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**Russell, Wendy K ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5028-6428>, Lester, Stuart and Smith, Hilary ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2578-166X> (2017) What do we want research in children's play to do? In: Practice-based research in children's play. Policy Press University of Bristol, Bristol, pp. 245-263. ISBN 9781447330035**

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## **Chapter 14: What do we want research in children's play to do?**

*Wendy Russell, Stuart Lester and Hilary Smith*

### **Introduction**

It is traditional for a concluding chapter to *reflect* on the content of the book and offer comment on meaning and future direction. What is offered here is an alternative optical metaphor, that of *diffraction*. Reflection implies seeking a singular, accurate mirror image of the studies presented here, reducing their multiplicity to more of the same. In this way it establishes a fixed direction for future (re)search in pursuit of a goal of enlightenment about children's play and adults' role in supporting it. In physics, diffraction occurs when waves hit a barrier or a slit resulting in a different movement and patterning. It is a relational phenomenon (or perhaps a phenomenon of relating); a diffractive analysis in research and other forms of knowledge production requires paying attention to patterns of interference. As Haraway (1992, p 301) says:

Diffraction does not produce "the same" displaced, as reflection and refraction do. Diffraction is a mapping of interference ... A diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear, but rather maps where the effects of difference appear.

Extending this, Barad (2007, p 25) suggests diffraction is

an apt metaphor for describing the methodological approach ... of reading insights through one another in attending to and responding to the details and specificities of relations of difference and how they matter.

Multiple readings extend thinking rather than repeating sameness; it is an approach that is generative rather than reductive, leading to more questions but also discerning patterns and potentials.

In putting such an approach to work here, this final chapter draws on concepts from new materialist, posthuman, Deleuzian and post-qualitative approaches to offer an account of the practice-based studies in this book and what these might mean for research in children's play. These approaches have emerged from transdisciplinary work across fields as diverse as philosophy, life and physical sciences, and anthropology (for example, Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2013). They disturb traditional research methodologies (for example, MacLure, 2010, 2013; Lather, 2013, 2015), and have been applied in a variety of contexts including early years education and childhood studies (for example, Lenz-Taguchi, 2014; Taylor and Blaise, 2014) and young teen sexualities (for example, Renold and Ringrose, 2011), but less so to middle childhood play scholarship, although examples are emerging, including Kane (2015), Lester (2013, 2016) and Russell (2016).

The chapter reads these approaches through each other and through theorisations of the social, political and economic landscapes of childhoods, children's play and research in children's play in order to pay attention to the patternings of relations of difference. It also weaves in participants' contributions to a workshop at a Professional Development Event (PDE) hosted by the 'Professional

Studies in Children's Play' postgraduate programme team at the University of Gloucestershire in January 2016. This is an annual event where graduating students present their research to current students, alumni and others in the sector. It was just such an event in 2013 that Professor Berry Mayall attended and gave us the encouragement to publish this collection of studies. The discussion at the 2016 PDE event explored the question 'what do we want research [in children's play] to do?' Responses to this provocation highlighted a number of contradictory hopes for research that were embedded in the professional context of adults working to support children's play. They are used here to provide a loose structure to the chapter, beginning with a consideration of epistemology: what/how we can 'know' about children's play and what different epistemologies *perform*. It then moves on to explore how the process of knowledge production plays out in practice and policy domains, in terms of what the dominant policy and research paradigms might do and what they might exclude. From this, the discussion broadens out into a consideration of the expressed desire for research and other forms of knowledge production not only to understand but to change the world in myriad small ways. Finally, the chapter ends with some further provocations to challenge dearly held assumptions regarding the ethics of the pursuit of knowledge, particularly about children's play.

Insights offered are partial, tentative and unfinished; like the studies themselves they are messy, situated, contingent and incomplete. They are not to be taken as final judgements; what matters is the process of attending to relations of difference, to small specificities as a way of disturbing habitual modes of understanding in order to bring in some of what has traditionally been excluded and to see what more might be said and done.

