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Entangled in the midst of it: a diffractive expression of an ethics for playwork

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Abstract:

The Playwork Principles establish the professional and ethical framework for UK playworkers. They also create contradictions that have an ethical dimension. Following an historical contextualisation, the chapter critiques the assumption of the autonomous rational agent implicit in the Playwork Principles' understanding of both play and playwork. It reconfigures playwork as relational, affective and affecting, embodied, situated and irreducible to representation in language. Through a diffractive reading of the work of Karen Barad, Rosi Braidotti and Judith Butler, it offers a posthuman, nomadic and relational ethics, acknowledging the emergent, ongoing and intra-active co-production of play spaces in which playworkers are already implicated.

Entangled in the midst of it: a diffractive expression of an ethics for playwork

> Something's happening. Try as we might to gain an observer's remove,
> that's where we find ourselves: in the midst of it. There's happening doing.
> This is where philosophical thinking must begin: immediately in the
> middle.
>
> (Massumi 2011: 1)

> Can we simply follow our passion to know without getting our hands
> dirty? … We are of the universe – there is no inside, no outside … There is
> no getting away from ethics – mattering is an integral part of the ontology
> of the world in its dynamic presencing. Not even a moment exists on its
> own. "This" and "that," "here" and "now," don't pre-exist what happens
> but come alive with each meeting … Meeting each moment, being alive to
> the possibilities of becoming, is an ethical call, an invitation that is written
> into the very matter of all being and becoming.
>
> (Barad 2007: 396)

Introduction

Playworkers in the UK work with school-aged children to support their play. The practice is underpinned by a set of principles that establish playwork's professional and ethical framework (PPSG 2005). These principles create a number of contradictions for practice that have an ethical dimension, and this chapter offers a modest exploration of this that seeks to reconfigure taken-for-granted assumptions that have become common sense truths. It is modest in the sense that it marks an experimental and initial playing with ideas that are different for the author: philosophy as an activity in the midst of it (Massumi 2011). It is offered as an 'expression': not a reproduction of an already existing state of affairs to be accurately communicated, more an immanent, mutual deterritorialisation of the gap between content and form of expression. This is itself an ethical act:

> There is indeed an ethics of expression ... It is a basically pragmatic
> question of how one performatively contributes to the stretch of expression
> in the world – or conversely prolongs its capture … Where expression
> stretches, potential determinately emerges into something new.
> Expression's tensing is by nature creative …To tend the stretch of
> expression, to foster and inflect it rather than trying to own it, is to enter
> the stream, contributing to its probings: this is co-creative, an aesthetic
> endeavor. It is also an ethical endeavor, since it is to ally oneself with
> change: for an ethics of emergence.
>
> (Massumi 2002: xxii)

In this spirit of modest and ethical expression, then, the chapter opens by placing the

Playwork Principles in the midst of their historical context, noting the shift towards prescription and technical standards for practice alongside an enduring sense of dissent and recalcitrance within playwork as a heterogeneous community of practice. Implicit in this 'minoritarian becoming-playworker' (adapting Braidotti 2012) is an appreciation of the nature and value of children's play that resists dominant, totalising, developmentalist and instrumental narratives (Lester and Russell 2013). Such an appreciation is evident in playwork practice (Lester *et al.,* 2014; Russell 2013), but is articulated infrequently. A different 'cut' on childhood and play that decentres playwork's focus on the psychological subject - and particularly on the material discursive practice of 'intervention' - is offered here as a contribution to the 'stretch of expression', given the mutual implication of epistemology, ontology and ethics (Barad 2007).

Following this, the chapter critiques the notion of the autonomous rational agent implicit in the Playwork Principles' understanding of both play and playwork to reconfigure playwork as relational, affective and affecting, embodied, situated and not reducible to representations in language. What is attempted here is a diffractive reading of texts through each other (a 'mash-up' perhaps, or an ongoing game of Donna Haraway's [1994] cat's cradle) of the work of Karen Barad and Rosi Braidotti, with a sprinkling of Judith Butler, in order to offer an alternative posthuman, nomadic and relational ethics that acknowledges the complexities of the emergent, ongoing and intra-active co-production of play space in which playworkers are already directly implicated.

