



This is a peer-reviewed, post-print (final draft post-refereeing) version of the following published document:

**Russell, Wendy K ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5028-6428> (2012) 'I get such a feeling out of... those moments': playwork, passion, politics and space. International Journal of Play, 1 (1). pp. 51-63. doi:10.1080/21594937.2012.656921**

Official URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21594937.2012.656921>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21594937.2012.656921>

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/2951>

#### **Disclaimer**

The University of Gloucestershire has obtained warranties from all depositors as to their title in the material deposited and as to their right to deposit such material.

The University of Gloucestershire makes no representation or warranties of commercial utility, title, or fitness for a particular purpose or any other warranty, express or implied in respect of any material deposited.

The University of Gloucestershire makes no representation that the use of the materials will not infringe any patent, copyright, trademark or other property or proprietary rights.

The University of Gloucestershire accepts no liability for any infringement of intellectual property rights in any material deposited but will remove such material from public view pending investigation in the event of an allegation of any such infringement.

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR TEXT.

This is a peer-reviewed, post-print (final draft post-refereeing) version of the following published document:

**Russell, Wendy K (2012). *'I get such a feeling out of... those moments': playwork, passion, politics and space*. International Journal of Play, 1 (1), 51-63. ISSN 2159-4937**

Published in International Journal of Play, and available online at:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/21594937.2012.656921>

We recommend you cite the published (post-print) version.

The URL for the published version is

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21594937.2012.656921>

### **Disclaimer**

The University of Gloucestershire has obtained warranties from all depositors as to their title in the material deposited and as to their right to deposit such material.

The University of Gloucestershire makes no representation or warranties of commercial utility, title, or fitness for a particular purpose or any other warranty, express or implied in respect of any material deposited.

The University of Gloucestershire makes no representation that the use of the materials will not infringe any patent, copyright, trademark or other property or proprietary rights.

The University of Gloucestershire accepts no liability for any infringement of intellectual property rights in any material deposited but will remove such material from public view pending investigation in the event of an allegation of any such infringement.

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR TEXT

**‘I get such a feeling out of ... those moments’:**

**playwork, passion, politics and space**

Wendy Russell

*Department of Leisure, Faculty of Applied Sciences, University of Gloucestershire,  
Gloucester, UK.*

Provide full correspondence details:

Wendy Russell, Snr Lecturer in Play and Playwork, University of Gloucestershire,  
Oxstalls Campus, Oxstalls Lane, Gloucester GL2 9HW, UK.

Word count: 7249

Author's post-print version

## **‘I get such a feeling out of ... those moments’:**

### **playwork, passion, politics and space**

This paper offers an analysis of playwork using the triadic spatial analyses of French Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre. It explores the way UK playworkers talk about the purpose of their work and how they navigate the dialectics of use and exchange value, control and agency, power and resistance, alienation and authenticity. Part of the dialectic lies in attempts to rationalise activity and the production of space in order to arrive at totalising truths that are expected to lie therein; alongside this other ways of knowing can be found in the playful moments of *lived space* and these defy representation. The paper concludes by suggesting that an appreciation of playwork spaces as *terrains vagues* may offer an alternative that co-exists dialectically with rational, planned *conceived space* and dominant practices in *perceived space*.

Keywords: play; playwork; space; Lefebvre.

Playworkers in the UK work with (mostly) school-aged children in a wide range of settings including adventure playgrounds, play centres, out of school care schemes, play buses, holiday play schemes, play ranger projects (streets, parks and open spaces), schools, hospitals, refuges and prisons (Russell, 2010). Trying to articulate what playwork is, and what is unique about it, has exercised the sector since its inception, particularly when this has addressed the question as to why playwork should receive scarce public resources. The diversity of settings in which playworkers operate compounds this tension. The case study informing this paper is an inner city, open access play centre; that is, the project does not offer formal childcare and the children, aged between 6 and 14 years of age, are free to come and go as they please. Projects such as these, which evolved from the adventure playground movement, tend to be funded in areas of high social and economic deprivation, and this brings characteristics

that differentiate this form of playwork from, say, that in a school-based out of school care scheme in an affluent suburb, or a rural mobile play service. Such play projects operate on the edge of chaos (Battram, 2008), with an ever-present threat of violence that challenges descriptions of play as innocent, or a civilising force, or inherently morally good (Henricks, 2009).

Official statements about the principles of playwork (for example Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group [PPSG], 2005) and playworkers' functions as described in the National Occupational Standards that underpin playwork qualifications (SkillsActive, 2010) have the effect of homogenising these diversities. Contemporary generic descriptions of playwork and its value tend to start from assertions about the importance of play in terms of children's development and well-being, from the perspectives of, for example, evolutionary psychology (Hughes, 2001, 2006), developmental psychology (Brown, 2003), or depth psychology (Sturrock & Else, 2005). Theories of playwork have developed during a time that Rose (2007) terms the century of psychology, when the impact of psychology permeated almost every aspect of social life including everyday language, having a significant impact on the kinds of people we are today and the way we understand the world and ourselves (Rose, 2007).