### **What is to be known?**

This collection, while loosely themed, does not cohere around a single point of organization other than a general interest in studies of children's play, which in itself remains intangible and elusive. Although many of the authors in this book were new to academic research and its associated conventions, they are not novice practitioners, far from it, and they bring a wealth of diverse practice knowledge. For some, their initial desire when approaching their research projects was to prove the worth of their work; thesis supervisors will be familiar with the process of scaling down ambition both in terms of the size of the projects students want to do and in their claims. These studies are small scale; within current dominant research paradigms, that often implies they are less significant than large scale projects that seek to show 'what works'. As this chapter discusses, there is a growing number of researchers interested in developing approaches and methodologies that can work with what becomes occluded in such large scale studies: the details of each situated experience and the differences that become homogenised in headline 'findings'. As such, these studies are concerned with the singular rather than the universal. They pay attention to the messiness, uncertainty and unpredictability of practice, and some of the chapters here certainly do that. In contrast to the still-dominant European-American research tradition, attention is given to micro-processes rather than products. It is practice fieldwork, that is, ways of being affected by what is happening in an open and generous manner (ethical practice). While many chapters apply what may be traditional methods, the approaches are not determined by these: they are experimental (in the sense of trying out something new to see what happens), partial and concerned with practice techniques and materials in order to add to what is known rather than reduce singular events to more of the same. The chapters are produced by being involved in the world, not objective bystanders; as such they are not trying to prove pre-established ideas but to generate or animate new

ideas and practices. They are modest attempts that arrive at '*particular conclusions in particular locations for particular studies*' (Law, 2004, p155, emphasis in the original).

One of the aims of the book is to question the assumption that research sits outside of practice and is therefore subject to different rules. The chapters are representative of practice-based research – that is, they show implicitly and explicitly the dilemmas of practice. Practice in children's play is always a process of (re)searching, an obstinate curiosity; one is always working with the not yet known, never to be fully captured in words or known once and for all. Practitioners' ways of knowing include their sensations, memories, intuitions, insights, perceptions, movements and imaginations, as is shown particularly in the chapters employing more-than-representational methodologies (for example, Williams, chapter 4; Coppard, chapter 5; Fitzpatrick and Handscomb, chapter 9; Dickerson, chapter 6).

The focus on practice-based research in children's play in the UK and the USA implies an adult practitioners' gaze. Whilst this is not a singular, universal gaze (and indeed some chapters in this collection have made efforts to move beyond 'gaze' to an embodied engagement), it is important to pay attention to the material and discursive effects of dominant understandings of the nature and value of childhood and children's play, together with the desires and multiple knowledges brought by practitioners to the research arena. Such desires were apparent in the flip chart notes of round table discussions held at the PDE workshop on the question 'what do we want research to do?', which showed a range of contradictory feelings and responses. Several used metaphors of light to express a desire for clarity of understanding about play, for example:

Shine some light on play and playwork.  
Clarify what play is.

This, together with other statements such as 'prove the importance of play, playwork, play environments', illustrates expectations of research to be able to discover fixed, boundaried, absolute and universal truths and to represent these accurately in language. Others were perhaps more nuanced in their language, using terms such as 'explore, raise questions'. Some, as a part of the 'carousel' process of visiting the flip notes of other groups, added challenges to the expressed desires for certainty. One flip chart sheet had, 'answer questions', to which had been added, ' – whose questions? Generate more questions or change the questions'. Similarly, one comment of 'solve problems' had the additional comment, 'create problems'. Yet another: 'Show results, prove things, disprove things' to which had been added, ' – can research do this?'

The opening chapter of this book briefly considers this last question in terms of raising a challenge to positivism in the social sciences, and this is picked up again here. Building on the Enlightenment principles of reason, science, progress and liberty, positivism in the social sciences applied the 'scientific method' from natural sciences, with the assumptions that knowledge could only be derived from empirical study, that there were deterministic and universal laws of human behaviour that can be objectively measured by rigorous methods and instruments, and that social science should be used to solve social problems (Demers, 2011). Although it has been argued that such a simplistic view hails more from philosophy of science than the actual practice of scientific research, positivism has persisted (Lather, 2005; Demers, 2011), albeit in a more measured form (often termed post-positivism or critical realism) that acknowledges complexity and observer fallibility but

seeks to overcome these by the use of multiple and triangulating methods. In this way, objectivity refers not to individual researchers but to the amalgamated methods; fundamentally, there is still a belief in an objectively existing truth that, although attempts to discover it may be flawed, should still remain the ultimate goal of research.