Playwork as 'becoming-minoritarian' practice: the entanglement of knowledge, being and ethics

Although playworkers in the UK work in a range of contexts, its best-known theorists hail mainly from the adventure playground movement (Brown 2003, 2008; Else 2014; Hughes 2006, 2012; Sturrock and Else 2005). This has played its part in the development of an ethos that places high value on self-organised, outdoor play with easy access to a range of indeterminate materials, tools, and the elements (Russell 2013). Adventure playgrounds were introduced to the UK by Lady Allen of Hurtwood following her visit to the junk playground in Emdrup, Copenhagen in 1948 and were largely welcomed by the authorities as an effective response to a post-war rise in delinquency amongst working class boys (Cranwell 2007). Although permissiveness and democracy, even anarchy, were at the heart of the adventure playground endeavour, Kozlovsky (2008) suggests this was aimed ultimately at meeting policy's instrumental goals. Out of anarchy and freedom would come an understanding of democracy and citizenship. In the 1960s and 1970s, the work attracted a significant number of people sympathetic to the civil liberties movements, and playwork was at that time often closely allied to radical community development, community arts and youth work (Cranwell 2007), with many playworkers being 'a mixture of hippy idealists, anarcho-punks and grass-roots community activists with strong libertarian and left-wing beliefs' (Conway 2005: 2).

In the ensuing decades, shifts in the socio-political landscape raised a number of challenges to

the original permissive, adventurous and democratic ethos. In particular, the introduction of health and safety legislation, registration and inspection regimes and the marketization of public services contributed to the development of externally derived prescriptions and standards (Lester and Russell 2013; Shier 1984). Playwork's institutions tried to tread the path between protecting this ethos and retaining some control over the development of such standards that have now become an accepted aspect of the work (Russell 2013).

These technical standards (for example, National Occupational Standards, quality assurance schemes, risk assessment forms, registration guidelines) mark a significant shift away from the experimentation, unpredictability, anarchy and freedoms of early adventure playground pioneers (Allen 1968; Benjamin 1961, 1974; Hughes 1975), leading some to mourn the loss of a movement, although the idea of 'play' (as a synecdoche encompassing children's play and adult support for it) as 'a dissenting presence that had the capability to invalidate dominant norms, needs and values … remains strong' (Cranwell 2007: 62).

What can be seen here is a dialectic playing out between playwork as a social practice with shared internal goods (MacIntyre 2007) and an increasing focus on technical skills and instrumental outcomes led by playwork's institutions in the name of recognition and status. Playwork's 'dissenting presence', or its recalcitrance (Battram and Russell 2002), might be understood as an attempt by a social practice to curb the potential for institutions to corrupt its value base (MacIntyre 2007). The tension remains and is played out in the endless rounds of meetings where official articulations - playwork's 'professing' - are revised, reworded and repackaged in attempts to resolve contradictions both within the practice and between the practice and its institutions. This exercise, however, is doomed to failure: the ineffable qualities of the playwork approach cannot be fixed in time or contained absolutely by representation in this technical manner, as there will always be something that exceeds it, that cannot be articulated in the limits of language.

It perhaps needs to be stressed, however, that this dialectic is by no means a static binary or negative opposition. A Lefebvrian (2009) perspective sees dialectics as the basis for perpetual change, ceaseless becoming, through the entanglements of a triad of social practice (from Marx), language and thought (from Hegel) and a Dionysian playfulness/creativity (from Nietzsche) (Schmidt 2008). Rather than the binary negation of essentialist Hegelian dialectics critiqued by Deleuze (1968), such a position can connect with his affirmative 'difference-in-itself'. This requires a nomadic rather than a fixed codifying approach, open to difference, deterritorialising the measured, striated spaces of totalising certainties (Deuchars 2011).

This always-becoming dialectical triad is cut here with Barad's (2007) entanglement of epistemology, ontology and ethics. Contrary to Levinas' (1989) argument that ethics is first philosophy prior to epistemology and ontology, Barad (2007: 185) argues that none is prior:

> Practices of knowing and being are not isolable; they are mutually
> implicated. We don't obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we

> know because we are *of* the world … The separation of epistemology from
> ontology is a reverberation of a metaphysics that assumes an inherent
> difference between human and nonhuman, subject and object, mind and
> body, matter and discourse … what we need is something like an
> *ethico-onto-epistem-ology* – an appreciation of the intertwining of ethics,
> knowing and being – since each intra-action matters.