These perspectives on play and playwork are valuable and have provided an academic basis for the development of a language and method that playworkers can use in their discussions both within and beyond the sector. Whilst they have illuminated some aspects of what is unique about the playwork approach, their evolution and appropriation have also given rise to a number of problems and contradictions. This article seeks to provide a fundamentally different perspective for theorising what playworkers do and what their value might be. It returns to an analysis that was prevalent in the 1960s and 1970s (Cranwell, 2007; Conway, 2005) but that has become

rather unfashionable today: that of politics, specifically the politics of space. The Playwork Principles describe the role of the playworker as being “to support all children and young people in the creation of a space in which they can play” (PPSG, 2005). The work of French philosopher Henri Lefebvre (1991) offers an analysis of that space that takes account of the social, cultural and political context for playwork.

This paper is partial in a number of ways. Firstly, it explores the analysis of one element only of a broader research study. Secondly, it makes no claim for universal applicability, since the research is an ethnographic case study, although it has been placed within the context of both social policy affecting playwork and the documented history of playwork’s theory and practice. Finally, I am myself an instrument of the analysis given my thirty-something years of immersion in the sector and my own attempts at sense-making during this time, and this will inevitably lead to partiality in analysis.

The research has as its focus an ethnographic case study of a team of six playworkers working in an open access play centre in an inner city area in the Midlands of England. The analytical framework used is Cultural Historical Activity Theory. This approach, developed initially from the work of Vygotsky and influenced by Marxist thinking, offers an opportunity to explore playwork as an activity within its social, cultural and ultimately political context. Activity Theory starts with the premise that all activity is object oriented (it is performed for some purpose) and it is mediated by ‘tools of the trade’. For playwork, this might be the physical site, equipment and materials, but also includes symbolic tools such as the explicit and tacit rules both for the play centre and for playwork as a collective activity system; the monitoring forms that playworkers have to complete for inspectors, managers and funders; and the ways in which playworkers talk about their work. In addition, activity systems reflect the four

processes of labour identified in Marxist theory: production, distribution, exchange and consumption. The framework is essentially dialectic: activity systems develop over time as a result of attempts to resolve inherent contradictions and it is for this reason that Activity Theory stresses the importance of the historicity (Engeström, 1987, 2005).

The case study has included an intensive period of fieldwork, recording of post-session debriefs during which staff complete monitoring forms required by funders, and semi-structured interviews with each member of the team. It is contextualised within an exploration of both contemporary and historical articulations of playwork through both the literature and through playworkers' own voices. This latter has included previous research and public discussions, together with semi-structured interviews with seven people who were playworkers prior to 1990, a historically significant moment in English playwork's development when the implementation of the Children Act 1989 brought playwork settings into the registration and inspection programme of first Early Years inspectors and then the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted).

This paper focuses on the ways in which playworkers, both past (PP) and contemporary (CP), articulated the purpose and value of playwork; that is, in Activity Theory terms, it explores playwork's object, drawing mainly on interview data.

### **Playwork as the production of space**

I think we provide a space ... it's an accepted place (Carla, CP).

A striking characteristic of the responses of both the pre-1990 and the contemporary playworkers to questions regarding the purpose of playwork was that these were articulated in the language of space. At first blush, this may seem obvious or indeed a

small claim for the value of the work; yet the importance of the space offered was that, in the words of Tanith (CP):

It's one of the few spaces where they are not annoying somebody, they're not told off for being a child and playing.

The overriding message was that playworkers offer something children need and value that they cannot get anywhere else. These ideas could be broadly grouped into two themes: firstly, that the design and organisation of urban space and its institutions (including the home/family) were not always supportive of these children or their play, and secondly, that the spaces offered opportunities for the dominant adult-child power relations to be reframed. Running through these themes, and in dialectical relationship to them as well as to each other, were also ideas about progress, hope and redemption: playwork projects offered these children the opportunity both to feel better now (in terms of the enjoyment of playing) and be better in the future (in terms of social skills, citizenship or, in some cases, realising a talent or potential).

### **“It's the only place they had to go” (Ken, PP)**

A frequent justification proffered by the play sector for the existence of separate spaces for children to play is that they compensate for restrictions on children's independent mobility and opportunities for merely 'playing out' (for example, Hughes, 2001; Sturrock, Russell & Else, 2004). This is not a recent phenomenon; indeed the pioneer of the UK adventure playground movement, Lady Allen of Hurtwood, pointed out over 40 years ago:

The fact has to be faced that modern civilisation interferes with a hard and heavy hand in the spontaneous play of children (Allen, 1968: 11).



Lefebvre offers a particular dialectical, spatial and historical perspective on what Allen terms ‘modern civilisation’ that is pertinent to this enquiry. For Lefebvre, space is not a mere neutral container, it is *produced* by the interrelationships between and among physical and social elements including the actions of individuals and institutions. These interrelationships are political because they are representations of power relations.