Two interrelated questions emerge here: first, why is it that positivism has persisted so doggedly in the face of sustained criticism, and second, what does such an epistemology do? Perhaps it has persisted because there is a desire for certainty, as reflected in the hopes expressed at the workshop for research to finally decide what it is that play is. It is far more comforting to think a phenomenon can be known than that it cannot. On a more cynical level, Demers (2011) suggests that government agencies and big business fund positivist research that serves their interest, whereas they are less likely to fund humanist or posthumanist research that is critical of the economic and political status quo, an idea that is revisited later in this chapter.

In addressing the second question, a belief in final proofs and truths relies on a clear delineation of the subject of research: what *exactly* is play? Definitions are useful, and certainly the *process* of trying to agree a definition – something that play scholarship has yet to achieve – is illuminating and enjoyable, in terms of what it says about both substance and perspective. However, defining does more than clarify the phenomenon itself. In order to define, boundaries have to be set, so there needs to be a distinction between 'play' and 'not-play', a distinction that can apply always and only to the play/not-play duality. Play becomes a thing that is 'outside of history and structure, decontextualized but measurable' (Lather, 2005, p 5), separated from the daily flows, messiness and rhythms of children's lives (Lester, 2013). For example, the stories of being a child during World War II told by the interviewees in Willans (chapter 3) show how play was interwoven into everyday movements and routines, such as their meanderings on the journey home from school, playing marbles on the way, or having to hide behind trees to avoid enemy aircraft. In Coppard (chapter 5, <page number>), one of the observers muses on the 'vague land between playing and not playing'.

Boundary-making practices do more than create a play/not-play duality. They also *perform* by excluding other ways of knowing about play. The more precise a definition, the more exclusive it is likely to be. Propositional knowledge progresses incrementally, building on initially tentative propositions until they become basic premises that a community of scholars accepts as given. They are abstractions with their own internal logic. One example of this is the particular understanding of the relation between play and children's development that sees the purpose of play as a mechanism for learning skills needed in adulthood. Despite critiques of the foundational studies making such claims (for example, Smith, 1988; Sutton-Smith, 1997, 2003; Smith, 2010), this basic premise is so firmly entrenched that it will take more than a few academics to dislodge its hold on policy, professional, commercial and child rearing practice. It is evident in the discussions on professionals' understandings of the value of play in Dickerson (chapter 6), Kinney (chapter 7) and Hawkes (chapter 12).

Such continual and self-referential 'upgrading', based on original premises that have become accepted truths, continues to exclude ways of appreciating play that no longer fit the basic premises. Foucault's (1972, p 207) words on trying to define science itself as a thing independent of context (that is, to separate it from its discursive formations and subsequent effects – its 'doings') can apply also to attempts to pin down both definitions of play and its relation to learning and development:

all the density of the disconnections, the dispersion of the ruptures, the shifts in their effects, the play of the interdependence are reduced to the monotonous act of an endlessly repeated foundation.

Perhaps these 'endlessly repeated foundations' occlude what first enchanted practitioners and scholars about children's play. In becoming worthy of scientific study of this ilk, play risks losing its playfulness, its joy, its pure nonsense and its entanglement with everything else that produces everyday life.

The effects of narrow perspectives are not only felt in an isolated realm of knowledge; they matter in terms of adults' relationships with children. As Barad (2007, p 185) states:

Practices of knowing and being are not isolable; they are mutually implicated. We don't obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are *of* the world. . . . The separation of epistemology from ontology is a reverberation of a metaphysics that assumes an inherent difference between human and nonhuman, subject and object, mind and body, matter and discourse . . . what we need is something like an *ethico-onto-epistem-ology* – an appreciation of the intertwining of ethics, knowing and being.

Traditional epistemological foundations and their accompanying classifications, resemblances and oppositions are concerned with a need to verify; these are disrupted by drawing attention to the ways in which something different comes to matter thereby re-configuring and constituting new forms of engagement and relatedness. It is a quest for 'more life ... a particular form of boosting aliveness, one that opens us to our being in the midst of life through a thoroughly ontological involvement' (Thrift, 2008, p. 14).