We have fallen into the common sense belief that there are fixed and pre-existing realities that can be first discovered and then mirrored faithfully in language. Both these assumptions have been challenged through Barad's (2007) theory of agential realism, developed from the radical challenge to traditional epistemology brought by Niels Bohr's work on quantum physics. These ideas are complex and profound and cannot be adequately summarised here without inevitable oversimplification if not misrepresentation. Nevertheless, key concepts can be used as tropes (as Baradian apparatuses perhaps) to offer up a different way of configuring what we know about children's play and playwork, or rather, to offer up *difference itself as a way of configuring them*. In a shift of optical metaphor, rather than seeking to *reflect* accurately and objectively a pre-existing and concrete reality, 'setting up worries about copy and original and the search for the authentic and the really real' (Haraway 1997, cited in Barad 2007: 71), a *diffractive* analysis offers 'a mapping of interference … A diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear, but rather maps where the effects of difference appear' (Haraway 1992: 300). For Barad, the diffraction apparatuses in physics not only reveal the effect of changes that occur when a wave hits an obstacle or slit, they reveal the entangled structure of phenomena:

> "Things" don't pre-exist … Matter is … not to be understood as a property
> of things but, like discursive practices, must be understood in more
> dynamic and productive terms – in terms of intra-activity.
>
> (Barad 2007: 150)

Barad coins the term 'intra-action' to extend the notion of interaction (which assumes pre-existing agencies) in order to emphasise how agencies emerge through the process of intra-action. This concept is revisited later in the chapter.

Representationalism assumes the knower to be apart from that which is known. The play scholar can define and categorise play as something that exists out there independently of their observation, and that can be accurately represented in language. Defining play requires that its boundaries are fixed and identifiable, that there is a clear separation between play and not-play. The generic concept can then be broken down into smaller bounded and identifiable categories (locomotor play, social play, rough and tumble, for example) with attendant benefits. A performative approach, however, sees 'thinking, observing, and theorizing as practices of engagement with, and as part of, the world in which we have our being' (Barad 2007: 133). Defining and categorising are boundary-making practices that have material effects. Furthermore, a posthumanist performative approach not only challenges the ability of language to reflect a reality awaiting discovery, it also challenges the anthropocentric

arrogance that humans are somehow apart from nature, an assumption implicit in nature-culture and subject-object binaries; it also pays attention to material, nonhuman bodies, in the ongoing becoming of the world. Knowledge and meaning are enacted as material discursive practices that determine what can and cannot be said about play and about the relationship of playworkers to playing (or non-playing) children. Knowledge thereby becomes intimately entangled with practice; our current ways of thinking and speaking about play enact an agential cut that closes down other ways of thinking and therefore acting: 'discursive practices are specific material (re)configurings of the world through which the determination of boundaries, properties, and meanings is differentially enacted' (Barad 2007: 149).

Given all of this, dissent and recalcitrance are important features of playwork ethics, together with an openness to difference (in terms of the otherness of other humans and non-humans, and also of a constant state of becoming). They represent a form of 'becoming minoritarian' practice that seeks to 'escape from "majoritarian" norms, subject positions, and habits of mind and practice' (Lenz-Taguchi 2012: 267), the agential cuts that produce habitual material discursive practice. This is ethical because it disturbs the hegemonic, common-sense, totalising material discursive practices that have emerged from the marketized, New Public Management (NPM) focus on performance indicators, outcomes and technical standards now the norm in public service (Banks 2004; Dahlberg and Moss 2008), together with the dominance of psychology in the twentieth century and the increasing reach of its gaze in the lives of children (Rose 1999a). A nomadic, relational ethics reconfigures the internalised, *in*dividuated, rational moral agent and pays attention to the forces, desires and entanglements of human, non-human and more-than-human becoming-players that affect and are affected by each other in ways that seek to bring about yet-to-be conditions (Braidotti 2012). The different diffractive cut on children's play and playwork offered here opens up ethical possibilities for knowing and being, for a different ethics – or an ethics of difference – for playwork.