In his history of space, Lefebvre (1991) describes how the development of cities has separated people from nature. This is not a nostalgic or romantic but a political statement. At a primitive level, people’s survival needs were satisfied through an immediate engagement with nature; progress and the development of societies brought with it a division of labour through specialisation together with the development of a superstructure to organise those specialisations, including political systems (the state), a means of exchange (money) and the production of spaces to support production, distribution, exchange and consumption (cities and transport systems). Specialisation, in the form of paid labour to produce commodities (goods, knowledge, services), separates labour and survival needs: workers are paid for their labour and they can then buy the necessities of life. In this sense, survival is mediated through labour and money rather than being an *immediate* relationship with nature. This gives rise to the fundamental Marxist dialectic between the use and exchange value of commodities. This dialectic can be seen in the literature from national organisations in the UK. The Playwork Principles (PPSG, 2005) define 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... For playworkers, the play process takes precedence and playworkers act as advocates for play when engaging with adult led agendas.

Yet playwork’s institutions also seek to show to potential funders how playwork can

help to meet policy agendas, as this example from London Play (Sutherland, 2011: 5) shows:

There is mounting evidence to suggest that play is an effective preventative solution to obesity. In London in particular, where childhood obesity is a particularly acute problem, and could cost the public purse up to £111m a year if it continues unchecked, the case to invest in play is even stronger. To put that into perspective, just one per cent of that would fund ten playworkers and buy a couple of new play areas in each and every London borough each year.

Although Lefebvre had little to say about children, urbanisation and the development of the state mode of production have had a significant effect on children's relationship with the outdoors. For Lefebvre the absolute space of nature has been replaced by the abstract space of the capitalist city which is designed and built to support the processes of production, distribution, exchange and consumption. Abstract space is contradictory in that it is both homogeneous and fragmented, with institutions of state power at the centre (government, banks, commerce, law, etc.) and those excluded from the processes of such decision making at the periphery, creating what Lefebvre (1972, cited in Shields, 1999: 178) terms

A collection of ghettos where individuals are at once 'socialised', integrated, submitted to artificial pressures and constraints ... and separated, isolated, disintegrated. A contradiction which is translated into anguish, frustration and revolt.

The production of space is an on-going endeavour, it is 'always under construction' (Massey, 2005: 9), through the dialectical relationship between three aspects, or 'moments', of space (Lefebvre, 1991). As a method of enquiry, dialectics aims to avoid dogmatic assertions. Concepts and phenomena can be understood as existing in a dependent but contradictory relation to their opposites (for example, the concept 'adult'

needs the concept 'child' in order to make sense). Such enquiry leads to the development of new ideas and tools; in this way dialectical analyses also need to encompass historicity.

### **Lefebvre's spatial triad**

An appreciation of dialectics is necessary in order to avoid separating out Lefebvre's triad as three discrete and independent kinds of space, since they exist in a contradictory and interdependent relationship with each other. The triad comprises:

- (1) *Representations of space*: also termed *conceived space*, this is the mental space of cartographers, planners and architects. The power residing in this space is seen in the ways in which people's daily lives are governed through urban design, as well as in the symbolic power of buildings, institutions and transport systems. This is where we see the ghettos described above, including the 'islands' of children's institutions such as home, school and play centre.

It is *conceived space* that dominates the literature regarding playspace design (for example, Shackell, Butler, Doyle & Ball, 2008). The naming and zoning of play areas and their content (the chill-out zone, the basket swing, natural play, loose parts, etc.) pre-suppose their use and value based on adult rational understandings of play and its purpose.

It is also *conceived space* that dominates generally the playwork sector's theorising. Attempts at representing the essence of play or playwork produce knowledge that becomes both commodified and reified. As a decontextualised (de-spatialised) focus of enquiry, play becomes a discrete and bounded activity, a thing, something that (only and always?) happens in discrete and prescribed places and times with expected outcomes, rather than something that is

interwoven into the rhythms and routines of daily life. This reification process can also be seen through the ways in which concepts from seminal works such as Hughes (1996) and Sturrock and Else (1998) on the affective environment are taken up and repeated often such that they become truths to be enacted technically.

- (2) *Spatial practice*: also termed *perceived space*, this refers to the everyday routines of life as experienced through the senses. Much of this, in Lefebvre's analysis, is about the humdrum of daily struggles, and it is the site of alienation. Alienation arises when daily life becomes disconnected from the meaning of life. It arises through the three-staged evolution of human activity where an initial spontaneous response becomes rationalised and organised and eventually commodified (Kelly, 1992).

It can be argued that this pattern is evident in the historical development of playwork. The pre-1990 interviewees spoke of their work in terms of it being new, and of the sense of being a part of an all-consuming, alternative way of being with children:

It was like the wild west, and it could be very exciting ... it was just the anarchy of it, ... the immediacy, the energy (Ken, PP).

