

Co-creating an Adventure Playground (CAP): Reading playwork stories, practices and artefacts

Report from an action research project carried out with an adventure playground
over a six-month period during summer and autumn 2013



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Introduction

This report draws on findings from an action research project carried out with an adventure playground (AP) over a six-month period during summer/autumn 2013. The overall intention was to explore the ways in which playwork practitioners at the playground make sense of and give meaning to their practice in designing and maintaining an environment for play. Working collaboratively with members of the play and playwork team at the University of Gloucestershire, adventure playground workers explored current articulations of design intentions and practices drawing on a range of conceptual approaches and tools. This brought a critical and reflective lens to the production of the AP, its everyday rhythms, routines and habits, and the ways in which adults and children co-create play spaces.

Through the introduction of concepts and tools, the use of reflective diaries and observations, and the iterations of action research dialogue, the playworkers experimented with approaches to the co-production of 'play space' that embraced openness, flexibility, complexity and emergence. This report tells the story of some of the revelations from this project and the possible implications for future practice at the playground and also for other APs. It opens with a brief overview of adventure playgrounds and some background specific to the AP in the study. It then introduces the conceptual approaches informing the study and the methodological implications and applications of this in designing an action research approach. Having established these foundations, the report presents and discusses some of the key findings and themes that emerged through the project before drawing some conclusions and possible implications from the experiment.

Adventure playgrounds

Adventure playgrounds were first introduced in the UK during the late 1940s by Lady Allen of Hurtwood after her visit to the junk playground in Emdrup, Copenhagen. These facilities sprung up in the spaces left by wartime bombs, using waste materials, tools and the permissive supervision of a playleader to create spaces where children could build play structures, light fires, make dens and engage in outdoor play. Largely developed and run by voluntary organisations, such spaces were welcomed by the authorities as an effective response to the rise in delinquency amongst working-class boys (Cranwell, 2007). Moore (2014, p. 143) suggests that

From a child's point of view, an adventure playground is the kind of idea that Just William and his outlaw cronies might have dreamt up if asked to invent a place for cheeky childhoods, where kids manage their own space and spend time doing "nothing". Possibly, in such a space they would even tolerate Playworkers (the other part of the equation of adventure playground success), as trustworthy, down-to-earth, adults-on-their-side, ready to help imagine and carry out the most outrageous plans ten- to 12-year-old boys and girls can imagine.

This form of provision, although having undergone significant changes since its introduction in the years following World War II in England, may be seen as fields of free action for children (Kytta, 2004); disorderly, unfinished *terrains vagues*, chaotic places where children can manipulate materials and the elements to co-create their own spaces for play. The original founders of the AP movement emphasised the need to intervene as little as possible and have confidence in children's capacity to develop their own ideas of play (Lester and Russell, 2013). Ward (1978, 2008) portrays adventure playgrounds as microcosms of a free society, as 'living anarchy', although they are, at the same time, adult-provided institutions of childhood that widen the relational and spatial divide between adults and children (Lester, 2014). There are pressures on contemporary APs to be part of the move towards greater technical interventions into children's lives that are designed to realise future focused outcomes (Lester and Russell, 2013). This has led to a move away from the self-organising, community-based ethos towards spaces that can tend to both romanticise childhood and play and become 'a mechanism through which young citizens are invited/incited to recognize their responsibilities' (Ryan, 2010, p. 771). Today's APs are affected by a range of social policy initiatives towards children, families and young people that are in tension with a more free, organic and emergent approach.

The study playground



The study playground is a well-established inner-city provision that has been in existence for over 30 years. Until recently the AP was locally managed, but over the past 12 months management and day-to-day operation of the playground has been subsumed under the responsibility of a borough-wide non-statutory play organisation. This restructuring has brought some organisational changes to the operation of the AP, and was introduced at a time of public sector funding cuts, although funding for the AP itself, along with other adventure playgrounds in the borough, has been static to date. Whilst this amounts to a funding freeze and has implications for staff pay, terms and conditions and other running costs, it is comparably favourable and due in part to successful partnership working and support for play across the borough. The play organisation has responded by making changes to the staffing structure to ensure the AP can reliably be open at times of highest demand. The CAPS study took place within this context, and inevitably took the

current state of the organisation as a starting point.

As one of the AP workers comments at the outset, she was new to working on the playground and things inevitably take time to settle, to build relationships, become familiar with routines and so on. As such, the research project was felt to be timely as it supported organisational changes and re-visioning of the playground. The collaborative partnership with the play and playwork team at the University of Gloucestershire grew out of a shared desire to extend beyond traditional ways of thinking about APs as a physical site marked by a range of structures and activities designed to promote 'adventure' towards a more nuanced appreciation of the ways in which play spaces emerge from the relational conditions of the environment. It should be stressed, therefore, that this analysis does not attempt to present a universal account of playwork (if there ever could be such a thing), but it is contingent and emergent, reflecting the overall approach and methodology of the study itself.

APs, as a part of the wider public sector, are caught up in ever-tightening control and accountability systems. Quality has become the great cliché of the reform of public services (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005), held to be a measure of approval but often reducing practices to technical tasks. 'Quality' is not a neutral term; it carries overtones of the modernist desire to classify and measure, to tame and subjugate the role of professional judgment (Dahlberg *et al*, 2013). The discourse of quality cannot grasp or adequately represent the complexity of perceptions, emotions and actions that arise through playing; nor can it appreciate the multiple bodies, materials, symbols, and affects that are brought together in playful encounters. The study follows a particular line of enquiry that acknowledges 'quality' arises not through meeting externally derived standards and outcomes, but from deepened insight into practice (Dahlberg *et al*, 2013).

The Playwork Principles (PPSG, 2005) are the formally endorsed statements of service ideal for playwork, and they describe the central function of playwork as being to 'support all children and young people in the creation of a space in which they can play' (PPSG, 2005). Yet this is generally underexplored in practice terms, with the focus falling on qualities of the physical environment that are assumed to be attractive to children. Planning play environments is often based on assumed cause-effect relationships; for example, by naming a space an 'arts and crafts area' and equipping it with a range of art materials, the space then affords creative play. This often taken-for-granted sense of space may be troublesome as it conceals the possibilities that a more nuanced appreciation offers.

Conceptual framing

Over the past few decades a 'spatial turn', based on a range of theoretical and practical perspectives, emerged across the social sciences and humanities and gained increasing significance as it:

...questions categories like 'material', 'life' and 'intelligence' through an emphasis on the unremitting materiality of a world where there are no pre-existing objects. Rather, all kinds of hybrids are being continually recast by processes of circulation within and between particular spaces. The world is made up of all kinds of things brought in to

relation with one another by this universe of spaces through a continuous and largely involuntary process of encounter (Thrift, 2006, p. 140).

