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'Adventure Playgrounds', 'Nature' and 'Learning': Disrupting lofty notions

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‘Adventure Playgrounds’, ‘Nature’ and ‘Learning’: Disrupting lofty notions

Abstract: This special edition seeks to explore notions of outdoor learning, nature and urban play spaces. In this article we playfully and seriously bring the subversive tendencies of adventure playgrounds to this exploration. The history of adventure playgrounds shows how they have always had to navigate the tension between supporting play for its own sake and meeting current policy agendas. We suggest that ‘nature and learning’ is one such agenda and offer both a theoretical challenge to current orthodoxies of thought and also a practical suggestion. Critical cartography is a spatial, relational and creative approach to documenting playwork that can offer a different perspective on playwork, be the basis for playworkers’ (rather than children’s) learning, and also prompt a re-enchantment with children’s play.

Starting out

This issue of *Built Environment* takes its starting point from a previous special issue on *Playgrounds in the Built Environment.* Revisiting these articles, published in 1999, throws light on how adults conceptualised and critiqued the nature and purpose of children’s playgrounds — and childhood itself — some 20+ years ago. Articles debated whether playgrounds were a poor substitute for the freedom to roam and play across the built and natural environment generally (Cunningham and Jones, 1999; Maxey, 1999), whether their shortcomings might be mitigated somewhat through attention to the processes and outcomes of design (Herrington, 1999; Maxey, 1999), and whether they could in some way compensate for children’s lack of opportunities to play out (Melville, 1999). Twenty years on, these issues are still very much alive. This special edition, however, addresses a specific concern that has become more apparent over the intervening decades, that of children’s contact with nature and the opportunities for outdoor learning in the built environment.

In this article, we revisit and develop these historic and contemporary themes as they thread through the history and narratives of adventure playgrounds. Although all playgrounds are subject to the same material discursive forces that seek to contain, direct and mould children’s minds and bodies in various ways, the origins, development and ethos of adventure playgrounds show how they have tried to navigate the tensions between working with these forces (in order to secure acceptance and funding) and disrupting them.

The article opens with an exploration of the production of playgrounds before focusing in on how adventure playgrounds seek to disrupt this production whilst also working with it. Critical cartography is briefly proposed as a method for helping playworkers think with both the instrumental and the intrinsic value of their work. We then introduce Gwealan Tops Adventure Playground as a case study playground that has used a critical cartographic approach since its inception in 2016. Following this, the article explores the nature of nature and critiques the fixed binaries it brings in its wake: nature/culture, child/adult, play/work, and particularly the way these are brought together in the idea(l) of the ‘natural playground’. Finally, the critical cartographic approach is described in more detail, presenting this as a basis for the playworkers’, rather than the children’s, learning. This approach to organisational and professional development widens attention from individual children’s progress towards space, objects, weather, other people and non-human

bodies, movements, rhythms and dynamics. In this way, it opens up many possibilities, including a different appreciation of nature and outdoor learning, and of the intrinsic and instrumental value of play and playwork.

Figure 1 ('Show and Tell') is a comic strip adapted from a short video, taken on a phone by one of the playworkers at Gwealan Tops Adventure Playground, Cornwall, UK. It is an example of the multi-method critical cartography of the ongoing production of the playground. We introduce it at the start as a way of setting the scene, the atmosphere, for the discussion that follows. We will return to it at points throughout, showing how play, nature and learning all feature in some way in this short, fairly ordinary but also magical scene.

[INSERT NEAR HERE:] Figure 1: Show and Tell (Gwealan Tops Adventure Playground, 2018)

The production of playgrounds

> Playgrounds are not neutral spaces. The production of playgrounds carries a range of social, cultural, political and ecological implications. Playgrounds are employed discursively to help produce and maintain divisions between adult and child (Maxey, 1999, p. 12).