Alongside this, however, they also acknowledged that there was much bad practice that would not be permitted in today's regulated forms of playwork. The development and professionalisation of playwork has taken place through rationalising and standardising it as a disembodied collection of technical procedures laid down in the National Occupational Standards (SkillsActive, 2010), or the requirements for Ofsted registration and inspection, or the monitoring forms required by funding agencies. Playwork, together with many

other public sector occupations, has been drawn into the marketisation of public services where performance is measured in this technical manner (Adcroft and Willis, 2005; Banks, 2007). The playwork sector's institutions try hard to valorise its existence through showing how it can speak to social policy agendas; increasingly these agendas, whilst using the discourse of supporting all children to "reach their potential" (for example, Allen, 2011: xiii), particularly those "at high risk of experiencing poor outcomes" (*ibid.*: 91), also talk of "social investments with good rates of return" (*ibid.*: vi). The Government's White Paper on teaching makes explicit the real purpose of education:

What really matters [in the education debate] is how we're doing compared with our international competitors. That is what will define our economic growth and our country's future (Department for Education, 2010: 3).

Yet if we thought this was all there were, it would be a somewhat depressing oversimplification, since *conceived space* and *perceived space* do not exist in isolation from Lefebvre's third dimension of space: *lived space*.

- (3) *Spaces of representation*: also termed *lived space*, this is the space of disalienation, of moments of escape from and resistance to the hegemony of *conceived* and *perceived space*, where people feel truly and authentically alive; it is the space of art, love, imagination and of course play. At the same time, this may also be seen as the space where resistance is experienced by others as disruption or even violence. At the time of the fieldwork, the Play Centre was in receipt of funding to work with specific children whose behaviour was understood as challenging. The policy construct of 'at risk' children, embedded as it is in the language of psychology (Rose, 1999, 2007), sees the deficiency as residing in the individual child, and the purpose of the intervention is to

normalise the deficiency. A Lefebvrian analysis would place the violence in the space rather than in the child, and might see it as a form of immediate and spontaneous resistance to the struggles of daily life experienced in the institutions of the family and school that are related to the power of the state mode of production (neoliberal capitalism) through *conceived* and *perceived space*. As Gareth (CP) said:

they should be able to come on feeling as though they want to disrupt the place. They should be allowed to do that... And they wanted to disrupt something, so give them something to disrupt. Give them me to disrupt.

A key feature of *lived space* is that it defies the kinds of representations found in *conceived space*: it cannot be planned, provided, measured or reduced to exchange value. It cannot be represented in the modern, rational science of certainty, determinism and absolute truths and thus sits uncomfortably with current discourse of evidence-based policy that provides the basis for public funding. This dominant paradigm of rational and technical interventions has been challenged in other areas of work with children and young people from ethical and political perspectives (see, for example, Banks, 2007; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Moss, 2007); it is particularly pertinent in relation to working with children at play given play's liminal relationship between the rational and the irrational (Sprioso, 1989), reality and irreality (Winnicott, 1971), and what Sutton-Smith (1999) refers to as the relationship between the adaptive and ludic dialectic, between equilibrium and disequilibrium. In their play, children deliberately create tensions and uncertainties motivated by the exhilaration this provides (Spinka, Newberry & Bekoff, 2001; Sutton-Smith, 1999), making life worth living for the time of playing. The difficulty with this theorising, if attempts are made to explain

it within *conceived space*, is that it becomes impossible to predict outcomes, or even ways of playing; it requires that playworkers be comfortable with not knowing, and, in their planning, “leave room for disturbance and uncertainty” (Lester and Russell, 2010: 10). This presents both a challenge and an opportunity for understanding what lies at the heart of the playwork endeavour.

In *conceived space*, planners and architects design cities in order to facilitate the processes of production, distribution, exchange and consumption, creating fragmented islands of specialisms that then need routes to link them. This can also be seen in the growing (increasingly homogeneous) institutions of childhood: the home, the school, and the varieties of after school recreation or activity institutions (Rasmussen, 2004), and the increase in traffic in order to take children to and from these islands. The normalisation of this fragmentation, together with the exclusion of children from the processes of production (although not entirely, and certainly not from consumption), renders them increasingly *out of place* on the street (Beunderman, Hannon and Bradwell, 2007).

Attitudes amongst play advocates towards children playing in the street have been and remain contradictory. In the UK there has been a growth in projects aimed at ‘reclaiming’ the streets for children’s play, through streetplay projects, play rangers, and local residents’ action.<sup>1</sup> However, historically, the street was often seen as a site of moral danger, particularly for the urban poor, since children playing unsupervised on the streets were drawn into crime and witnessed the loose morals of adults in the pubs and cinemas (Brehony, 2003). Later, concern about the safety of streets extended to “ubiquitous high speed motor traffic” (Stallibrass, 1974: 255), and Abernethy (1968,

---

<sup>1</sup> see, for example, the Bristol-based ‘Playing Out’ organisation: <http://playingout.net/>

1973: 28) suggested that adventure playgrounds were “remarkably successful in attracting the non-conformist element” and that this “would keep them off the streets and help reduce accidents”.