Traditional accounts of play (and generally playwork) approach play as a *thing*, something that is distinct from other behaviours and that can be classified, categorised and given an identity, thereby fixing the identity of the players as individuals exercising their own personal preferences. From this perspective, the playworker can account for play in a fairly technical manner and make judgments about the effectiveness of things in the environment to support play (including themselves).

The intention of the research project was to introduce different ways of thinking about space. At the heart of the approach was the recognition that spaces are always produced through encounters (Massey, 2005), and as such are ever open to the possibility of new arrangements and formations. Spaces are always in the process of being made and transformed. The adventure playground is not merely a physical bounded container for play-as-activity but rather is a relational space, produced by the on-going, contingent performance of everyday and ordinary experiences, habits, routines, etc., and their accompanying sensations, emotions, meanings, and actions. It is, by its very nature, an environment in which children and adults are thrown together, and have to get on together. The act of playing is an intra-active event, an in-between-ness (Holford, 2013). Intra-activity implies mutual constitution in which there is no clear divide between discourses, things, bodies and matter; they are always in a relationship which affects each other (Barad, 2007). Play is not something that is found inside individual bodies but is a configuration or assemblage of bodies, materials, symbols and so on, all with a desire to produce a momentary space in which the collective power to act in a certain pleasurable formation is increased and finds expression in what we might term playing. Thus a 'play space' does not pre-exist encounters between disparate organic and inorganic materials. Playful encounters emerge through a range of spatial tactics and manoeuvres enacted by bodies, materials and so on each with a particular force and desire.

While this is always spontaneous and unpredictable, playwork seeks to support and be responsive to the conditions under which playfulness thrives, to appreciate and work sensitively with the rhythms, flows and patterns of movements and encounters. It is also a political and ethical action: APs have the potential to be environments in which the desires of children to become different can take precedence, where children need not be subjugated to an adult desire to progress in quite the same way as in other institutions of childhood.



Such spaces of difference defy technical and instrumental measurement, although they may still be amenable to capture through the process of meaning- or sense-making: a reclaiming of the idea that professional judgments are carried out in relationship with others and not established through an externally imposed set of pre-determined performance measures or standards. In this context, and adapting from Dahlberg *et al* (2013), meaning-making may be described as the continuous and open process of constructing and deepening understanding of the 'play space', and in particular playwork practice, to establish a sense (perceptions, emotions, thoughts) of what is going on. The notion of movement is significant here, and the ways in which bodies and materials, in their movements, become entwined and entangled or fall apart. Thus the playground may be understood as constituted through, productive of, and permeated with flows and forces that establish ever-changing patterns, habits, rhythms and moods. In the context of this approach, habits are not seen as forms and mechanisms that inhibit consciousness and freedom. Rather they are formations in which life and its surrounding support systems become entangled to gain a sense of ease and greater capacity to act with minimal effort (Grosz, 2013). Habits are the creative foundations that establish the possibility of stability in a world that is always changing; they serve 'to organize lived regularities, moments of cohesion and repetition, in a universe in which nothing truly repeats' (Grosz, 2013, p. 219).

Paying attention to such habits and routines reveals they are the foundations from which playing emerges (or is constrained) as adults, children and young people tentatively expose and explore the environment through different ways of moving and relating, creating new juxtapositions of bodies, symbols and materials, simply to enliven the productive possibilities of the space. The intention of the action research was to bring a lens to bear on these everyday rhythms and the ways in which this playground is 'always a process of becoming, seething with emergent properties, but usually stabilised by regular patterns of flow that possess particular rhythmic qualities whether steady, intermittent, volatile or surging' (Edensor, 2010, p. 3). Such rhythms may also be expressed as an 'atmosphere' which suggests something vague and ephemeral, defying rational explanation or

description, that ‘hesitates on the edge of the unsayable’ (Anderson, 2009, p. 78) but at the same time produces singular affects and events.

Implications for research design

Rather than trying to categorise and classify, or seek causal explanations and universal truth claims, attention switches to the performance of the moment, becoming no longer an exercise in accuracy of terms, explanations or attribution of some utilitarian or developmental purpose that occurs outside of the play. There is always an excess or overflow that cannot be fully represented and which escapes attempts to reduce lived experience to linguistic forms (Thrift, 2008). Playing is a performance that has no pre-existing identity, but is emergent, and the gaze of the researcher is brought to bear on bodies and things co-joined in situated action (Harker, 2005). A performative turn sees a shift from the paradigm of representation to techniques of performance - verbal, bodily and multi-modal - within the social (Dirksmeier and Helbrecht, 2008); for a short time the performance abolishes the order of the normal course of life. Presenting play as performance creates further challenges: each act of playing occurs in the present as an unpredictable, joyous assemblage of disparate bodies and materials, a singular event each with its own conditions, forces, flows and time-structure.

Paying attention to moments of playing requires methods that can work with the messiness of everyday life rather than seeking to reduce it to static and fixed experiences. A performative approach, as with playing, eschews certainty and the positivist/scientific protocols of research to allow in the experimental and creative (Dewsbury, 2009). Research is always beset by its own limitations, but the difference in a performative stance is that it thrives on this failure and uses it to develop a critique on the limitations that traditional methodological protocols might impose on what can count as knowledge, questioning the ways that we currently configure the world (Dewsbury, 2009).

Focus is turned to everyday, embodied and sensuous practices, of movements and flows, and the forces of things to affect and be affected (Horton and Kraftl, 2006). As such, rather than being designed simply to gather data to answer standard research questions, the methodology here is intimately connected to practice with the intention of developing approaches that start to get to grips with the complexity of co-creating environments to support playing. It is nomadic and wandering, following the movements of bodies as they weave their relationships with other bodies, materials and affects, being sensitive to the emergence of moments and ‘thing-flows’ and to be able to elaborate relationships that produce a map and not a tracing (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988). Perhaps a different form of participative research is taking place here, an inversion ‘of “participant observation” to “observant participation” ...to emphasise the serious empirical involvement involved in non-representational theory’s engagement with practices, embodiment and materiality’ (Dewsbury, 2009, p. 327). It is a mode of participation that opens up a ‘generous sensibility, one that might be capable of re-enlivening out affective engagements with others’ (Popke, 2009, p. 84).

Action research

A turn to the performative and more-than-representational nature of playing offers a more affirmative position for the purpose of this research project. Attention is drawn towards methods that can attempt to do justice to the nature of playing itself; to get at those moments when bodies and materials come together to create space/time with a particular force and style that happens as it is being played out. An action research approach is ideally suited to working with the messiness of the production of an AP. It recognises that playworkers are immersed in the co-production of the space through their daily actions and relationships with each other, children, materials, histories, symbols and so on. In action research terms they are co-producers of situated knowledge that is:

- not always readily amenable to representation – an ‘ineffable knack’ or the ‘expertise’ of local practices;
- not shared by outsiders who will always know ‘less than’ the participants.