This production includes how we tell the history of playgrounds. For some play advocates, it is often a story of containment, of keeping particular children off the streets, both safe from the physical and moral dangers of the street and not causing trouble (e.g., Hart, 2002). Absent from these accounts are the lives of the children and families who were the targets of such corrective or protective interventions. Hardy and Ingham (1983) point out the complexities of families' and children's own desires for spaces to play, as well as their resistance to the intentions of the more powerful. Once the concept of playgrounds had become established, they were seen as something that *should* be provided, with local residents campaigning for them.

Accounts of the work of late nineteenth and early twentieth social and moral reformers in European and Anglophone countries tell of the enclosure of children's play, situating it in specific locations, as part of a wider movement that developed institutions to address concerns about the welfare of poor urban children (Brehony, 2003; Cranwell, 2003). The connection between philanthropy, education, moral welfare and developmental psychology produces the playground as a block of space-time that aligns with other forces to examine, discipline and normalise (particularly working class) children's behaviours. Play was given a value for something other than play, namely the proper education of children through the exercising of their bodies and thereby guiding their moral development (Hahn, 2018).

As with contradictory constructions of childhood itself (Valentine, 2004), so the professional and academic discursive production of the utilitarian playground has not only situated children apart from adults, but has professed its value through contradictory but interwoven narratives of correction and redemption. In her semiotic analysis of the history of playgrounds in the United States and Europe, Hahn (2018, p. 195) describes them as 'an expression of societal longings oscillating between hoping for a better future [Utopia] and longing for the carefree past [Arcadia]'. She identifies three trajectories: the first is the playground as outdoor gym, with its concern for the physical health of children; the second she calls 'little Tivoli', where the narrative is play for the sake of enjoyment; the third is Rousseau's 'back to nature'. This last is a particularly powerful

contemporary narrative, as seen in the focus for this issue. We consider this in more detail later, but for now we explore the production of the adventure playground as both embedded in the same narratives, including the 'back to nature' one, yet also resisting them.

Adventure playground histories

The history of adventure playgrounds usually begins with Danish landscape architect Carl Theodor Sørensen working in partnership with Froebel-inspired educationalist Hans Dragehjelm (de Coninck-Smith, 1999). Sørensen had seen children playing on building sites and vacant land, noticing how they used whatever was to hand to build their own playgrounds, often doing this in preference to using the playgrounds provided for them (Allen, 1968). He realised that as a landscape architect, he had all the power and control — and fun — in the design of children's play spaces, whereas if children could build their own playgrounds, the power — and fun — would pass to them. Sørensen's idea of a junk playground was somewhere with 'branches and waste from tree polling and bushes, old cardboard boxes, planks and boards, "dead" cars, old tyres and lots of other things' (Sørensen, 1935, cited in de Coninck-Smith, 1999, pp. 13-14). The first junk playground opened in 1943, in German-occupied Copenhagen, close to a new housing estate in Emdrup.

'Adventure' playgrounds were introduced into England, initially in London, Liverpool, Grimsby and Bristol, in the immediate post-war period by Lady Allen of Hurtwood after her (unplanned) visit to Emdrup. Gradually the concept spread, with local communities getting involved in setting them up, largely in the spaces left by wartime bombs.

The adventure playground movement sought to overcome the restrictive influence of traditional public playgrounds by creating sites in which children's playful freedom of expression could be fully supported. To this end, play leaders (now known in the UK and elsewhere as playworkers) were appointed to provide resources and offer a degree of 'light' supervision to maintain an open environment in which children could build, destroy, light fires, run, climb, hang out and generally enjoy greater freedom. As such, they were promoted as environments which enhance playing rather than attempt to direct, censor or limit it.

This counter movement offers a form of provision that potentially de-territorialises traditional adult configurations of time and space, problematising the normative standards of playgrounds and play provision. Yet at the same time, as Kozlovsky (2008) suggests, adult intentions for children's play were not altogether removed, but reconfigured to a different instrumental purpose. The formative years of the adventure playground movement in England coincided with post-war concerns about the rise in delinquency, particularly among working class boys, and the need to create spaces where children could 'play out' anxieties and frustrations that arose from living under stress in impoverished slum conditions. Developing community based and locally organised adventure playgrounds, as a part of post-war reconstruction, was one of the first examples of community or collaborative planning and the introduction of a new form of 'citizenship'. Creating such sites for children to play in a permissive and supportive environment could lead to children overcoming their aggression and becoming more responsible citizens.