Similar contradictions were apparent in the interviews. The production and reproduction of the street as an inappropriate space for children can be seen in these statements of interviewees, who expressed this in terms of safety or sanctuary:

We’re turning inner-city spaces into places where they can play safely...’cos they can’t play in their flats, and they can’t play in the streets ... I think it was the beginning then of, you know, ‘streets weren’t safe’, mainly through cars, and I think it’s now exponentially, you know, the paranoia of what goes on out there (Jim, PP).

They don’t feel as vulnerable as they’d be outside on the streets, cos [for] a lot of children there aren’t places for them to play where they feel safe, where they feel comfortable (Tanith, CP).

Safety, in this context, was broader than the dangers of traffic or fear of adult predators or moral corruption. The vulnerability was in terms of aggression or abuse from other people, often other children and young people, particularly bullying, racism or the territoriality of gangs. In addition, it was in terms of the children who did attend keeping out of trouble themselves:

they knew if they were on the street, inevitably they would have got in to trouble, and it would have meant trouble with the law (Ken, PP).

**“It’s a safe space ... you’re seen as being a safe container of that kind of emotion” (Graham, PP)**

Ideas of safety and sanctuary in the interviewees’ responses sometimes referred to the idea of the playgrounds and play centres being a sanctuary away from the often stressful, chaotic and unpredictable home or street lives of the children, despite the ever-



present potential for violence. Interviewees were asked to describe the kinds of children who attended the projects. This gave rise to some emotional responses:

It tends to be those with a lot of emotional shit will access play centres (Tanith, CP).

I now have a map, right? Which I call 'the child map' ... There, she is there, and there is no significant male, changing significant males, prostitution, drugs, death of siblings, der der der der coming off. And then I've got a box underneath that I say "who's involved in this family?" So 'police, social services, der der der'. And then at the bottom I put 'playworkers', with a question mark ... The best thing I can do is a safe haven, where they feel they're safe, they feel solid, they feel they belong, they feel they're cared for (Mary, PP).

You know a lot about the family backgrounds and even then knew it was the tip of the iceberg. And, yes, there were so many, no wonder they wanted to let rip somewhere, and be angry somewhere and have jewellery somewhere, you know, it's not all negative, you know, they need their jewellery as well and the sort of exhilaration and pleasure and all that sort of thing (Carla, CP).

These extracts show the emotional impact of the children's home lives on the playworkers and illustrate the background to the highly charged atmospheres on the projects. Evident in the interviews was a dialectical relationship between hope and despair, being and becoming, empowerment and redemption. Some spoke about "moving children on", or that playwork could empower children to change their own circumstances through giving them power over the space:

Adventure playgrounds were gonna save the world! ... By offering children a different life experience, yeah. By making...by giving them a real place, and a recognised place, and power (Carol, PP).

At other times, interviewees spoke of the benefits of enjoyment in the here-and-now, the value of play in just making things a bit better for the time of playing:

If I can chase a kid and he's happy ... he's laughing at me calling me big nose or whatever and running off and giggling ... you've done something for that child, you've made them happy, even for a split second (Jem, CP).

**“The playground was the only place that would take them” (Carol, PP)**

In addition to the idea of the playspace being a place of safety and sanctuary, several interviewees spoke of it also as a last refuge:

It was almost a sanctuary for the really aggressive disaffected, the only place they can go, you know, they were standing out in the rain because they were banned from every...all provisions that were organised in any way, and we were the last refuge (Jim, PP).

The history of adventure playgrounds shows how the ideas were felt to be particularly appropriate for what Abernethy (1968, 1973: 28) termed “non-conformist elements”.

Such generalised sentiments were more prevalent amongst the pre-1990 playworkers, although the contemporary playworkers did talk about children being excluded from school, or their contact with other local professionals such as the Youth Offending Team. The play centre was also in receipt of funding for two projects to work with specific children, firstly through what was initially called a ‘challenging behaviour project’ but later renamed a ‘play support project’, and secondly an ‘inclusion project’ to support disabled children to attend the play centre. The majority of children on the inclusion register also presented with a range of behavioural challenges, including ADHD (Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder), dyspraxia and autism spectrum disorders. The terminology is of relevance here, since they are psychological notions produced in *conceived space* and constantly reproduced through the daily routines of the play centre, including time spent after sessions completing the monitoring paperwork for these two projects (*perceived space*).

**“It was their place...you were there to facilitate it” (Jim, PP)**

A dialectic that emerged in interviews, albeit with little explicit acknowledgement of the internal contradiction, was that between control and agency, power and resistance.

Several interviewees spoke of how children were free from restrictions that may be imposed in other spaces:

These were spaces where the children had the choice ... it kind of reversed what I thought was the then paramount ... adult dominated agenda (Graham, PP).

It was somehow they'd found that place for themselves, and made it their own, to a very large degree (Carol, PP).

Yet at the same time, interviewees also spoke about the need for containment of some kind. The extract from Carol's interview above continued:

And that was the problem in the struggle, because they burned it down three times, so the issue was who did it belong to?

