

A NEW PLAYWORK PERSPECTIVE

This paper should be read in conjunction with the 'A Personal List Of Events And Evolving Understanding That Have Led Playwork To Where It Is Today' and 'The playwork matrix'. It is a summary of a longer and more complex piece of work.

It includes a series of principles relating to playwork. Our starting point is twofold. The first is the importance of playing to the survival and evolution of human children. The second is that this is a playwork perspective.

If accepted the ideas will represent a significant change, a 'paradigm shift', in how we see the discipline of playwork. The needs for this re-evaluation could be summarised as follows:

- there are competing perceptions of what playwork actually is
- the field is unhappy with the differences between interpretations of the task of playwork and its theoretical basis
- the increasing weight of specific playwork texts and literature allow a new formulation to be developed.

INTRODUCTION

Recently there has been a subtle movement towards a more reflective, introspective view of playwork. This movement has been brought about by ideas borrowed from educational and teaching constructs. It represents a change from a preoccupation with an objective view of the child at play, to one that acknowledges a playwork-specific viewpoint. In this new definition, the playworker is more subjectively engaged with the playing child or children and objectively aware of their own reactions, feelings and responses.

There has also been development in the way playwork has been understood by the field. This change could be defined as a recognition of the need to extend the boundaries of the job, from the presently recognised essentials to do with the obvious (e.g. setting, security and safety considerations) which could be termed manifest playwork, into new definitions that accommodate the more subtle, relationship awarenesses inherent in playwork

and could be termed latent playwork. It is important to make a distinction between these primary and secondary considerations in our practice and it is fundamental to the theoretical ideas explored here.

The most current discourse on playwork clearly places a focus on the more latent elements of the task. Accordingly, a PRINCIPLE prioritises the demands of both manifest and latent requirements of the tasks of playwork. The key principle being that the job of playwork moves from the latent to the manifest and not vice versa.

THE NATURE OF PLAYWORK

A unique playwork perspective requires us to create new forms of definition and description to do with our practice.

The playing child interacts with a system that has echoes that stretch back millennia. These inform a series of highly elaborate rules and deep processes that function in a sometimes intense and sometimes casual interplay with the environment and others. These deep processes should be seen to be an inborn need to create meaning, order and sense out of seeming chaos, and playing can reasonably be seen to be the natural expression of these deep processes. Playwork understands that this negotiation happens in the designated playspace. It goes without saying that it also happens outside of this playspace too, but by and large, it takes place in a recognised space with its own boundaries where the playing child can enact a return to their 'condition of freedom'.

It would seem to be obvious that the task of playwork rests in the playspace. This space should be seen as being a physical and non-physical place where biological processes, genes and environment, collide in creative flux. We spent some time examining this point of collision and discerned some elements thought relevant to the task of playwork.

Of all the principles we have isolated, what follows is by far the most difficult to state. It is both the most obvious and the most abstract. It is both simple and startlingly complex. It contains ideas of evolution and adaptation, of environment and ecology, of deep laws, of nature and nurture, of genes and inheritance, of emotional repertoires, of identity and self.

It is hoped that what follows will provide parameters for the ludic ecology of the child at play, and a way of describing our own position as playworkers in relationship to these acts of playing.

ELEMENTS OF PLAY

The increasing confidence about the range of theory emerging from the field is a new phenomenon. Only in the last few years have there been observational platforms to underpin the assertions that we previously made out of belief and, on occasion, sheer bloody-mindedness.

As a group we attempted to describe what elements the child's playing could be defined within and against. In effect, we attempted to map, however tentatively, some generalised patterns that could describe the development of the child. We arrived at the following broad elements:

- evolution
- emotion
- environment
- identity

Please note that these elements are merely the extension of patterns onto an unknown. The elements are not disciplines, though they can lead to that construction (see The Playwork Matrix) they are simple headings that permit a 'fix', a bearing on an unknown, to be established. None is more important than the other and none cut off from the other. There is obvious overlap and fuzziness at boundaries.

Nevertheless, we felt that these constitute the factors, the 'morphic' fields, through which the playing child moves and manoeuvres in seeking satisfaction from their playing. If an image is necessary to convey the idea of a morphic field, think back to the early science classes, where iron filings radiated in stratified poles around a magnet.

EVOLUTION

This is an area in which a significant contribution to the theoretical development of the field has been made. What this has meant is that our understanding of playing has considerably advanced. Now, out of this literature, we have the opportunity to open up vistas of understanding that are unique to our work.

This represents no leap in the dark. There is sound evidence to suggest that the process of playing and the evolutionary import of what is being said by writers in this area has a direct bearing and impact on our emerging playwork perspective.

EMOTION

We move now to emotion. Much has been made of the ideas of 'emotional intelligence', proposed by Daniel Goleman, and rightly so. However, the idea of an emotional element as described from a playwork perspective, is of a different order.

That the child playing in the playspace is intensively engaged in the development of emotional repertoires of feeling, as it plays through the child, is not a massive departure from statements playwork theorists have already made. What is novel, is that the consciousness of emotion can be rehearsed in the child's play and that a bodily-based vocabulary of affect can be developed, as part of a legitimate and recognised element of the playwork task.