As the UK adventure playground movement grew, it attracted people sympathetic to the growing civil liberties causes of the 1960s and 1970s, with playwork often closely aligned with radical community development, community arts and youth work (Cranwell, 2007), and many playworkers being 'a mixture of hippy idealists, anarcho-punks and grass-roots community activists with strong libertarian and left-wing beliefs' (Conway, 2005, p. 2). More recently, the growing domination of neoliberal economics and associated political regimes, bringing with it increasing measurement and future-focused instrumentalising and pathologising of children's lives, has attempted to re-

territorialise the spirit of adventure play (Lester and Russell, 2013). In line with the dominant policy paradigm focus on outcomes for children, those running adventure playgrounds need to make the case for funding in terms of instrumental outcomes aligned to policy priorities.

This has become even more necessary in the current period of UK austerity measures that have seen a 23% reduction in funding for children and young people's services (Action for Children *et al.,* 2020), leading to the closure of many adventure playgrounds (Hocker, 2014; Martin, 2014; McKendrick et al., 2015). The ethos of freedom and self-organisation has become over-coded, rendering adventure playgrounds as sites that can remedy perceived deficiencies in children, in the state of childhood and in wider society. One of these deficiencies, we will argue, is children's loss of contact with nature.

We suggest that critical cartography can act as a tool to help playworkers stay connected to the original ethos. It is an approach to documenting *what happens* that focuses on mapping how the space works rather than how individual children might be learning or developing skills. Crucially, it focuses on detail and on creative ways of accounting for how children play, and so gives rise to stories and examples of play that bring a smile and can re-enchant playworkers with children's capacity for play. We introduce this in more detail later in the article, but first briefly introduce Gwealan Tops Adventure Playground as a case study for this approach.

Gwealan Tops Adventure Playground: a case study

Gwealan Tops is Cornwall's first and only adventure playground. It is relatively new, opening in 2016. Its two job-share managers have considerable experience and brought with them a history of supporting learning, professional development and action-based research. A playwork ethos has informed every aspect of decision-making from the beginning including the selection, recruitment and induction processes for staff, most of whom had never seen an adventure playground before (nor had the children!). The new team was established with a firm commitment to learning through experience and reflective practice both individually and within the playwork team.

[INSERT NEAR HERE:] Figure 2: Gwealan Tops Adventure Playground, 2016

The site has been transformed from a field (Figure 2) to a playground with large adventurous structures (including the first outdoor roller slide in the UK) whilst maintaining wild areas for camps, grass for games, tarmac for wheels and a small indoor play hut for arts, crafts and hanging out (Figure 3). It could be described as a 'natural playscape'. Although it is an attractive destination for the wider Cornwall region, the playground has maintained its focus on offering free play opportunities to local children including some of the most deprived families in the country (MLCHG, 2019). Over 800 individual children have registered as independent users who can drop in whenever they like. This includes a diversity of ethnicity, background and disability with an equal uptake from girls as well as boys.

[INSERT NEAR HERE:] Figure 2: Aerial view of Gwealan Tops Adventure Playground, 2020

The adventure playground compensates for the lack of opportunity to play out as previous generations did, to experiment and climb trees, to fall out with others and to make up again, to talk about everything under the sun, to make sense of themselves and the world around them. It offers the kind of space where children can experiment and make mistakes, test out new experiences or repeat earlier behaviours, be different from how they are at school or in the family, forge friendships and develop their personalities without trying to meet the expectations of adults.

The playground is reliant on public funding and applying for funds is a constant activity. Funders usually require stated outcomes for beneficiaries in line with their aims, which are often linked to disadvantage, development of social skills, physical activity and so on. In particular, the playground has been funded to run nature-based projects. One recent project, supported by a grant intended for the introduction of more native plants and bio-diversity into the setting, resulted in a maze and a built structure that could be climbed by both children and plants rather than a separate garden area, meaning play was retained as the core focus. The tension between the joys of climbing trees and using cones or apples as missiles versus the nurturing of nature is a recurring theme. The managers have been keen to hold on to the playwork ethos, and decided early on to use critical cartography, an approach they had used in a previous action research project (Fitzpatrick and Handscomb, 2015, 2017), as part of the way the team and playground could continuously develop.