One further comment remains on the situated knowledges informing definitions of play and the intertwining of knowing, doing and ethics that can be made in relation to the specific definition of play employed by the UK playwork sector. Although not all of the chapters in the book are about playwork, many make reference to the Playwork Principles (Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group [PPSG], 2005), the professional and ethical framework for playwork practice (see Appendix 1 for the full statement). These Principles give the following definition of play as:

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

This definition was formulated to apply to the particular social and political landscape in which playwork operates: as such, it is a clear example of how 'knowledge' is situated. Understood as a code of conduct for the sector, the intention of the Playwork Principles is to fulfil a number of functions including protecting service users, giving credence and professional status, giving guidance to practitioners, and helping to create and maintain professional identity (Banks, 2004). Within this context, the definition of play becomes a formal statement of service ideal that can be useful in terms of resisting expectations from other adults to control or direct children's play towards

particular adult-determined outcomes. Nevertheless, it also creates tensions, as discussed in Jackson (chapter 8), Smith (chapter 11) and Hawkes (chapter 12).

This definition is situated in the dominant disciplinary perspective of the era and landscape where it was formulated, that of twentieth century minority world psychology and its attendant assumptions of the individual child as 'autonomous subject exercising rational agency over both human and non-human others from which they are ontologically discrete' (Russell, 2016, p 197). What is of interest here is to consider what such a definition might exclude. What happens if the human subject is decentred, no longer seen as apart from nature but an entangled part of it? This requires a radical dissolution of the nature/culture binary, the foundational assumption within humanistic, constructivist epistemologies of the separateness of the given (nature) and the constructed (culture).

Disturbing the nature/culture boundary implies a reconfiguring of other comfortable dualities, and in particular that of subject/object (to which might also be added human/non-human; adult/child; play/not-play, mind/body). Furthermore, fixity becomes unseated: phenomena are no longer singular and unitary but nomadic, always becoming (Braidotti, 2013). Barad (2007) coined the term *intra-action* as a substitute for *interaction* 'in order to stress that the actors in a performative relationship should not be seen as distinct entities, acting upon each other from "outside", but as entangled agencies which establish each other as well as being created themselves' (Keevers, 2009, p 20). As Russell (2016, p 198) notes,

At the risk of over-simplifying her [Barad's] work, what this does is radically reconfigure understandings of the ways in which space and time are produced ... 'Play-spaces' ... do not pre-exist independently of their production, but emerge through the intra-actions of bodies, affects, histories, material and symbolic objects and so on. Space becomes relational, dynamic and always in the making.

Many of the chapters in the book specifically consider children's lives spatially, particularly – but not only – those in Part 2, and the two oral history projects (Harris, chapter 1; Willans, chapter 2). Several experiment with ideas from posthumanism, new materialism and performative, more-than-representational approaches that offer different ways of knowing, being and acting. 'Thinking differently shifts focus from what is happening inside individual minds to what is produced within and in-between bodies and materials that constitute the spaces of encounter' (Lester, 2013, p 137). From this perspective, research into children's play focuses 'less on fixed boundaries between play and not-play, this play and that play, good play and bad play, and more on the dynamic flows and forces of those entanglements and the possibility of becoming-different' (Russell, 2016, p 198). It is not a question of what play might mean but how does it work, not with the expectation of a definitive answer but simply being more attentive to the particular and singular set of circumstances from which playful moments emerge.

Such a perspective highlights the entanglements of epistemology, ontology and ethics, something that was apparent from the PDE workshop. Since participants were all practitioners, there was a clear desire for research to make a difference for their practice as well as for children's play itself. In particular, there were several references to influencing policy, a topic to which the chapter now turns.

## Influencing policy

In response to the question, 'what do we want research to do?' many participants, in flip chart comments and discussion, expressed a strong desire to influence the policy process, both in terms of policies directly concerning children and families and broader policies that affect children's everyday lives (for example, town and spatial planning, highways and welfare policies). The relationship between policy and practice is felt sharply in the current political landscape of austerity and the biggest cuts in UK public spending since the beginnings of the welfare state (Slay, 2012), with children's play services being especially vulnerable to local government cuts (McKendrick et al, 2015). Comments included 'help us articulate and advocate what we do', 'inform and influence policy and policy makers', and 'provide evidence'. These three statements offer slightly different positions in the research, practice and policy tension triangle (Lester and Russell, 2008), from finding ways to 'represent' what play practitioners do (and, by implication why it matters), to influencing policy processes (which is more than merely 'proving' value), to the contested concept of evidence itself. In both the USA and the UK, the turn towards evidence-based policy has meant a shift away from critical research that challenges the inequitable status quo towards a resurgence of positivism in qualitative research (Lather, 2015; Edwards et al, 2016). Evidence is required to show which interventions are most effective – and cost-effective – in addressing identified social problems. Such positivism employs what St Pierre (2015, p 76) terms '1980s methodology' and its attendant concepts of reliability, replicability, validity, triangulation, data coding, audit trails, inter-rater reliability and so on, with the 'gold standard' being the randomized controlled trial and its assumptions of 'causation and final truth'. Whilst such tools can be useful, they 'only answer certain kinds of questions' (Bristow et al, 2015, p 128), implying other forms of 'evidence' can also 'count'. As Edwards et al (2016, p 1) point out:

this assumption that every problem in society has an evidence-based solution is part of a modernising, new managerialist approach to governance in which social values and moral issues are reduced to technical rationality, cut adrift from political debate involving interests and power, while social justice, material conditions and social inequalities are obscured from view.

Nevertheless, no matter how rigorous, reliable and replicable the methods used, it is not only evidence that influences policy. The significant body of work on policy networks and advocacy coalitions highlights how the policy process is rarely driven by rational choice and is much more likely to be incremental (building on slight shifts from what has gone before) and open to influences from other interest groups (Hudson and Lowe, 2006). As Voce's (2015) story of the English Play Strategy and Lester and Russell's (2013) account of the Welsh Play Sufficiency Duty illustrate, what influences agenda setting and the other messy, iterative and interdependent processes in policy development and implementation depends on myriad and often unpredictable events, connections, disconnections, relationships, ideologies, interests, influence and power resources (in the form of political and legal authority, information or finance) as well as 'evidence'. Play advocates can have different roles to play in terms of promoting different forms of value for their practice: as Kinney describes in chapter 7, policymakers may focus on instrumental value of play services, but a case can be made also for intrinsic and institutional value (Holden, 2006). Play advocates need to find ways of articulating all three (see Matthews et al, chapter 13 for an example). The argument made here is that more-than-representational and diffractive methodologies can help enliven the drab accounting



of linear and technical 'what works' evidence and can also open up the cracks to expose what these methods exclude.

Some models for impact evaluation, albeit those at the lower levels of standards of evidence (Bristow et al, 2015), emphasise the need to identify the theory behind the interventions. Known as theory-driven approaches to evaluation, these include Theory of Change (Fulbright-Anderson et al, 1998) and Realist Evaluation (Pawson, 2006). Although both these approaches would fit in the 'post-positivist' camp, they do perhaps allow for more critical approaches that can make visible basic assumptions and what they exclude.

This brings the discussion back to questions of theory and its place in practice-based research in children's play. The next section considers the theoretical assumptions embedded in much social policy concerning children and young people that may speak to instrumental value, and the final section explores what theory can offer for articulating value differently and what this might mean for research.

### **Policy processes as material discursive practice**

The theories embedded in policies concerning children and families are often discussed within policy literature as paradigms (Moss, 2007) or narratives (McBeth et al, 2014). Both approaches bring slightly different emphases to exploring the assumptions inherent in the ways policy understands the nature and value of childhood, and, implicitly or explicitly, the material effects of these assumptions, but employ different methods for analysing these. Despite challenges raised by the social studies of childhood that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century (Prout, 2005), the overwhelming paradigm/narrative in policies relating to children and families remains future focused, seeing childhood as an apprenticeship for an autonomous, producing and consuming adulthood (Moss, 2007), with education policies aiming to build future industry leaders and social services and youth justice policies aiming to limit the burden of the poor on the state (Katz, 2011; Edwards et al, 2016). These are deficit models that fix childhood as separate from adulthood. Both are encapsulated in this foreword to the Open Public Services White Paper (HM Government, 2011, p 4):

The failure to educate every child to the maximum of their abilities is not just a moral failure to accord every person equal worth, it is a piece of economic myopia which leaves us all poorer. For in a world rendered so much more competitive by globalisation, we can no longer afford to leave talents neglected. Every pair of idle hands, every mind left uncultivated, is a burden on all society as well as a weight on our conscience.