Action research does not see the adventure playground workers as the subjects of research but as co-researchers; all are currently working to co-create an environment that is designed to support children’s play. It aims to give all participants equal power in the partnership (understood as a way of affecting and being affected to increase the power of all components to act in collective desirable ways); it values their expertise and situated knowledge, accepting that a playground is a multiverse or multitude of stories and affects and not a single universe. By doing so, it also recognises that the flow and direction of the research is unpredictable and organic in nature, creating perhaps some dilemmas and tensions which in themselves can be a focus for collaboration (Banks *et al*, 2013). One of the unique features of action research is that the cyclical process is fluid, responsive and grounded in creative action rather than being a series of well-defined steps that are rigorously adhered to come what may. It also recognises that while practices may be bound by habits, routines and customs, there is no intrinsic necessity for them to be performed in this way, it is simply the way in things have turned out and they could (and still can) have turned out differently. Hence action research can actualise different ways of doing things (Drummond and Themesll-Huber, 2007) by working with and reconfiguring the situated knowledge and practices of the playworkers charged with the everyday production of the playground. It is more than a ‘problem-solving’ approach or a tool for the organisation to increase productivity and performance; it is not intended to support a pre-existing agenda but is experimental in nature, seeing what more can be done to understand the complexity of playground production and by doing so create mutual ‘understanding and learning in and through dialogue, critical reflection, and action’ (Maurer and Githens, 2010, p. 269).

As such, the project was designed to be one of experimentation and co-investigation, beginning with a series of facilitated workshops to introduce key concepts and methodologies that led to the production of a range of artefacts, or what is referred to as ‘playwork documentation’ (after Dahlberg *et al*, 2013) that could be made available for critical scrutiny to see what more might be discovered. Such methods are a form of visualisation; ‘what is documented does not represent a true reality’ (Dahlberg *et al*, 2013, p. 155) but is just one of many perspectives that can be taken to explore the ways in which play spaces appear in the environment. Recognising this, the artefacts themselves were co-constructions of everyday relationships between adults and children and included:

- Mindful observations of children’s play that show the content of playful expressions and what children do and say, their relationship with the environment and so on. It makes what happens on the playground concrete and specific, recognising each moment of playing is a singular event. This material is then available to reflect on playwork practice, the interventions that playworkers make in producing space for play, and more directly in children’s play itself.
- Stories of practice that highlight some of the joys, tensions and dilemmas associated with playwork and that add to the learning, culture of practice and repertoire of responses within the community.
- Mapping spaces to portray how they are produced and continually reproduced through children’s playful movements and appropriation of time/space. This form of playwork documentation is a creative process drawing on performative methodologies that extend beyond the written word and includes mapping the environment and recording flows and forces of movements, video and photographs, sound recordings.
- Sharing this documentation in different ways: at face-to-face meetings, prompted by existing documentation or the discussion; in journals and other shared artefacts (for example using post-it notes on maps); in online blogs and discussion fora.
- Applying critical and reflexive thinking: subjecting the diverse range of artefacts generated to continuous critical scrutiny through iterative conversations supported by the participation of facilitators to listen to and guide the meaning-making process.

Meaning-making is not an abstract process but one that works with the materials and experiences of everyday encounters in the play setting in order to study and make meaning from actual practice (while recognising that in fact there may be many meanings or understandings), and not attempt to reduce what is going on to fit preconceived categories (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2013). This again highlights the value of mindful observation and sense-making as ways of constructing practice rather than fitting it into a pre-existing and pre-determined frame. This did not preclude the value and application of concepts, but these were placed within the context of practice and helped to elaborate or embellish the ways in which practitioners could relate both inwards and outwards to maintain the focus on the playing child.

Presenting the findings

The action research process led to an emerging methodological approach to considering the co-production of an adventure playground that included the use of mapping, stories, observations, blogs, sound recordings and review sessions to look at the collection of artefacts and what they might reveal. The overall intention of the approach was to encourage playworkers to think about the ways they get on with their everyday practices and routines and to consider why these things matter and what they add to (or detract from) co-producing the adventure playground. It was emphasised at the outset and throughout that it was not expecting practitioners to present themselves as ‘perfect’. Once open to this level of more detailed scrutiny, things emerged and it was here that skilled facilitation extended thinking by offering new tools to help make sense of stuff and develop a space in which curiosity, uncertainty, questioning, ‘what if?’ and so on became an integral

feature of the process. The research strategy was inductively co-constructed and interpreted; it inevitably drew upon the stories, observations, and creative artefacts of all research participants and used these continually to shape the next steps in the process. Rather than extracting a representation of the world from the world (Beyes and Steyaert, 2011), the approach adopted here engages with the performance of everyday life as 'we are slap bang in the middle of it, co-constructing it with numerous human and non-human others' (Thrift, 1999, p. 297).

Thus 'data' were not inert or detached from the process, waiting to be thematically analysed by external researchers and their coding systems (MacLure, 2013); the artefacts were much more vibrant than this and were thoroughly embedded in practice and action, themselves changing as they were used in further documenting, reflecting and discussion. Given all that has gone before, it is not possible or desirable to present here any definitive account, but in order to explore the ways in which concepts, methodologies and practice are entwined a number of overlapping vignettes are introduced. These are singular examples, one event among many others that are used to activate details (Massumi, 2002). They all matter, not in any scientific manner, but rather to set ideas in motion without any pre-determined end or destination. Each vignette foregrounds the complex and often contradictory nature of the ways in which adults and children go about producing the playground. They mark an experimental approach to the environment by looking at life on the move, and offer a multi-layered and multi-textual analysis of the everyday stuff and relationships that occur in the setting. It should be highlighted at this stage that the representation of these vignettes in this format runs the risk of separating out processes, products and methods that are inextricably connected; stories contain relationships and movements through space, maps are a creative and emergent form of capturing flows and movements and could be seen as another form of 'story-telling'. Collectively these unfinished artefacts reveal an intricate picture of the rhythms, habits and patterns of playground production that when subject to critical scrutiny and action make it possible to consider ways of producing more equitable distribution of time/space for playing.

Story-telling

At the outset, story-telling was used to disclose relationships with the environment in the workshop sessions, during team debrief sessions and casual encounters in the daily routines of the playground, and in the individual blogs in the Moodle¹ (online) group specifically established for research participants to keep in touch and share ideas and experiences between workshop sessions. Story-telling is a way of making the 'problems, anguishes, joys of practice become comprehensible' (Bolton, 2001, p. 7). It marks the use of an aesthetic imagination (drawing on sense, feelings, intuition) in creating material that 'provides a screen as wide as life itself, drawing upon all of a practitioner's faculties' (Bolton, *ibid*). Attempting to reflect only upon what actually happened, and then to subject such an account to rational questions such as 'how might I have done it better' unnecessarily restricts what might be explored and what more can be said. The following extract from a playworker blog is one example of this process:

¹ Moodle is an open source learning platform used by the University of Gloucestershire

One summer afternoon, some children had been investigating around the edges. One boy emerged with the red plastic slide from the kit house that is scattered around. He said "Look what I found! What can I do with it?" Several other children followed him. They decided to take it up the water tower structure. They worked together to lift the slide up the structure. They got to the level where the rope hangs over the sand pit. The group of 4-5 boys involved were all very competent climbers so I decided to watch from a distance what happened next. They pushed the slide out over the end of the structure above the sand and two of them sat on the slide, stopping it from falling over the edge with their weight. Then after a countdown, the boy at the back got off and the slide dropped with one boy still on it. He grabbed the rope just in time to stop himself falling along with the slide. The level of excitement was something I've not seen before on the playground. He climbed down. The other boys congratulated him on surviving. He said "That was sick! That was sick you know!" One of the other boys said "We could do this every day!" The first boy said "I didn't know I was going to make it! I thought I was going to die!"