Before introducing the approach in more detail, the article brings a critical eye to the production of nature and learning, the key theme for this issue. We do not do this in order dismiss current orthodoxies as wrong, nor are we setting up an alternative argument as truth. Rather, we do this to see what more might be thought and done: as with both play and adventure playgrounds themselves, theory and practice should be open to different ways of thinking and doing.

The nature of nature

In his study of the culturally and historically situated meanings of keywords, Raymond Williams (1983, p. 219) suggests it is perhaps 'the most complex word in the language'. He goes on to offer three areas of meaning:

> (i) the essential quality and character *of* something; (ii) the inherent force which directs either the world, or human beings, or both; (iii) the material world itself, taken as including or not including human beings (Williams, 1983, p. 210, italics in the original).

Williams' keywords project highlights how concepts become heavily invested with meaning. Contemporary meanings of nature have emerged from the Age of Enlightenment, but even then, its meaning was complex and contradictory. For Jean-Jacques Rousseau, nature was seen as pure and in opposition to the ills of society and culture. Conversely, for Immanuel Kant, culture allowed humans to transcend their base bodily ('natural') impulses and sensations. Both views create an opposition between nature and culture, separating humans from whatever else nature is: we are apart from it, above it even. Nature is seen as something fixed and immutable, 'out there', whose laws can be discovered through scientific enquiry, and therefore controlled. Knowledge will lead to humans being free of the brute vagaries and forces of nature.

These multiple meanings of nature position it as both 'an antidote to the evils of society and at the same time the promise of society's ultimate salvation' (Lester, 2016, p. 55). In a further contradictory layering, these meanings are imposed onto children, who both/either must be protected from the harms of society in order to preserve their innocent, original, natural state (Rousseau) and/or learn to become cultured and control their base natural impulses (Kant), and who also become repositories for our anxieties and hopes for the future of planetary health.

Why does this matter? Critiques of the narrative of the natural child, and by extension of natural play, highlight how these narratives are not mere ideas: they are performative. They further separate children from adult life, and position childhood itself as in crisis due to its lack of connection with nature. Given that play is a defining feature of childhood, it is a small step to arrive at the idea(l) of the natural playground, where 'Nature is … waiting to fill children's deficits and lack,

protect their state of innocence and produce future guardians of a threatened planet' (Lester, 2016, p. 60).

Positions become fixed in binary oppositions: there seems no way to escape the duality. Children are defined by their difference from adults and vice versa; it is the same for nature and culture, play and whatever not-play might be (usually work) (Prout, 2005). Not only are positions fixed, but also trajectories: a straight line from birth to senescence predetermines stages of development and the end goal. Singular lines of causality are assumed between forms of playing and skills or aptitudes gained (Lester, 2020). Further, there is a clear value order to these dualities, one is always 'better' than the other and carries more material discursive power. One example situates children's diminishing Connection To Nature (the capitalisation and reduction to CTN turns a concept into a thing, then into a reality, then into a moral crisis) directly in opposition to 'videophilia', identifying 'screens' as a singular cause of the reduction in children's time spent outdoors (Edwards and Larson, 2020).

Again, we wish to stress that we are not dismissing these stories as wrong. The movement to promote children's outdoor play, in nature, has the best of intentions and brings many benefits. Nor are we setting up other stories as right, which would merely create further binaries. We do, however, highlight that these dominant stories, the unquestioned orthodoxies of natural play and learning, are so powerful that they exclude other ways of thinking, doing and being. It is to this that we now turn.