Playwork's recalcitrance is seen less in grand gestures of major politics and more in everyday 'minor' acts that carry a hope for a better today rather than some final future utopian project (Horton and Kraftl 2009; Rose 1999b): moments of nonsense and playfulness that can emerge in spaces where conditions are supportive. These rarely find their way into 'serious' texts about playwork, but have begun to emerge in the virtual spaces of social media. Playwork practice based largely on tacit knowledge, intuitions, hunches and an 'ineffable knack' (Heron 1996) intersects with external pressures to categorise and codify play into a thing to be provided for its assumed instrumental and future-focused benefits.

Such an ethical stance can be argued for any work with people, but it is particularly salient for those who work with children at play, given both the otherness of children and the notion that play itself can be seen as a Deleuzian line of flight from the dominant adult orderings of time and space (Lester 2013), where such a line of flight 'does not mean to flee but to re-create or act against dominant systems of thought and social conditions' (Deuchars 2011: 5).

Apollo and Dionysus at play

Most playworkers, particularly those in open access[i] settings, are funded through the public purse and so need to justify their work in the language of whatever social problem concerns governments at that time. In this endeavour, Apollo rules in the playground. The majoritarian material discursive practice that sees play as a mechanism for learning skills needed later in adult life privileges a pre-existing, stable and separate Cartesian mind over a Dionysian body that requires disciplining. Particular forms of playing are valued over others for their perceived effectiveness in developing the desired skills and healthy bodies (Lester and Russell 2013). Locomotor play becomes valuable in terms of preventing obesity (Alexander *et al.,* 2011). Pretend play is valued for its role in the development of social cognition and skills (Lillard *et al*., 2010). Even the category 'risky play' is psychologised so it is no longer irrational, unruly impulsivity in search of high excitement and arousal, rather it is a need that helps children develop risk assessment skills (Lester and Russell 2014).

Nowhere is the Apollonian child more evident than in the 'return-to-nature' movement that is a current focus of play advocates and environmental organisations alike.[ii] The research agenda, and subsequent benefit claims, focus again on the development of disembodied cognitive capacities, including pro-environmental attitudes, mental health and emotion regulation, scientific learning and environmental knowledge (Gill 2011). The author of the psychopathologising concept of 'nature deficit disorder' (Louv 2005) encapsulates this in his blog post entitled 'Want your children to get into Harvard? Tell 'em to go outside!' (Louv, 2011).

In all of this, play is seen unproblematically as a force for good, with singular causal links being made between particular forms of play and desired, predominantly cognitive, skills. Play becomes reified, even commodified, into something to be provided by (well-meaning) adults as a way of helping children to fulfil their potential (Lester and Russell 2013) and to ward off our own adult ontological and existential anxieties about the future (Katz 2008; Kraftl 2008). Inevitably, this leads to privileging some forms of play over others, particularly over the Dionysian forms of playing that may elicit adult anxiety or offence (Sutton-Smith 1997) and that are not necessarily inherently 'good'.

What this illustrates is the entanglement of epistemology, ontology and ethics through majoritarian material discursive practices. They have become so pervasive that they are understood as common sense. It is argued here that ethical playwork has a responsibility to disturb these understandings in order to offer a minoritarian, diffractive cut (Lester *et al*., 2014): not another fixed position in opposition, rather an openness to what might be different.

These two forms of future-focused, utopian territorialisation of children's play (Bauman 2003; Lester and Russell 2013) - that is, its instrumentalisation in social policy (and therefore public funding) and its rational, Apollonian bias - create ethical paradoxes for playworkers discernible in the assumptions underpinning the Playwork Principle as a code of ethics, and so it is to an examination of these that we now turn.

Decentring the human subject in the Playwork Principles as a code of ethics

Codes of professional ethics are generally public statements that profess a service ideal. As such, their intention is to fulfil a number of functions including protecting service users, giving credence and professional status, giving guidance to practitioners, and helping to create and maintain professional identity (Banks, 2004). Such codes will always be problematic because of the tensions between prescription and professional judgement, and between universal principles and the particular in everyday situated practice.