This story begins to reveal not only the actions of the children but the affective relationship between adult, children, materials, and so on that constitutes the assemblage of 'walking the slide'. Witnessing and recalling the story is an exemplary tale; a constructed description that contains a hint of the shared collective melange of thrills, fear and laughter and so much more.

Playwork organisations may be portrayed as a collection of stories; they are the means by which 'an organisation's past, present, and future coalesce: stories and dialogue about our history; stories and dialogue about who we are; stories and dialogue about who we can become' (Boal and Schultz, 2007, p. 426). The idea of playwork as a network of stories shared in everyday informal contexts counters the technical and hierarchical lines of accountability and information sharing that are prevalent in many organisations. Play organisations are brought into being by the stories they tell. It becomes a medium for individuals to articulate and share their explicit knowledge, their implicit understandings and feelings, thereby adding to the collective wisdom of the setting. Developing a habit of story-telling contributes to the emergence of a 'constructed voice' (Belenky *et al*, 1986) through telling stories that sparkle with passion and authenticity (that is, informed by deep understandings of the complexity of adult relationships with children's play). It represents horizontal relationships among playworkers and children rather than detached, supposedly objective accounts, as the following blog posting illustrates:

A 6 year old asked me to play on the swing with her. She got on. She was fearless and clearly well practised. She asked me to push her off from the sloped platform- it wasn't possible without my falling off the platform. She sulked. I asked if she would feel happy if I had a go on the swing. She said yes. I had a go. She got onto the platform and boarded² the swing - fearless. There we were swinging. She said "look no hands". I had a little heart attack. She was only staying on by balancing on my legs and we were swinging high and fast (as far as I'm concerned, although she complained it was too slow). We had several more goes like this of me swinging and her boarding. One go she boarded the swing and then didn't hold on. She started to fall off! I shouted at her to hold on and I clung to her. She was laughing. I stopped the swing. She sulked until I

² Boardering is where a person jumps on to an already occupied moving swing

agreed to have another go. I said "Are you going to boarder?" She said yes. I said "Only if you are going to hold on this time". She said no. I said "But you might fall of and die". She said "No I won't. Dying isn't real anyway"! One of the best quotes about risk and play I've ever heard. Eventually she convinced me she wouldn't boarder me if I had another go (obviously I knew she would). She did. She didn't hold on again. This time she started falling again and it was clear she was doing it on purpose and was actually totally in control. She'd been pretending last time too. She was REALLY testing and pushing my comfort levels. I had a fantastic time and I think she did too.

A focus on story-telling also promotes alertness and much closer attention to what may appear to be routine events. Spaces are formed by the assembling of 'stories-so-far', by the histories, feelings, desires, etc. that people bring to the encounter; the spaces produced through this contribute to 'stories-in-the making' (Massey, 2005), the on-going ways in which children and adults seek to co-create moments when things are more enjoyable. Such events are moments of instruction, and reveal the tacit conventions, habits and expectations that orientate children's and adults' movements. It also initiates a process of 'staying still', to closely observe the patterns, modes of movements across other people and things and consider the 'mutual co-shapings and entanglements that happen in particular locations' (Banerjee and Blaise, 2013, p. 2). But life is always on the move, and stories-in-the-making are the basis for more stories to come. This is a transcript of a story co-related by two of the playworkers:

B: Another thing that happened just after you left – that group of girls – went out en masse to pick up their little brother and then came back; we could hear massive noise coming down the street – 're, re cycling, re, re-cycling' and then they came into view wearing the green new borough re-cycling bags and came into the playground asking if anyone else wanted to join 're- re-cycling'.

A: When they come in – there's about 10 of them, they just change the dynamic of the playground – the one's that I like are at around 3.30 you get the ones who say 'we're the older ones' and they dominate the space, but when they come in it's like a balance – maybe because they go to a single sex school – but they are more playful I find – I don't see then particularly caring about male attention – so there was plastic all over the playground.

B: The little brother was sort of walking behind 'are you part of this gang' – 'no – I put my bags in my rucksack because they might be useful'.

These stories stand alone as illustrations of the multiple ways which adults and children co-create moments in which the environment becomes a little more vibrant. Too often such singular events are subject to rational explanation, used to extrapolate universal understandings. This was resisted, as far as possible; such stories are tentative and present just one point of view among many:

The awareness that we are not representing reality, that we make choices in relation to inscribed dominant discourses, makes it easier to critically analyse constructed character of our documentation and to find methods to counteract and resist the dominant regimes (Dahlberg *et al*, 2013, p. 156).

Throughout the project the intention was to work with the creations and generations that the task of story-telling promoted. Thus stories were not an objective product of research, but a method that was a 'partial and intersubjective critical experience' (Gallagher, 2011, p. 53). It is not an accurate account or re-telling, but a creation of a current state; it is a starting point for inquiry rather than a 'place on which to fix pre-existing categories and meanings' (Gallagher, *ibid*). It involves labour, having to work hard at recalling the minute details associated with the environment and the seemingly mundane routines and practices going on. 'Mere description' is a high and rare achievement (Latour, 2005) yet there are often concerns that simply describing may mean that there is something missing. Does description require explanation? Latour (2005, p. 137) responds with the claim that if 'a description needs explanation it means it is a bad description'. Good descriptions offer the chance for sharing points of view, to be caught out and surprised by the affective registers within the account'. It is a process of addition, both in terms of intensifying feelings and extending connections, rather than subtraction which reduces the event to a pre-existing category or explanation. These small stories of practice are important for their particularity and in their singularity may come to trouble grand narratives and universal explanations; they act as 'entry points to the working out of conceptual ideas in local contexts' (Lorimer, 2003, p. 214)

Mapping

Adopting a 'nomadic' approach to the research process invites participants to wander the environment and pay attention to events and encounters between disparate materials, more-than-human encounters between people and things (Banerjee and Blaise, 2013). To support and extend research possibilities, participants were introduced to another form of 'playwork documentation' through the process of mapping as an alternative way of representing space and begin to connect the landscape with specific feelings and memories. In this context, mapping is more than an exercise in accuracy, plotting and fixing things in time and space, what Deleuze and Guattari (1988) refer to as tracings, but is concerned with possible relationships and new ways of looking at disparate materials and phenomena and the ways in which they move and encounter through the environment. It pays attention to the flows and forces of materials and the rhythms they produce, allowing for thinking differently about individual and collective experiences (Martin and Karembeis, 2103). Again, the map is not detached from the context of its creation. It has multiple entrances and points of view and functions as a pragmatic exercise of discovering more about how things work (De Freitas, 2012).