Lefebvre's spatial triad offers a useful framework for appreciating, but not feeling the need to resolve absolutely, this dialectic. The stated principle of playwork as supporting children's freely chosen play presents a problem for play projects working with the ever-present potential for violence; situating play within Lefebvre's *lived space* allows for an appreciation of the dialectic relationship between this and control that might reside in *conceived* and *perceived space*.

Sometimes control or containment was practised through preparation, organising resources or activities. Usually, resources were set out, or even specific activities planned, but all the interviewees recognised that these were flexible.

If I set something up and it's taken a bit more to set up and they're just not interested, I think blow me, waste of bloody time. But then no, I've got no particular expectations because I just, depends what mood they're in (Carla, CP).

Alongside this were ways of managing the space in an effort to widen access and participation. Several of the pre-1990 playworkers spoke of having to develop strategies for making the playgrounds safe for all children, not just the dominating older youth.

It was used by a small group of older black guys...so much racism that existed that was really, really hard to breakdown ... our first task...was to put out there that the playground was open and it would be safe, basically, ... for anybody to use. Boys, girls, black, white (Callum, PP).

You certainly worked to ensure that each and every type of group could come in and find their space and their stuff ... we dealt with the issues about why a six year old had a right to tell a seventeen year old to back off (Mary, PP).

Some spoke of rules, whether these were formal and explicit or informal and tacit:

They all have to take on board that there is ground rules, they still have to abide by them ... They need boundaries, you know (Kay, CP).

How might the idea of rules speak to Lefebvre's three kinds of space? In one sense, they begin their life in *conceived space*. The ground rules at the case study play centre were developed with the children and this was seen as an exercise in ownership, participation, democracy and citizenship. The rules were fairly standard and were mostly to do with respect, as Carla (CP) said, "general getting on with rules". They were observed, through spatial practices, to varying degrees with different children at different times, with a range of sanctions including a system of warnings and exclusions. These explicit rules operated alongside a range of tacit rules that emerged in *perceived* and *lived space* through the daily practices and relationships between and among children and playworkers.

Three observations are made regarding the dialectic between adult control and children's agency. The first point to make is that power relations inherent in the wider

society were played out in the play projects across stratifications of age, class, status, gender, disability and ethnicity. Yet these were not singular or straightforward. Two white pre-1990 interviewees spoke of their relationships with Black young men, particularly around aggression, gender issues and conflicts between different sound system groups; in both examples the playworkers sought support from key members of the local community to mediate these power relations.

The second point regarding rules and relationships is to do with how issues of power and resistance play out in Lefebvre's *lived space*. Rules are devised in *conceived space*, implemented or not through *spatial practice*, and resisted in *lived space*. The delicious dialectic here is that *lived space* is the space of play, where players can transform the rules of the drudgery or fear of daily life and rearrange the world in any way they wish (Sutton-Smith, 1997). The Playwork Principles, situated firmly in *conceived space*, imply that playworkers should produce a kind of *lived space*, but this is not possible without paying regard to the dialectical relationship between and among Lefebvre's triad of spaces.

The paradox is that play which is supposed to assist orthodox adaptation into that partly indifferent world ... can also become instead a replacement for it, and as such becomes for many a superior form of alternative adaptation. Play need have nothing to do with typical survival oriented adaptation, and yet because it provides such a good time to its participants, it leaves them often happier about their usual life circumstances. So play may be said to have become adaptive by ignoring the usual norms for adaptation (Sutton-Smith, 2005: 5).

So, rules are developed as a part of creating a space where children can play; in their play, children may well resist or subvert these rules. Part of the fun is the uncertainty of how the playworkers might react, *within the safety of the overall ethos of the space*. Unless the rules exist, they cannot be subverted; unless they are taken seriously by the

playworkers, there is no fun in subverting them; without a general ethos of playfulness, the secure frame for resistance falls away. There are many layers to the subtleties of this kind of communication, including playworkers playing with the rules as well.

The third point to make is that the interviewees expressed a genuine affection for the children and young people with whom they worked despite, and often because of, the challenges they presented.

I just found these children so exciting, so amazing and full of life ... I liked their excitement ... they always would surprise you (Ken, PP).

Many interviewees spoke of how difficult the job was: constant monitoring of a space that operated very close to the edge of chaos, pre-empting when they felt the atmosphere shift, sometimes directly being threatened or assaulted themselves. Yet set against this were moments for the playworkers themselves in *lived space*, often very small moments, and what came across in the interviews was a general enthusiasm and passion for the moments when it all seemed worthwhile.

Then the horse decided it wanted to trot and catch up and the horse just kept trotting but he, only being small, was bouncing up and down in the saddle, he was all over the place like this, and he started to laugh. And he just laughed and laughed and there was tears rolling down his face, his head was flicked back sort of literally like that hahahahahahaha, laughing his head off just absolutely like that and I've never seen him so happy, ever (Gareth, CP).