The service ideal articulated in the Playwork Principles asserts that the broader the range of opportunities available for children to play, the better for their development. However, the instrumentalisation and rationalisation of play that underpin the justification of public funding for playwork are directly countered by statements intended to minimise the 'adulteration' (Sturrock and Else 1998) of play, understood as the pollution of children's ludic habitat with adult desires. This is particularly apparent in the definition of play as

> a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically
> motivated. That is, children and young people determine and control the
> content and intent of their play, by following their own instincts, ideas and
> interests, in their own way for their own reasons.
>
> (PPSG 2005)

Such characteristics, or equivalents, can be found in much of the literature on play, for example, Burghardt (2005), Caillois (1961), Garvey (1977), Huizinga (1955). They are problematic epistemologically, ontologically and ethically. Of particular relevance here is the assumption of an autonomous subject exercising rational agency over both human and nonhuman others from which they are ontologically discrete. Such an individualist conception of the subject can be challenged at a pragmatic level: everyday experience shows that compromise and negotiation are key features of playing with both human and non-human others, tempering absolute freedom of choice and direction. Barad's (2007) work reveals the full extent of the entangled nature of matter (human and nonhuman bodies). Agency is not something that someone possesses, 'agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action' (Barad 2007: 33). She elaborates:

> Intra-actions are nonarbitrary, nondeterministic causal enactments through
> which matter-in-the-process-of-becoming is iteratively enfolded into its
> ongoing differential materialization. Such a dynamics is not marked by an
> exterior parameter called time, nor does it take place in a container called
> space. Rather, iterative intra-actions are the dynamics through which
> temporality and spatiality are produced and iteratively reconfigured.
>
> (Barad 2007: 179)

At the risk of over-simplifying her work, what this does is radically reconfigure understandings of the ways in which space and time are produced. Human bodies are

entangled with other human and non-human bodies. A diffractive figuration of these entanglements (as meaning making and as material discursive practice) focuses less on fixed boundaries between play and not-play, this play and that play, good play and bad play, and more on the dynamic flows and forces of those entanglements and the possibility of becoming-different. As an affirmative figuration it focuses less on children's needs to play in particular ways that are beneficial for their development – a positioning as lack – and more on the Deleuzian-Spinozan idea of *conatus*. This as 'an affirmative, non-intentional intensity, producing connections … neither a "want" nor "lack" but the effort of an individual entity to persevere in its own existence … determined by its capacity to affect and be affected' (Parr 2005: 266), in terms of seeking to enhance capacities for joyful existence and avoiding connections that reduce that capacity. A state of playfulness may be seen as one of vitality; this is not merely 'fun' but a state of positive affect that enlivens things for the time of playing. As Lester (2013: 136-137) states:

> Deterritorialisation holds the most promise for self-ordering and 'joy'; it is
> a desire to seek out leakages in the constraining molar system and establish
> molecular *lines of flight* away from the plane of organisation. The
> contention here is that playing may be seen as such a movement away from
> order, stability and predictability. It is the process of being a child
> becoming different and open to what it not yet is ... Playing may be seen as
> desiring to affect and be affected by creating uncertainty and disturbance,
> and to play with the relationship between disequilibrium and balance.

'Play spaces' therefore do not pre-exist independently of their production, but emerge through the intra-actions of bodies, affects, histories, material and symbolic objects and so on. Space becomes relational, dynamic, and always in the making: '[e]vents and things do not occupy particular positions in space and time; rather, space, time and matter are iteratively produced and performed' (Barad 2007: 393). Such a reconfiguration also requires a rethinking of intervention and adulteration, key apparatuses of playwork. The Playwork Principles state:

> Playworkers choose an intervention style that enables children and young
> people to extend their play. All playworker intervention must balance risk
> with the developmental benefit and wellbeing of children.

Illustrative of the other statements that make up the Playwork Principles, this shows how they rest on assumptions that are deontological, utilitarian and teleological: universal assumptions of an autonomous rational agent and of the right actions to take, either according to professional duties or according to a form of felicific calculus that assumes particular outcomes from particular actions. Yet, as with the impossibility of the freely choosing child, playworkers are not apart from but a part of what happens, they are already in the midst of it, already implicated. If spaces are produced through entangled intra-actions, then there can be no single cause and effect of isolated actions that are currently described as interventions.