The process of mapping was introduced early into the project as an individual and collective exercise. As one playworker commented on the opening activity:

the bits that I drew first – or the things that were easiest, the things in the corner, were spaces where I had some kind of interaction there – so the easy bits were the woodchip pile because I did loads of shovelling and moving around of woodchips, or the little hang-out bit – I would go and tip the water off the chairs so they could sit out there – things that are to do with the functional setting up or the preparing of the space, maintaining of the space as well as the playful interaction – the way you know it as a playworker – so the willow is easy to locate because we weaved it and watered it – so it's not just what is actually there but what is there in my mind.

When individual accounts were collaboratively assembled, the co-produced map of the playground was invested with personal and shared affects and meanings. There were spontaneous outbursts of collective memory associated with particular topographical details, for example, the 'dip' (a small hollow in the middle of the playground) was a place that 'had a whole load of mats in it and we played play fighting – when they were doing wrestling and everything' (workshop session transcript) but also recognition of the relational qualities of the environment. This map has now become a central feature of playground practice, with playworkers adding post-it notes with significant observations, feelings, experiences and so on on a regular basis and using this for continuous review. This exercise also established the foundation for further mapping practices and some examples of this are given here.

Discerning playworker movements

The mapping exercise arose from a workshop discussion about the movement and level of contact between playworkers during a session. Each playworker was plotted on a rough map of the playground at the start of the day at 3.30pm when the playground opened (see Diagram One). After each subsequent 5 minutes, timed with a stopwatch, they were then plotted again on the map. At each observation a note was made on a separate sheet of what the playworkers were doing (see Diagram Two). This was carried out over a one hour forty six minute timespan.