Beyond nature/culture binaries

There is no denying a material world. Mountains, trees, rivers, animals exist, as do weather systems and viruses; indeed, as do streets, statues and smartphones. However, the *concept* of nature is a human construction. Key words are embedded in history and culture (Williams, 1983); understandings of the world are mediated through words. Defining nature (or child, or play) is a boundary making practice (Barad, 2007); it is this that creates the dualities that are so problematic. Thinking beyond dualities requires thinking differently, even thinking beyond language, using other forms of sensing the world. Thinking beyond the fixity and separation inherent in definitions, categories and dualities offers the opportunity to consider the world as relational.

Relationality here is understood as more than passing connections with others; it is the process by which everything changes, with the world in constant flux. There is no separate, fixed, essential 'I', no human exceptionalism apart from the world, just as there is no fixed, essential Nature. Barad (2007) talks of entanglements and coins the term 'intra-action' to think beyond 'interaction' towards such a radical view of relationality. Nothing exists in isolation, everything is in a state of becoming through encounters with other human and non-human bodies, material objects, forces and so on.

> To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not preexist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating (Barad, 2007, p. ix).

The critical cartographic method of documenting what happens on the playground works with these ideas of relationality and entanglement. We return now to Figure 1, in order to read the 'show and tell' story with these ideas.

Show and tell

The comic strip is taken from a short video, part of the playwork documentation that forms the critical cartographic approach at Gwealan Tops Adventure Playground. We have included the full transcript of the video below as it offers more detail as well as a different mode of documentation.

> [The filming is made by the door of the hut. Throughout the conversation is the sound of children banging loudly on an old piano.]
>
> Boy 1: We've been making a potion and
>
> Boy 2: We've been putting all sorts of things in it.
>
> [Boy 1 looks intently at the contents of the plastic cup.] We put a stone
>
> Boy 2: Snail
>
> Boy 1: Oh. We put some [pauses] stuff in there and um some spicy, a spicy thing
>
> Playworker: A spicy thing? [Boy 2 puts a piece of bark into the cup and prods it below the surface of the liquid.]
>
> Boy 2: A spicy berry
>
> Playworker: A spicy berry?
>
> Boy 1: [fishes out the bark and throws it on the ground.] I'll get it. Four, um, three, um, six of them.
>
> Boy 2: Yes, six.
>
> Playworker: Oh, look at the colour. [Boy 2 now adds some grass.] Hold it up to the sunlight.
>
> [the camera shifts position as Boy 1 holds it up and adjusts it so the light shines through the deep red potion.]
>
> Boy 1: Let me - I'll just check the berries [brings the cup back down and looks intently at it again. Boy 2 runs off.] And inside it, it's got this disgusting orange thing
>
> Playwork: Euuugh, yeah.
>
> Boy 1: Any witch would like this. [A smile starts to creep across his face.] It's called deodorant. And you drink it and suddenly your armpits get [pauses for dramatic effect, moves right up to the camera lens and cups his mouth] STINKIER!!!
>
> [He turns and walks away. The playworker is left chuckling to herself for several seconds.]

How might we think about this dynamic and ongoing production of spacetime? The episode is both ordinary and exceptional. Playing with potions is of course very common, but this potion and this moment are unique. Boy 1 displays an embodied engagement with the potion: his fingers are dirty and marked from picking 'spicy berries', he pokes his fingers into the potion, he peers at it very closely, he talks about the detail of its content (some of which he finds disgusting), he holds it up to the sun to see the colour. He is not an outside ringmaster directing the production of 'show and tell', he is thoroughly implicated in its flow and rhythm. Drawing on Barad's (2007) concept of entanglement, the event emerges through the intra-action of present (and absent) bodies and their desires; the materiality of the cup and its contents, natural and otherwise, gathered

opportunistically from whatever was to hand; the contextual other-world of witches; the playground's history, culture and atmosphere; the sun and its capacity to shine through the deep red potion in a satisfying manner; the materiality of the camera, clearly present and included in a sophisticated way as an equal player together with its assumed but physically absent audience; the highly playful, conspiratorial performance of a disruption of almost-taboo social rules about sweaty, smelly bodies and how we must tame them; the evident enchantment of the playworker in the extended chuckle included as a part of the video clip and much more.