This raises questions about the playworker as an ethical subject: if there are no singular

causes or no individual agents of change, where does responsibility lie? Barad suggests that if responsibility does not lie with individuals alone, this means that responsibility is even greater than if it did: 'entanglements are … irreducible relations of responsibility'. She continues:

> Responsibility is not an obligation that the subject chooses … [it] is not a calculation to be performed. It is a relation always already integral to the world's ongoing intra-active becoming and not-becoming.
>
> (Barad 2010: 265)

Concluding thoughts: towards a playwork ethics of emergence
The key point to be drawn from the discussion so far is that ethics, in this cut, is not about autonomous moral agents but first and foremost about relations. It is an 'ethics of passion that aims at joy and not destruction' (Braidotti 2012: 175) and at a collective well-being. In this sense it aligns with other poststructuralist philosophies that address politics and power. It is a nomadic ethics of emergence that requires continual questioning of majoritarian and habitual material discursive practices that can have the effect of overcoding and colonising children's desires (Lester and Russell 2013).

Embedded in such an ethics is the relation to the other. Responsibility to the other acknowledges an affirmative difference, appreciating children's 'otherness' from adults and resisting the desire to 'know' them in terms of our own worldview, thereby turning them into versions of the same (Levinas 1969). As Braidotti (2012:172) argues:

> Otherness is approached as the expression of a productive limit, or generative threshold, which calls for an always already compromised set of negotiations. Nomadic theory prefers to look for the ways in which Otherness prompts, mobilizes, and allows for flows of affirmation of values and forces which are not yet sustained by the current conditions.

The chapter closes with some tentative suggestions for what might be called dispositions for an ethics for playwork. These are adapted from Rushing's (2010) analysis of Judith Butler's ethics. They are not offered as essential characteristics of an ideal playworker, given what has been said here about moral agents. Butler makes the case for developing a subjectivity that is at ease with vulnerability, rather than the overriding thrust towards invincibility, mastery, supremacy. In applying Butler's interpretation of Levinas to playwork, the relation with children *precedes* being a playworker; playworker subjectivities are produced through these relationships in an ongoing state of becoming. In this sense, they are performative.

The dispositions proposed for an ethics of playwork are: openness, playfulness, humility, and patience/restraint as a disposition of *not*-doing that can guard against the totalising and essentialising that policy often assumes and requires.

Openness is about being comfortable with not knowing, in terms of both children and

playwork colleagues as others and in terms of play's unpredictability and spontaneity. 'Openness to others is an expression of the nomadic relational structure of the subject and a precondition for the creation of ethical bonds (Braidotti 2012: 174).

Playfulness does not mean forever playing the clown. It does mean being open to turning situations on their head, accepting of moments of nonsense that arise, and bringing a playful disposition to situations that may be conflictual, if appropriate. It means not taking play too seriously, as it is far too important for that.

Humility requires an uncertainty regarding our selves, given that categories (for example, woman, playworker) seek to essentialise and smooth away difference, a form of violence in the Levinasian sense. In the spirit of a nomadic ethics, this unsettles any core idea of identity, freeing us to be unknown to ourselves and to live at the edge of our own limits of knowledge. In terms of relationships with children, and especially children at play, 'we work in a field of not knowing' (Sturrock, Russell and Else, 2004: 33).

Patience and restraint involves not demanding that the other explain or define themselves in a way we can understand. It is perhaps a disposition of *not* doing, of waiting and seeing. This is not to be confused with doing nothing, particularly in terms of discussions regarding intervention and adulteration in playwork. It requires a mindfulness and openness to the unknown and to uncertainty, perhaps even a sense of wonder at what may emerge rather than anxiety at what might happen. 'The ethical subject is an embodied sensibility, which responds to its proximal relationship to the other through a mode of wonderment' (Barad 2007: 391). Given all that has been said, it should go without saying that these are interdependent and interrelated, applying to relations both with the children and with other human and nonhuman bodies. Cultivating these dispositions may support the conditions for a radical ethics of transformation that pays attention to the forces and values of relations: the capacity to affect and be affected.

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Acknowledgements

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[i] The term 'open access' refers to play projects where the children are in principle free to come and go, in contrast to out of school settings where caregivers pay for childcare and the children stay until collected. In practice, the boundaries are not quite so clear cut, as some open access setting offer formal childcare or children are told by their caregivers to attend the setting until collected.

[ii] For a detailed discussion of this, see Stuart Lester's chapter in this book.