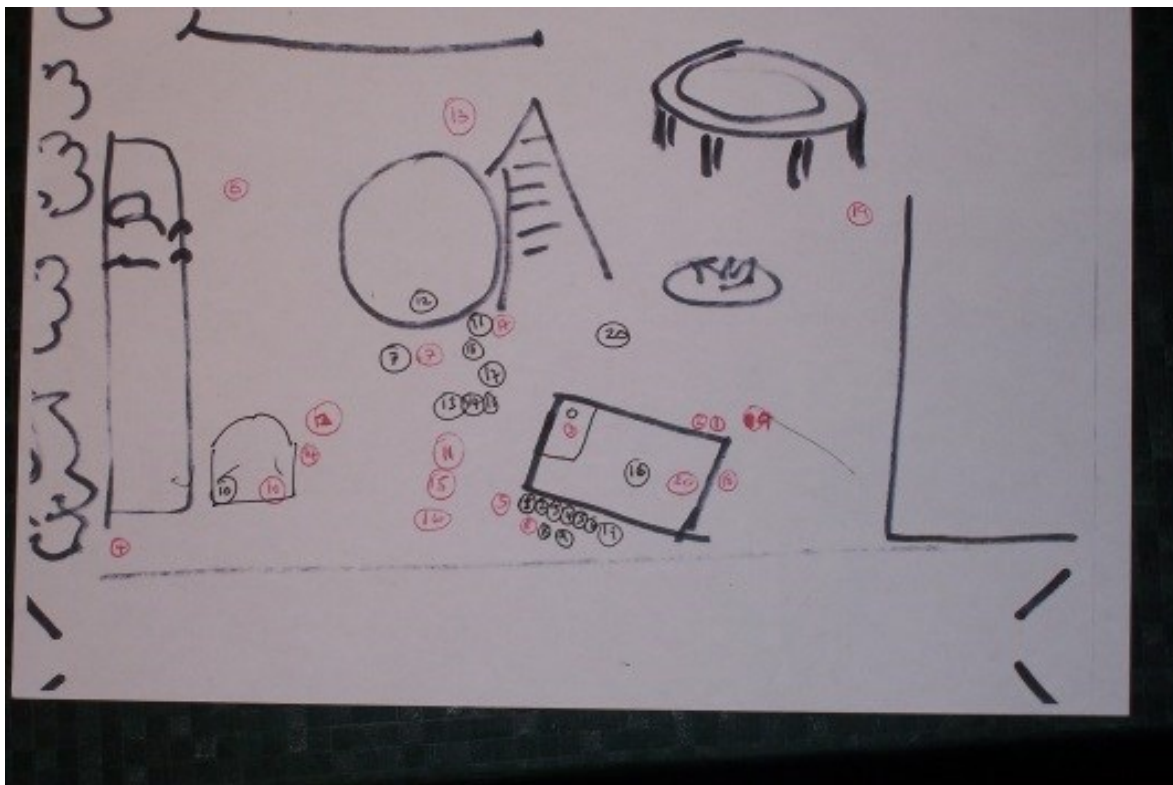


Diagram One

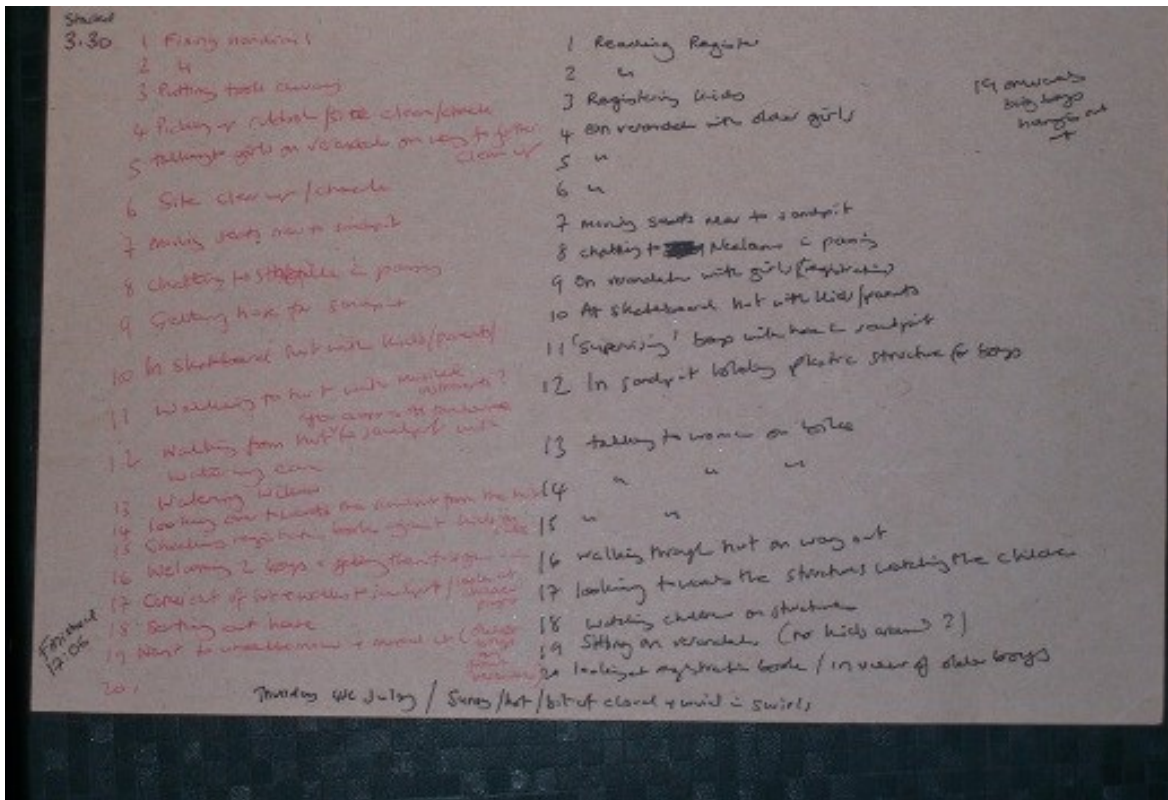


Diagram Two



Diagram Three

The individual numbered plottings were then linked up as can be seen in Diagram Three to illustrate the playworkers flow of movement across the playground over that time period.

This process only tells a limited story in that 4 minutes and 59 seconds of what they were doing is missing from each 5 minute period. This detailed exercise led to a number of further observations about playwork positioning, for example:

SL: Do you have spaces where you sit as a regular sitting space?

A: Sandpit.

B: Also on the edge of the round swing.

A: I try to sit where I can see the whole view of the playground. Sometimes children invite me....or I can see spots where there are other children around.

SL: So if you take yourself off, as part of this movement, to sit here and prop yourself there...

B: Yes - that's where we were last week. When we were sort of keeping eye on the veranda area but in a quite chilled out way. And there were some little ones around there. They know we are there. They weren't using that swing before and now they are.

SL: I think that's interesting – I think playworkers should sit – and do exactly what you are doing – sitting gives you that sense of pausing, looking,

B: Those young children that seek out interactions with you, it opens up that little space for whatever it is they might want to say to you or whatever conversation... they might want to chat about. Its showing you've got time. You are not always busy. And if you are busy they can help you if they want to. There are those pauses that they can fill. You are waiting for that as well.

Discerning children's movements

This is an example (Diagram Four) of one of the observations on the playground which captures children's relationship with the environment and the flow of movement of two girls aged about eight over a period of twenty minutes. The observer heard them cry out 'Oh no...some boys are on the swing!' and their first position, represented by a thick blob, is plotted to the left of the playground hut. One then grabbed the other's arm and they raced off to where some containers are on the site and then under the zip wire on to the big structures. The girls were constantly in motion whether running between the structures and around the playground or climbing up the towers and scrambling over nets or up and down the ramps. The observer could not always see exactly where they were all the time especially when they disappeared behind the structures and could not hear what they were saying to each other until towards the end of the observation when they were close enough to be heard. They then went to their rucksacks and got out what looked like two sticks (later identified as toy wands) and one of the girls collapsed on the ground in the long grass (represented by the large blob to the right of the hut) as though she was dead. The other girl stood over her trying spells to re-awaken her and then a younger boy came over and said 'I killed one death eater!'



Diagram Four

Diagram Five is a further example of playworkers mapping movement of children and playworkers on the playground. It captures 15 minutes of movement.

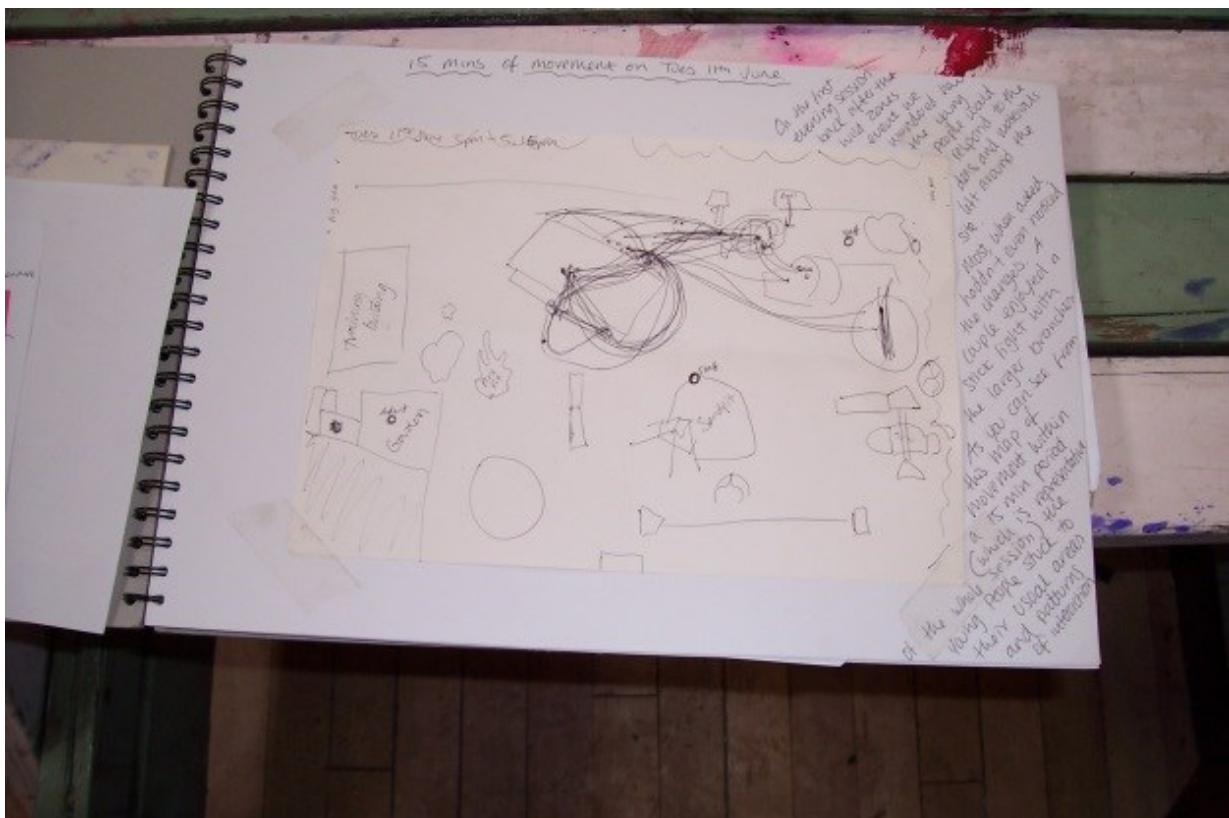


Diagram Five

As a playworker commented about the practicalities of mapping movement:

It was in the middle of an established session – a ‘groove’ was happening so it didn’t feel like there would be anything sudden – sketched as it was happening – so it was ‘they have gone to get the ball’, ‘They have come back’. They have gone there – so it was as it happened – it is an indication of the overall movement – some kids would have stayed there the whole time – the adults are marked on but I stayed in the same place of course – on the edge of the sandpit – B was gardening there – A was round there but didn’t stay in the same place – so if there is one line it is one kid’s movement, a thick line might be one kid around there a lot or a group of kids moving. The notes are a summary of the significant movements.