Such a relational perspective shows the inseparability of nature and whatever else might be not-nature in the event. The 'spicy' berries are actually blackberries, which grow over a capped tin mine shaft: the site has many mine workings beneath the apparently 'natural' field. The outdoor context with its plentiful natural elements certainly helped to create conditions for the scene, but so did the culture of the space, other worlds (witches) and technology. In terms of learning, the boy will certainly have learned things, but this is not a focus for the event: the playworker does not seek to extend learning by naming the berries or explaining the sunlight through the potion. We chose the title 'show and tell' to evoke a commonly used classroom method to encourage children to talk about things they may have found as a starting point for teaching something specific. The reference is deliberately an educational one. Yet we are less concerned with following traditional paths of cause and effect for children's learning.

Rather, we are keen to look more deeply at the intentional learning for the playworkers. The video clip was part of the playground's critical cartographic approach to reflective practice and organisational development. It is to this that we now turn.

Critical cartography as an approach to playworkers' learning

What happens if we turn ideas of children's learning in nature on its head and look instead at playworkers' own learning, as an active commitment to think differently in order to trouble the dominant schisms between Kant and Rousseau, discipline and libertarianism, Utopia and Arcadia? What might ideas of intra-action, entanglements and human non-exceptionalism offer in this ethical endeavour?

If we accept that meaning (culture) and matter (nature) are mutually implicated (Barad, 2007), then we need to look at 'what goes in between the discursive and the material' (Taylor, 2013, p. xix). Critical cartography is an approach to documenting the events, flows and rhythms of settings – in this case, Gwealan Tops Adventure Playground, in Cornwall, UK.

Moving beyond a traditional developmentalist and psychological theorising of children's lives, critical cartography is based on mapping the space. There are two senses to mapping here. Firstly, it focuses on how the space works, drawing on ideas of space as always in the process of being produced through encounters between people, landscapes, material objects as well as less tangible things such as symbols, desires, histories, culture, atmosphere and so on (Massey, 2005). In this sense, space itself is relational rather than a neutral surface or container. If the purpose of playwork is to create a space where all children can play,[i] this opens up the possibility of paying attention to the space rather than only focusing on outcomes for children. Secondly, it acknowledges the limits of attempts to represent accurately an independently existing reality. The mapping process engages each contributor's embodied, affective relationship with spacetime, using methods that can map beyond the limits of language and also beyond the limits of what is – a mapping of possibilities as

well as particular realities. The mapping uses multiple creative methods and is an ongoing collective endeavour (Fitzpatrick and Handscomb, 2015, 2017; Russell, Fitzpatrick and Handscomb, 2020).

Critical cartography in action

This section describes the experiences of Gwealan Tops Adventure Playground's embedding of critical cartography into their daily practice. Getting to grips with core concepts, developing ways of seeing and attending to the everyday, creating ways for expressing and sharing perspectives alongside exploring understandings requires facilitation. Processes of daily team debriefs, regular team meetings and in-house learning events supported by the playwork managers were woven into the fabric of the organisation from the beginning. The introduction of critical cartography was also supported by researchers from the University of Gloucestershire who have expertise and experience in both playwork and this mapping approach. The playworkers and trustees have engaged in a number of group and individual reflections and this has formed a bedrock of shared practice and commitment to learning throughout the organisation. An openness and willingness to learn and share thoughts and experiences is a central tenet of the way we all work and learn together.

What follows are examples of the on-going documentation and artefacts that have been created by the team as part of our engagement with critical cartography.

The production of a shared map of the site is a good starting point to help awaken powers of observation and attentiveness to the multiple facets of the space. Discussion about the terrain, dimensions, boundaries, features, facilities, access and through routes raises questions. What can be assumed as fixed and significant becomes open to interpretation and the more temporary, liminal and loose aspects become less overlooked. Binaries such as permanent and transient; physical and affective; natural and manufactured; planned and unplanned are called into question. Over time the map is remade as both the space and the team change.