I get such a feeling out of watching children be able to do things their way without even having to...you know those moments when you stop and you think "right, the older lot are over there, got their extension leads, sit and chat and with their music box. That group is over there doing what they need to do in the mud. The others have put all the material down the bottom of the structures there. The others are on the roof marrying each other, whatever. The cardboard boxes are all...yeah? And so and so's brought a bloody funny dog, brought a dog out with them, and someone's

brought a train.” And just that ability to...they didn’t need us in that moment, in those moments (Mary, PP).

These are perhaps the moments when *lived space* is shared between playworkers and children. However, *lived space* defies attempts to be exhausted through theoretical analysis; there is always a part that remains inexpressible (Schmid, 2008). This may explain why these moments were perhaps more evident in the observations than in interviews; during my time at the Play Centre, these moments, often fleeting, were an integral part of every session, moments where playworkers laughed, played the fool, joined in nonsense games with the children, or just stood back and marvelled at children immersed in playing. *Conceived space* speaks to the modern desire to define, explain, classify and discover truths in order to control events. The naming of things and spaces fixes them with a sense of certainty and rightness. It also speaks to the exchange value of playwork in terms of addressing policy agendas. This is not so in *lived space*; here concepts of uncertainty, unpredictability and vagueness come to the fore, together with play’s use value (Lester and Russell, 2008).

This is why such an understanding cannot speak directly to policy, and also why *lived space* has to be understood in its dialectical relations with *conceived* and *perceived space*. The dilemma is not resolved; rather, it allows for an understanding of its existence. Both the pre-1990 and the contemporary playworkers were aware of the importance of moments in *lived space*, although they articulated this in different ways. What has changed, in the space between the earlier days of adventure playgrounds and today is that the logic and precision of space has come to dominate over its vagueness. Adventure playgrounds originally developed in the bombed out spaces after World War II and other vacant lots, and they were understood as rough and ready *terrains vagues*, defined (vaguely!) by Carney and Miller (2009: 42) as

spaces in the city that are empty, abandoned, derelict, in which often a series of land uses have taken place ... terrain vague is seen as space that is free, available, unengaged, limitless, uncertain, roving and temporary.

It may be that an acknowledgement of the value of this uncertainty and spontaneity, of the nature of play and the power of *lived space* both for the children and the playworkers, offers up moments of hope, moments of disalienation from the dominance of *conceived* and *perceived space*.

## **Conclusion**

This article has drawn on analyses using the work of Lefebvre on the production of space in order to foreground an aspect of playwork that has been buried through the dominance of psychology and a technical and rational approach to intervention in children's lives. A spatial analysis highlights the dominance of the rationality of *conceived space*, the humdrum of everyday *perceived space* (both for children and playworkers) and the need to speak to policy agendas through exchange value. This is not a call to speak differently to policy, nor is it a call to apply different techniques to playwork practice. Rather it offers up an analysis of the work that makes space for the importance of *lived space*, both for children at play and playworkers at work.

## **References**

- Abernethy, W.D. (1968, 1973). *Playgrounds*. London: National Playing Fields Association
- Adcroft, A. and Willis, R. (2005). The (un)intended outcome of public sector performance measurement, *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, 18, 386-400. doi 10.1108/09513550510608859



Allen, G. (2011). *Early intervention: next steps. An independent report to HMG.*

London: Cabinet Office

Banks S. (2007). Between equity and empathy: social professions and the new

accountability. *Social Work & Society*, 5. Retrieved from

<http://www.socwork.net/2007/festschrift/esw/banks>

Battram, A. (2008). The Edge of recalcitrance: playwork in the zone of complexity. In

F. Brown and C. Taylor (Eds.) *Foundations of Playwork* (pp. 89-94). Maidenhead:

Open University Press

Beunderman, J., Hannon, C. and Bradwell, P. (2007). *Seen and Heard: Reclaiming the*

*public realm with children and young people*. London: Demos and Play England

Brehony, K. (2003). A “socially civilizing influence”? Play and the urban ‘degenerate’.

*Paedagogica Historica*, 39, 87-106. doi 10.1080/00309230307453

Brown, F. (2003). Compound flexibility: the role of playwork in child development. In

F. Brown, (Ed.) *Playwork Theory and Practice* (pp. 51-65). Buckingham: Open

University Press

Carney, P. & Miller, V. (2009). Vague spaces. In A. Jansson and A. Lagerkvist (Eds.)

*Strange Spaces: Explorations in Mediated Obscurity* (pp. 33-56). Farnham: Ashgate

Publications

Conway, M. (2005). From guerrilla playwork to the centre of government policy on

play? In B. Hughes (Ed.) *PlayEd 2005: what is the future for playwork? The 17<sup>th</sup> play*

*and human development meeting*. Ely, Cambs

Cranwell, K. (2007). Adventure playgrounds and the community in London (1948-70).