The use of diagrams or alternative forms of representation can be a ‘creative force, inventive and experimental attempts that disrupt the taken-for-granted ways of seeing the world, a creative act of proliferation and rupture’ (De Freitas, 2012, p. 557).

Other methods

Alongside the approaches outlined above further non-representational methods were also introduced to the analysis. Contrary to the practices adopted in many childhood institutions in which there is a primary focus on noise reduction and promotion of children’s quietness (Gallagher, 2011), a playground is likely to have a different audible feel, as noted by Gallagher (2011, p. 47):

I live close to a primary school. When children are in the school’s playground, the noise that they make is clearly audible if my windows are open. On a typical weekday, at around half past eight in the morning, the high-pitched voices of a few children can be heard. Gradually, more voices join the fray, building steadily into a raucous cacophony, a swirling mass of laughter, shouts, chirps and screams reverberating around the playground— a peculiar variation on the dawn chorus.... Sometimes it seems joyful and carefree; listening closely one can hear yelps of delight and triumphant cries of ‘tig!’ At other times, the sound seems disturbingly aggressive, the riotous buzzing of an agitated swarm. Its intensity can also be troubling.

Not only are there distinctive sounds associated with playing, but these, as with children’s movements, may have their own distinctive rhythms and spatial locations. As such, playworkers were encouraged to pay attention and where possible record the ‘background noise’ of the playground. The use of audio recordings has gained increasing attention in research studies, as Gallagher and Prior (2013, p. 2) argue:

audio recording produces distinctive forms of data and modes of engaging with spaces, places and environments which can function in different (and complementary) ways to more commonly used media such as written text, numbers and images.

Audio recordings or ‘soundtracks’ can provide insights into the distinctive audible features of spaces and hold the potential to complement more traditional forms of data by adding a sensory dimension and the ambience of an environment. During one evening session A did try experimenting with recording background sounds and to identify these against specific

positions on the playground. Audio recordings were placed on Moodle and other playworkers invited to identify the particular locations of recordings. Further short recordings have been produced but there is potentially much more to be done with this approach.

Accompanying this, experiments have been carried out using video technology, a method now commonly used in qualitative research (see for example Jewitt, 2012) and most notably applied in this project by setting up a video camera in a fixed position and recording child and adult movements over a period of time. This has been viewed at both normal speed, and in fast-forward mode as a way of looking at the flow of movements within the playground. Again, there is considerable potential in this approach for adding another distinctive component to playwork documentation.

Discussion

The examples of artefacts in section 6 begin to offer a fascinating insight into movements and spacings; mapping children's movements during the first 15 minutes and plotting playworker positions during a session reveals glimpses of some of the flows and forces across the playground, and when superimposed on to the large map produced by the group foregrounds the everyday ways in which the playground space is continually produced and reproduced. Adding further tracings to this map reveals other forces and undercurrents which may escape general notice. But this is not merely an exercise in detection; the methods are intricately connected to practice, provoking an inquisitive stance that questions current arrangements to see how they may include and exclude children from using the environment to create their play spaces. They open up practices to see what more might be done, using 'what if?' as a form of intervention. However, these are not random acts but draw on shared experiences, intuitions, sensations, movements, affects and so on to see what more can be done to keep the environment open to multiple playful possibilities; they are always experimental in the sense that there is no pre-determined outcome to be achieved.

At this point a very specific micro example is introduced that illustrates how these artefacts combine to reveal the ways in which habitual practices, of adults and children, may inhibit movement for some children. On the basis of this closer examination, a small intervention was made – a 'what if?' to potentially disturb this routine, with the intention of trying to open up space to more possibilities.

The chairs

This story shows how the approaches used in the research project played out through a set of chairs in ways that became quite significant. It weaves its way throughout the data over a period of time, across numerous artefacts such as photographs, videos, mappings, transcripts of sessions and blogs. The story begins on the very first day, when the playworkers were asked to take three photos of the 'playspace' that held particular meaning for them. One of the playworkers took a photo of some chairs on the veranda by the entrance to the building. Introducing the photo to the others in the group, she said

I've got seating which is my special place. I find that this is a meet and greet place and I'm always standing there greeting the children as they come in. This is the place where the children catch up, what's happened in school, gossiping, lots of playing going on, rough and tumble, chasing around and also it is the last point where everyone meets and says good-bye to each other.



Others agreed that the spot was special, calling it the 'heart' of the place, and noting also the significance of leaving rituals enacted here at the end of the session. Alongside this sense of specialness sat also an awareness, expressed at a later session, that the older users often dominated the

area, congregating there loudly and boisterously filling the space, and this was daunting for people wanting to enter the building (although there was another door, this was the main and most visible one). The space was clearly important to groups of teenagers, as highlighted in a mapping of flows that one of the playworkers did during a 15 minute period when only the teenagers were there.

These conversations and other artefacts highlighted the significance of what might be considered a very ordinary space and very ordinary happenings on adventure playgrounds, and this is why it is of interest in this research. The mapping of the flows and movements is intended as more than an exercise in accurate representations of reality, plotting and fixing things in time and space, rather it is concerned with possible relationships and new ways of looking at disparate materials and phenomena, allowing for thinking differently about individual and collective experiences. The photograph above is seemingly devoid of vitality, understood as a collection of material objects onto which the viewer may impose meanings drawn from their own histories and experiences of such spaces. When the site is in operation and the young people move through and occupy the space, each event might be seen as an assemblage of material and symbolic objects, bodies, desires, affects, histories, relationships and so on – a unique moment where elements combine to produce 'what happens'. Previous and subsequent events may be similar, but will never be exactly the same. These repeated yet different events become a part of the habits of the space as a whole, understood as the way things are, and also offering the opportunity to be different (Dewsbury, 2011).

The seats themselves contributed to the production of a space that was experienced by the playworkers as both special and problematic. It is unclear how long these seats had been there; it is assumed that they had been there long enough for their positioning to become a key and habitual element of the assemblage that produced that space. Part of its significance lay in its position as threshold; one of the playworkers spoke about often feeling that she had to ask the youths to move away from the door, and another spoke of two younger girls not wanting to use the door where the teenagers hang out. So the positioning of the chairs is significant: being at the threshold of the building affords both the space as meet and greet and the space of intimidation for others wanting to enter the building.



