-initiated play" with "adult support enabling environment, and sensitive interaction" (DCSF, 2009, p. 5). This approach would reflect Hyvonen's (2011) Finnish study on teacher's

perceptions of play, where the focus is on the process of play, rather than outcomes, can support children's learning. The teacher in Hyvonen's (2011) take on the role as an 'afforder'. The Afforder is a "*facilitator, tutor, shepherd, advisor, motivate or, protector, prodder, observer, activator, challenger, and encourager*" (Hyvonen, 2011, p. 59) which resonates with the hierarchy of play maintenance and simple intervention. The process of play is more important than the outcome where "*play proceeds at the pace set by the learner*" (Hyvonen, 2011, p. 59), reflecting medial intervention where the role of the adult is to be invited by the child. This aspect has also been considered in the United Kingdom where the use of play in early years learning focusing on process is evident in the curriculum of both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (Howard & King, 2015). The application of the Play Cycle and how adults (teachers) support this could be a consideration not only to both the Irish curriculum, but also considered for the Foundation Phase in Wales and the Early Years Foundation Stage in England.

In terms of the playwork field, the results of this study demonstrate that the Play Cycle theory has, as the authors originally intended, provided a conceptual framework which has developed professional playwork practice in terms of "containment" (p.86): that is, for the playworker to "frame the play boundary of the child" (Sturrock & Else, 1998, p. 86). Playworkers within this study did feel their role is to observe, facilitate or when invited to join in with children's play. Sturrock, Else and Russell (2004) stated "Adults judgements relate primarily to the ludic, playful process; facilitating that process ought to be the sole consideration for intervening in the child's play" (p.73). Where children did invite playworkers into the Play Cycle, playworkers clearly considered their adult role as a play partner (Howard & McInness, 2013), where the child has control over the content and intent of their play (Hughes, 1996). The results reflect a case study using observations and interviews on supervised play provision (Beunderman, 2010). Children described the role of the adult as "*a balance between freedom and intervention*" (Beunderman, 2010, p. 27), *whereas playworkers recognised the need for intervention "in a style appropriate to the setting is one of the key challenges and skills of playwork"* (p. 38).

This “*low intervention, high response*” (National Playing Fields Association (NPFA), PlayLink, Children’s Play Council (CPC), p. 16) position was reflected in 23 responses to the survey. This playwork mantra is generally understood to mean that playworkers should wait until they are invited to be part of the Play Cycle, or not to get involved at all (). 30 respondents were concerned that any involvement in the child’s Play Cycle would be seen as adulteration (Sturrock and Else (1998)), defined as “*the play themes are determined by the workers*” (p114), which would prove appear contradictory to the notion of the playworker as someone who supports and facilitates the play process. Concern about adulterating the Play Cycle is reflected in the comment below:

“I teach L3 playwork and find in many settings adulteration occurs far too often. I get them to observe their peers and reflect on their findings. Amazing outcomes”

This delicate balance between the potential for adulterating the child’s play cycle and resisting the adult agendas to intervene may highlight why playworkers appear to be loath to engage in Sturrock and Else’s fourth stage of ‘complex intervention’. Complex intervention has both the child and the adult in a ‘deep’ interplay, with the sharing and overlapping of the play process (Sturrock & Else, 1998). This involves a lot of time and involvement of the playworker where the playworker is not simply responding to play cues, but could be issuing them (King & Temple, 2018). For example, the playworker could use a Play Cue to re-establish a Play Cycle and achieve the “re-establishment of a theme that has been eroded” (p. 101). For Sturrock and Else (Sturrock & Else, 1998; Sturrock, 2003), adulteration can be avoided if playworkers adopt the ‘witness position’. The witness position is where the playworker is consciously aware of their role they are taking, whether it is a passive as in play maintenance or a more active role such as complex intervention. The key aspect is that the playworker is aware of what they are doing, and more importantly why and that involvement of the Play Cycle is not meeting any adult agenda (Sturrock & Else, 1998). The role of the witness position

has been discussed in relation to reflective playwork practice and the transactional analysis functional fluency model (King and Temple, 2018). However, it rarely appears in the playwork literature and from the survey appears not to be a part of the Play Cycle theory which is currently in use.

A further consideration for why complex intervention may not feature in playwork practice is the legal responsibilities of the playworker. Legislation requires that many adults who work with children provide adequate supervision (Children Act, 1989). Often in playwork settings there could be up over 50 children attending, and as Sturrock & Else (1998) explain, “The playworker may be involved in any number of disputed or conflicting frames, narrative, themes or games, and so on (p. 101).

The playworker may not have the capacity to be in a complex Play Cycle with a child or group of children and still provide the level of supervision required for the majority of children in the setting. Being involved in complex intervention could result in children being inadequately supervised, particularly if other adults are engaged in dealing specific incidents in the setting, such as giving first aid or dealing with a parent.

One specific area that complex intervention may be more prevalent is in working with children with additional needs, as stated by the following comment:

“Yes as it has helped when supporting children with autism, helped develop an understanding of play more, helped understand play behaviours – ie seeing play not negative behaviour”

Sturrock & Else’s (1998) ‘Colorado Paper’ considers the play space as the natural therapeutic space, and playworkers are not ‘trained’ to be play therapists or counsellors. However, complex intervention may occur in more therapeutic contexts, such as the use of playwork practice in hospitals (Ward, 2008), where it is key the playworker takes on a role, such as in the use of puppets

(Reid-Searl, Quinney, Dwyer, Vieth, Nancarrow & Walker, 2017). Children and young people with particular conditions may not be able (or willing) to ask, or to ask in a way which might be regarded as a play cue by adults. In such circumstances adults may have to issue play cues and become involved in complex intervention without being asked (Conn, 2016). This contradicts Hughes's (2002) view that intervention is about being invited to play by the child but may result in a child becoming involved in a play cycle which would have not otherwise occurred.

Conclusion

The theory of the Play Cycle has provided the underpinning theory and provides a common language to reinforce practice and help in supporting playwork training and learning. It has also developed practice in terms of reducing intervention in children's play and changing the way that adults view children's behaviour. The Play Cycle theory could extend to other professions such as pre-school and primary education, where play is used in professional practice in different contexts, to introduce an alternative lens to the role of the adult in children's play.

This study found that playworkers view their role in the Play Cycle to be of low intervention, high impact where if "adults find it necessary to intervene, their goal should be to withdraw as soon as possible to leave the child to play freely" (Sturrock, Else & Russell, 2004, p. 73). Playworkers considered their role in the Play Cycle as play maintenance (observing and reflecting), simple involvement (acting as a resource) and medial intervention (part of the Play Cycle, but wait to be invited in). This raises some interesting questions about why respondents to this survey did not consider their role in terms of complex intervention, which have been considered in terms of legal responsibilities and fear of adulteration. Further studies may explore the neglected area of complex intervention, and its particular potential application for adults who work with children with specific needs.

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