To explore each playworker's experience, history and perception of the space, we each took three photos of places on the playground that were significant to us at that time and shared the images and the stories behind them. One early example was a photo of the outline of a pair of shoes on what some call our Tango Swing. This is an iconic structure, versions of which can be found on many UK adventure playgrounds. Ours reaches a height of seven metres and was the first large structure built. It needed to be seen from the road to announce that here is an adventure playground. It is different from what was here before. When standing on the swing you can see the rest of the playground and children hang out there waiting for a go so it is a place where stories are swapped, names are learnt and corrupted into nicknames, and relationships are built.

This introduces and builds on the importance of narratives and singularity becoming integral to methodology for critical cartography. Understandings are deepened through knowing some of the background, history, geography, proportions and context of the swing at the same time as recognising the experiences and feelings of the staff member such as being at height, having a view and being part of a social group dominated by young people's culture.

A key tool we use to assist in the continuing attempts to capture evidence of how the space works is sharing stories of playful moments. This can be through simply asking each other 'what do you see or hear now' or through writing notes on post-its and adding them to the map (Figure 5). We use our WhatsApp group as both an instant way of sharing moments or a way to share thoughts after time to process. It is embedded in the team culture as a way of communicating generally. We could call these observations, but they are more embodied than merely seeing, they pay attention to detail,

and they don't offer any interpretation. Many are ways of sharing a sense of awe and enchantment with children's play, not necessarily in an over-romanticised manner (see the story of Lucy below, for example, or the show and tell story in Figure 1), and the ways in which children readily move beyond the constraints of physical reality (see the conversation on gravity below). More recently we have tried to find ways that concentrate the storytelling, for example, through three-minute snapshots; focussing on one child, one area, one object or one play frame; or using only 25 words to capture moments. Here are some examples:

> I'm going to get you!
>
> Arms, fingers outstretched
>
> Leaning forward
>
> Don't overbalance
>
> Swinging, flying, grasping.
>
> I've killed my arms.
>
> **************
>
> Lucy after a small group had formed themselves into a little gang and taken over the dragon swing.
>
> "Just like dogs…they touch it and think they own it".
>
> **************
>
> Why do we go down when we jump off things?
>
> It's gravity. It's what keeps you from falling up.
>
> But I want to fall up – that way I can swim in the sky.
>
> But then everyone would fall up and never come back down.
>
> Yeah I know. That's what I want gravity to do.

[INSERT NEAR HERE:] Figure 5: Stories and moments on the map (Gwealan Tops, 2018)

We also use photos and videos, capturing and recording events and playful moments and provoking further discussion. Using drone photos of the whole site (Figure 3) alongside hand-drawn maps is helpful when imagining possibilities for the space or trying to note down observations. Videos of whole sessions taken from one position can be seen speeded up, helping to show flows and movements of the area over a day. Beyond sight, we have worked with other senses, including sound (for example, recording for a few moments and asking others to say where the recording was) and memories of smell, touch and taste.

We have also focused on movements, on the flows and rhythms of the space. These might be big or small movements of people, objects, elements and so on.

[INSERT NEAR HERE:] Figure 6: Movement of boy on bike (Gwealan Tops, 2018)

The rhythms, affordances and experiences of children and staff in all forms of weather, across seasons and various moods are captured, noted and explored as part of increasing understandings of the space and environment. This can be through photos, videos, audios, stories and often shared on WhatsApp. The pictures showing the joys of mud (Figure 7) and the WhatsApp post that shows some of the team and children in a very murky mizzle so typical of Cornish life (Figure 8) encourage sharing, questioning and anticipation. They trigger thoughts of other experiences whether positive or negative from childhood, holidays, work or home life that deepen affective understandings of the environment. They recognise natural phenomena as part of the entanglement and inform any critical analysis in both an atmospheric and practical way.

[INSERT NEAR HERE:]

Figure 7: Joys of mud (Gwealan Tops, 2017)

Figure 8: Yet another misty, murky day (Gwealan Tops, 2018)

We have sometimes used alternative creative approaches, for example, making a daily comic strip over one half term holiday (Figure 9), or employing an illustrator from nearby Falmouth University whose illustrations captured moments in a sharply observational way and introduced a new way of seeing that enriched team reflections. (Figure 10).