Following her mapping of the flows of movement that highlighted the significance of this area, one of the playworkers said, 'From that I just thought I wonder what would happen if we just move the chairs'. This 'what if?' question was raised in the research sessions, introduced not as an experiment in the sense that there is no pre-determined outcome to be achieved,

but draws on the histories, intuitions and perceptions of the playworkers. This open-ended questioning coincided with others deciding to use the chairs as setting for a planned family open day event, and the chairs were moved in preparation for this from the veranda to form a circle on the open grass in preparation for this before one of the playground sessions. One of the playworkers describes the reaction of one of the regular teenagers to this moving of the chairs:

So the gates were opened, the first person who comes in is D., doesn't notice they are on the grass, just sees the chairs are not on the veranda, 'A! Where are the chairs!', started to move chairs back, they are not light chairs and he didn't want any help, sat there waiting for someone to come, lying down and dominating that space, reclaiming his territory ... he wants that to be his space, ... it just shows how important that area is to him and all those social interactions there which includes the door – which is probably the one staff use most to go in and out of the building, the door nearest the office, probably the door where you've had most discussions with him. That's his preferred space.

So, two of the seats were moved back almost immediately, and the others were left where they were. The initial moving took place in June, and a discussion with the playworkers in July, just before the summer holidays, returned to the topic. It seemed that not many of the regular children had used the chairs out in the open grass, although one chair had been

moved towards the swing, lost its back and become part of the structure – something to land on as a step up to the platform. The story was told of one boy fairly new to the playground who had put his bag on a chair in the new location, sat there for a bit and left it there, with the playworkers commenting ‘so it must have felt like a neutral, unthreatening space with the chairs out there in the open’. However, the chairs had been used a lot by parents with younger children, with some of the older children asking why younger ones had started coming more. There was a feeling that although the teenagers still congregated on the veranda, ‘there is not the hubbub there was before’, and there was also a feeling that the presence of the younger children and parents modified the behaviour of the older ones to an extent, although there were still displays of aggression that co-existed alongside the adults and younger children.

These changes cannot be attributed solely to the moving of the chairs in any predictable, causal or replicable manner. The moving disturbed some of the taken-for-granted assumptions about the space and how to be in it, both for staff and users, and this happened alongside all the other aspects of the production of the playspace such as the open day family event, the playbus visits, and perhaps a shift in the ways the playworkers paid attention to the flows and forces in the space as a result of the research project. Throughout the project, the chairs featured frequently and to an extent came to embody the approaches explored. At the end of the summer, for example, two blogs posted in early October mentioned the chairs again. One is reflective, musing on the significance the chairs had assumed:

The chairs have taken on a new arrangement with one or two near the building, two under the stage and two still out in the middle (where they've been for most of the summer). Reading the day book and registers, and realising that some of the older young people were back, some of the middle-age group from summer were still coming, [after school club] Friday visits still had a generally younger primary school-age group, and parents and littlies were visiting at weekends seemed to reflect the more dispersed and smaller grouping of the chairs! They have taken on a story-telling role for me.... is it true, I wonder?

The other, two days later, acknowledges the shift of the seasons and the end of the school holidays and the possible return of the older users, leading to a decision to (re)place some of the chairs in the social spaces used by them:



Back to school. Some of the older term time users popped in to see who was around. Myself and A decided to move some of the chairs back into the places they like hanging out, to help them feel welcome after a summer of not being there. We put a seat back on the

veranda (not right next to the door though) and several back under the ramp/arch. We left the rest in the middle.

Another playworker commented on her blog that play spaces change all the time, uploading a video clip of a young boy cycling on the veranda in the space where the chairs had been, commenting:

Why does playspace change? Because why not 🤔

The chairs were raised again as a significant symbol of the journey the playworkers had felt they had made at a final meeting to review the process and plan a conference workshop. The research had begun at a time of great transition for the playground, and it contributed to framing the way this was approached, particularly in terms of mindfulness and openness to emergence and possibility. This section closes with some extracts from that discussion that highlight this and the shift towards an experimental, 'what-if' approach rather than seeking solutions.

it was a great opportunity that this came upon us – we had a new team, full of ideas, sharing practices, challenges that we faced and experimenting – with the chairs – and it helped, I feel like that helped a lot.

Cos it was like the dynamics that are here don't need to be set – we can make interventions into those dynamics without having to get physically into the middle of fights, shout our heads off, tell people off – we can make changes to the dynamics by making changes to the site – that's part of the job we do

...

'what if' is an important part for children on the playground, the regulars.

...

There is a less kind of solution focus to problems – more just exploratory, more grappling rather than a mission to solve.

Conclusion

The overall point to be made from the research is that mappings, recordings, observations, diary entries, photographs and so on, as collective playwork documentation, begin to reveal and analyse the flows and rhythms of the playground in more detail, bringing to the surface some taken-for-granted assumptions, habits, routines and so on, making them available for critical scrutiny.

It made me appreciate moments more. It is always a nice surprise when something happens but I think this has made me a bit more aware when something is on the brink. Like when someone comes up to you and says 'Have you got the broom?' 'Yeah?' but people don't normally ask for a broom - what's going on? More sensitive to those moments and being aware of when you are in a special moment and reflecting on it and sometimes you are a key player in the moment and appreciating that and appreciating the more shared aspect of the play... it is important that I am here and this moment probably wouldn't have happened or at least not in this way without my presence and I

have been able to bring things into this frame that might not have been there but it is still child led and I am still going along with them and appreciate how that is co-created - noticing that more.

The move towards a performative approach that adopts a ‘more-than-representational’ stance to the environment shifts focus from seeking to establish cause-effect relationships between individual subjects and inert objects to matters of practice that emphasise relationality, movements, entanglements and flows of heterogeneous materials. Meaning making is ‘a play or dance of different agentic bodies/ matter, trying to make themselves intelligible to one another (Lenz-Taguchi, 2010, p63). Such documentation is not an explanation or truthful representation but becomes an exemplary event which leads to further possibilities for connections and experimentations. Recordings are more than ‘things’; they become part of the process of widening attention and bringing all senses to the everyday intra-actions and formations that occur within the playground (and beyond).

As the story of the chairs wonderfully illustrates, positioning playwork as intra-active (and not something apart) in the co-creation of the adventure playground reveals the possibility of acting responsibly with the mutual entanglements of bodies, things, histories and so on. Responsibility, in this sense, means paying attention to the affects, forces, flows and intensities that contribute in an affirmative manner to create play spaces and acting in the here and now to maintain the possibility of different possibilities emerging. The following comment made by one of the AP playworkers during a workshop session provides a fitting conclusion to the report:

I think it is that crucial bit in this big old adult world that’s not a particularly nice place to be a lot of the time, for adults or for children, just having this little bit – like an oasis – of something else – it is just a different space that hasn’t got the pressures of, or tries to resist the pressures of money, time, family sometimes and all that stuff.





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