ENVIRONMENT

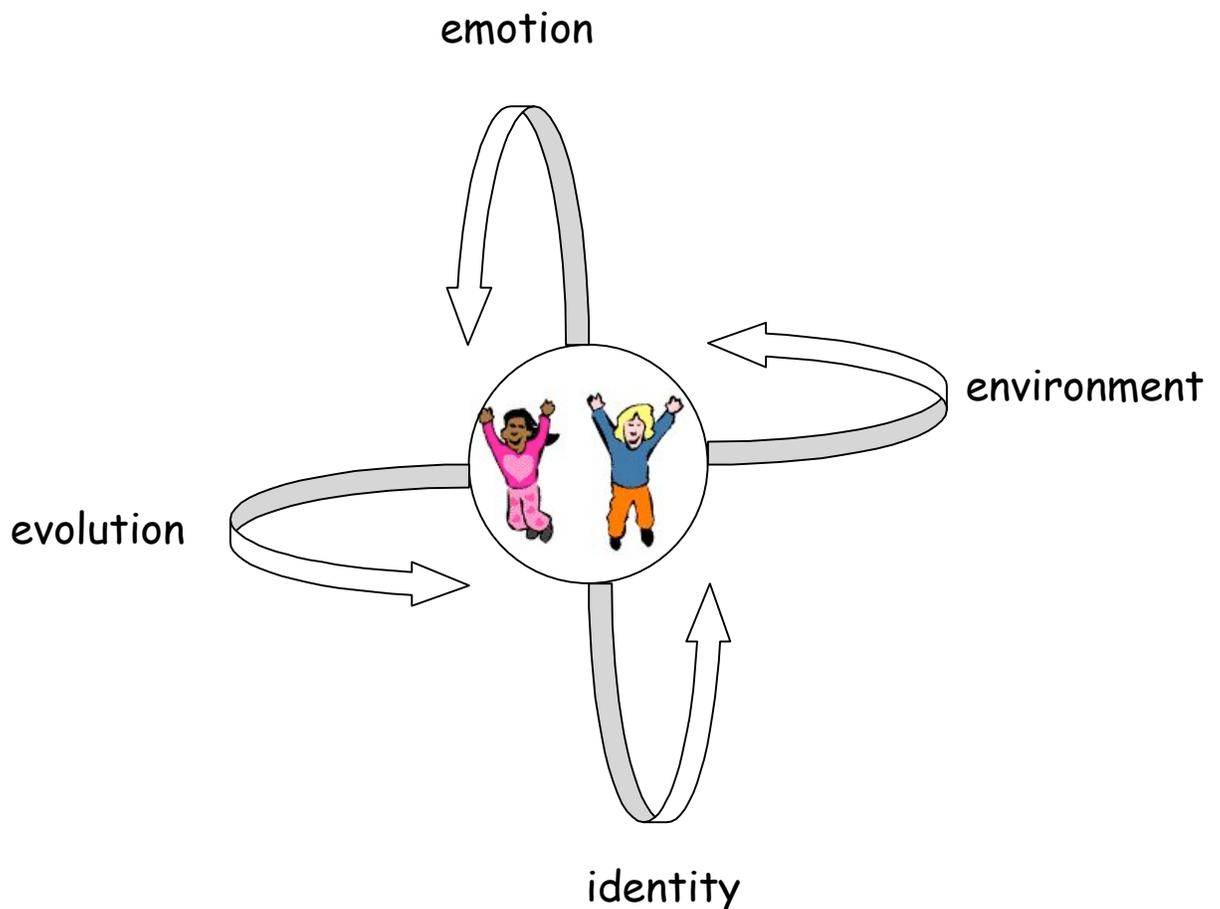
The links between the ecology of the playspace and the wider environment are seldom advanced in the playwork perspective as it is presently discussed. There are profound connections between the playing child in the microcosm of the playspace and in the wider macrocosm of environmental awareness. This ecological perspective can only be arrived at and more crucially, sustained by means of playing. The urge to sustain life can only be understood through the deep grammar of sustained playing.

IDENTITY

Identity may well rest in playing, where the subtle process of projection and introspection form quirk and character. The element of identity is where the child gains control and executive power over the development of their personality and sense of self.

REPERTOIRES OF RESPONSE

If we look to the four elements as they impact on children they also have the same impact on the playworker and on a playwork perspective. If we see the playing child situated in the four elements, so too is the playworker.



In short, the playwork task rests in describing, feeling and thinking through what the playful encounter means to that concerned adult. Here rests one of the most crucial principles of playwork: namely, that the playworker's repertoires of response to the playing child are drawn from insights derived from this material playing through them as an attendant adult in the playspace. They represent indirect accounts that are responses to material generated from and out of shared ludic interactions with the playing child.

The primary activity of the playworker is to be attendant to the actions, behaviours and expressions of the playing child. That there are other tasks is obvious, but they are in service to the relationship shared between the child and the playworker in the playspace. Again this reinforces the idea of movement from the manifest aspect of the task, to a concern, principally, with a more latent involvement.

There is overlap and a drawing apart, confluence and influence, emotional interaction and investigations of role and rule, rite, ritual and rights. But, above all there is a specific form of ludic contact. This latter point is the true nature of our task.

CONCLUSION

We have as yet developed no full cost analysis of the loss of play habitat, play deprivation or adulteration, and corruption of the natural laws of play. The way we respond to our children's play needs warrants serious attention. We believe that current orthodoxies about play and playing are too limited and narrow, and as a profession, playwork has been forced to make some accommodations to these orthodoxies over the years.

However, if we continue to cut ourselves off from nature generally and from the nature of the child's play more particularly, we believe that we are being negligent with our precious and fragile heritage. That is why we have attempted to focus our attention on the origins of play and the needs of the playing child.