[INSERT NEAR HERE:]

Figure 9: Detail of comic strip (Gwealan Tops, 2018)

Figure 10: Illustrations of playing (Gwealan Tops, 2018)

Other playful ways of documenting the space have emerged over time. One example was being given the challenge from our external researchers of imagining we were David Attenborough (a British broadcaster famed for his films of creatures in their natural habitats), and talking about the children as if they were a little-known species. Another is asking 'what if?' questions, such as 'what if we all started today at the top of the tower?', or 'what if we all hid?' or 'what if we don't talk today?'. Another is asking the team at de-brief to imagine the session as an animal, or a film, or a song and share their thoughts. Sometimes the team will be asked to make an observation at exactly the same time on a day for a few minutes to share as part of debrief. Another example that relates to current events (during the Covid-19 pandemic) was to use the 'social distancing' warning tape as a prompt to be incorporated into the capturing some playful moments, as Figure 11 shows.

[INSERT NEAR HERE:] Figure 11: Sticky tape pandemic play (Gwealan Tops, 2020)

The process of embedding critical cartography into everyday reflective playwork practice has built a culture of valuing stories, micro moments, passing and flitting events. The documenting of *what happens,* the variety of artefacts based on observations, stories, experiences and stimulated by prompts has led to a shared language that is very different from what can so often take place in teams. The tendency to be stuck in circular reflection loops that identify and solve problems can be very limiting, often making causal connections that may be incidental or misleading. Traditional approaches to reflection driven by external accountability procedures can encourage professionals to feel pressured to demonstrate the importance of their role and therefore minimise how far they look critically at an organisation's failings. None of this is conducive to being a learning organisation.

We opted instead to learn through processes of critical cartography, emphasising the twin process of account-ability and response-ability so we can learn from each other's different ways of seeing, feeling and describing what is going on around us. Our approach concentrates on the space, movement, playful moments and on 'what if' experimentation that explores the ways in which playworkers at the playground make sense of their practice in designing and maintaining an environment for play. Everyone is encouraged to contribute, question, discuss, challenge and disagree in order to deepen our understandings of ourselves, playwork, children and their play.

Closing thoughts

Critical cartography has been used in a range of contexts, including formal evaluation of playwork projects, and is beginning to take on a life of its own as an evaluation methodology. Importantly it maintains a focus on real life experiences that help deepen understandings. The experience at Gwealan Tops Adventure Playground has been particularly successful, partly perhaps because the managers have been committed to using it as an approach right from the start in a new project where most of the staff were not familiar with playwork. It has been useful elsewhere, but has also met with challenges precisely because it relies on a radically different view of the space, and requires significant support in order to shift hanits of thought. Nonetheless, despite challenges, there are aspects of it that have been very useful in highlighting the value of a playwork approach.

Adventure playgrounds have tried to navigate the tensions between the desire to disrupt powerful adult causal and linear intentions for play provision and the necessity of working within a system that requires measuring outcomes in order to secure funding. The critical cartographic method of documenting offers a way of sharing with others the value of what it is that makes playwork different from other professional ways of working with children. When used alongside more traditional approaches to monitoring and evaluation, it shows how the instrumental outcomes are met *through* the particular approach of playwork, that is, supporting all children and young people in the creation of a space in which they can play. Instrumental value can be realised through paying attention to playwork's intrinsic value.

In terms of adventure playgrounds as sites for outdoor learning in nature, this approach helps to avoid the binary thinking that can create hierarchies of value. Discussions about outdoors or indoors;, natural or artificial become redundant as the entanglement of forces, matter and humans are all part of the space. It is not an 'either or' but an 'and and' way of encompassing how things are.

Finally, what we love about it is that it also makes us laugh and maintains a sense of wonder and enchantment with children's play.

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[i] This statement comes from the Playwork Principles (Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group, 2005), which outline the ethical and professional basis for playwork in the UK.