In W. Russell, B. Handscomb & J. Fitzpatrick (Eds.) *Playwork voices: in celebration of*

*Bob Hughes and Gordon Sturrock*. London: London Centre for Playwork Education and

Training

Dahlberg, G. & Moss, P. (2005). *Ethics and Politics in Early Childhood Education*. Abingdon: Routledge Falmer

Engeström, Y. (1987). *Learning by Expanding: an Activity-Theoretical Approach to Developmental Research*. Helsinki: Orienta-Konsultit. Published online by the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition, UCSD

Engeström, Y. (2005). *Developmental Work Research: Expanding Activity Theory in Practice*. Berlin: Lehmanns Media

Henricks, T.S. (2009). Orderly and disorderly play: a comparison. *The American Journal of Play*, 2(1), 12-40

Hughes, B. (1996). *Play environments: a question of quality*. London: PlayLink

Hughes, B. (2001). *Evolutionary playwork and reflective analytic practice*. London: Routledge

Hughes, B. (2006). *Play types: speculations and possibilities*. London: London Centre for Playwork Education and Training

Kelly, M. (1992). Obituary: Henri Lefebvre, 1901-1991. *Radical Philosophy*, Spring 1992. Retrieved from

[http://www.radicalphilosophy.com/default.asp?channel\\_id=2191&editorial\\_id=9838](http://www.radicalphilosophy.com/default.asp?channel_id=2191&editorial_id=9838)

Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space* (D. Nicholson-Smith, Trans.). London: Blackwell

Lester, S. & Russell, W. (2008). *Play for a change: play, policy and practice – a review of contemporary perspectives*. London: National Children's Bureau

Lester, S. & Russell, W. (2010). *Thinking about play participant's pack 2*. London: Playwork London (unpublished)

Massey, D. (2005). *For space*. London: Sage

Moss, P. (2007). Meetings across the paradigmatic divide. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 39, 229-245. doi: 10.1111/j.1469-5812.2007.00325.x

Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group [PPSG] (2005) *The playwork principles*. Cardiff: Play Wales

Rose, N. (1999). *Governing the soul: the shaping of the private self* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). London: Routledge

Rose, N. (2007). *Psychology as social science*, London: London School of Economics and Political Science. Retrieved from

<http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/socialPsychology/pdf/Psychology%20as%20a%20Social%20Science%20-%20LSE%20-%20February%2007.pdf>

Russell, W. (2010). Playwork. In T. Bruce (Ed.) *Early Childhood: A guide for students*. London: Sage

Schmid, C. (2008). Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space: towards a three-dimensional dialectic. In K. Goonewardena, S. Kipfer, R. Milgrom & C. Schmid (Eds.) *Space, difference and everyday life: reading Henri Lefebvre*. Abingdon: Routledge

Shackell, A., Butler, N., Doyle, P. & Ball, D. (2008). *Design for play: a guide to creating successful play spaces*. Nottingham: DSCF Publications

Shields, R. (1999). *Lefebvre, love and struggle: spatial dialectics*. Abingdon: Routledge

SkillsActive (2010). *National Occupational Standards for Playwork*, London: SkillsActive.

Spariosu, M.I. (1989). *Dionysus reborn: play and the aesthetic dimension in modern philosophical and scientific discourse*. New York: Cornell University Press

Spinka, M., Newberry, R. & Bekoff, M. (2001). Mammalian play: training for the unexpected. *The Quarterly Review of Biology*. 76, 141-168.

- Stallibrass, A. (1974). *The self-respecting child: a study of children's play and development*. Harmondsworth: Penguin
- Sturrock, G. & Else, P. (1998). The playground as therapeutic space: playwork as healing. "The Colorado Paper". In G. Sturrock & P. Else (Eds.) (2005). *Therapeutic playwork reader I*. Sheffield: Ludemos Associates
- Sturrock, G. & Else, P. (Eds.) (2005). *Therapeutic playwork reader I and II*. Sheffield: Ludemos Associates.
- Sturrock, G., Russell, W. & Else, P. (2004). *Towards ludogogy parts I, II and III: the art of being and becoming through play (The Birmingham Paper)*. Sheffield: Ludemos Associates
- Sutherland, F. (2011). *Childhood obesity – an opportunity for play?* London: London Play.
- Sutton-Smith, B. (1997). *The ambiguity of play*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press
- Sutton-Smith, B. (1999). Evolving a consilience of play definitions: playfully. In S. Reifel (Ed.) *Play and Culture Studies* (vol. 2, pp239-256). Stamford, CT: Ablex
- Sutton-Smith, B. (2005). Introduction. In F.F. McMahon, D.E. Lytle & B. Sutton-Smith (Eds.) *Play: an interdisciplinary synthesis*. Maryland: University Press of America
- Winnicott, D.W. (1971). *Playing and reality*. New York: Basic Books

Acknowledgements: the author thanks all the playworkers who consented to be interviewed and to become research participants. Thanks also to my supervisors, Dr Malcolm MacLean and Professor Mike Collins (University of Gloucestershire), who gave constructive feedback on early drafts and also to Eva Kane and Anna-Lena Ljusberg (both Stockholm University) and Håkan Larsson (Swedish School of Sport and Health Science) for making time to read and feedback on an early draft at a research seminar.