Such language exemplifies 'the conflation of fiscal rationality and morality' as a 'hallmark of neoliberal governmentalities' (Janzen and Jeffrey, 2013, p 122). It can be understood as what Ryan (2014) terms 'biosocial power' – a particular configuration of Foucault's (2008) concept of 'biopolitics' as applied to children and childhood – acting on the minds and bodies of children in order to produce the self-governing citizen. Ryan locates the children's playground as a site of biosocial power, as a 'technology of conduct ... to both constitute and govern the liberal democratic subject' (Ryan, 2014, p 87). Such a technology navigates the tensions between positioning childhood as a site of freedom and constraint, particularly in terms of those children identified as social

problems in need of state intervention. In tracing the history of the public playground in the USA, Ryan draws parallels with contemporary political narratives that have resurrected the 'moral underclass discourse' (MUD) (Levitas, 2004). Many (but not all) of the chapters in this book discuss play provision in areas of deprivation; although there is little class analysis presented, this is perhaps an element of difference that is elided through homogenising grand narratives of childhood play.

A powerful example of the entanglements of policy narratives, developments in science and technology, professional practice, global capitalism and neoliberalism can be seen in the dramatic increases in the use of psychopharmaceuticals as a form of governance of difference among children and young people (Janzen and Jeffrey, 2013). Another example can be seen in the use of neuroscientific evidence as a political strategy for 'framing and taming' policies on early intervention (Edwards et al, 2016). In the UK, early intervention policies (for example, Allen, 2011) cite evidence from neuroscience to show the effects of environment on brain development from conception and through the early years. The argument has been forcibly and emotively made 'that focusing on babies' brain development is the only way to prevent a multiplicity of social problems from unemployment, lack of social mobility and educational under-achievement, to crime, violence and anti-social behaviour' (Macvarish, 2013, p 1). There are critiques of the research itself, including how neuroscience is still contested and not 'policy ready' (Edwards et al, 2016), how it has been overgeneralised and oversimplified in policy and professional discourse (Bruer, 2011), and how claims that plasticity and sensitive periods being limited to the early years are contestable (Rose and Abi-Rached, 2013). However, what is of interest here is what such material discursive practices *do*.

In their critique of this biologising of parenthood, Edwards et al (2016, p 2) state:

pseudoscientific 'brain science' discourse is co-opted to bolster policy claims about optimal childrearing. This discourse frames poor mothers as the sole architects of social disadvantage, and its taming strategies of early years intervention are entrenching gendered and classed understandings and social inequalities.

These two examples illustrate the power of ideologically led policies that select evidence strategically; what this means for research in children's play is that practitioners and advocates need to pay attention both to what scientific evidence might exclude and to other ways of knowing, being and doing. In reality, play advocates have to navigate this policy landscape. The desire for research to prove that play practitioners can help meet policy agendas is understandable. Ethically, the argument here is that the field needs also to seek different ways of articulating why children's play – and adult attention to supporting the conditions for play to emerge – matters.

### **Changing the world through re-enchantment**

This chapter has highlighted some of the contemporary challenges faced by practitioners/(re)searchers in co-creating opportunities for children's play. It is set against a backdrop of increasing individualisation and commodification of all aspects of life (Garrett, 2009) where life itself has become the main capital of neoliberalism (Braidotti, 2013). The ways in which bodies and desires are subjugated to economic imperatives and political ideologies is a dominant cliché of global capitalism. However, the disenchantment and totality that such regimes may present are not given and prefigured; there is always an excess, something always escapes. Indeed, playing

contains micro-revolutionary possibilities for re-working oppressive power structures, generating feelings of 'being connected to an affirmative way to existence' (Bennett, 2001, p 156). The multiple entanglement of subject and objects that come about through movement, encounters, affects, and so on, and that produce moments of playing, also constitute the emergence of practice wisdom. What is known and the 'knowers' of this knowledge co-emerge and shape each other through doing (speaking/acting/thinking), and by doing they continue to collectively co-create practice (Keevers et al, 2012).

Alongside the expressed desire for proofs and truths and the challenges to these, the flip chart notes from the PDE event also articulated a desire to 'challenge the status quo' and 'to disrupt and disturb common understandings', and for bigger aims to:

- make society better;
- change the world and the way we feel about the world – more just and fair;
- continue to be enchanted with the world.

Some hope might be drawn from the chapters in this book, many of which raise a challenge to dominant paradigms and begin to explore alternative approaches to research that can offer an ethical and political stance and that can help to re-enchant the study of children's play and adults' relationship with it. There is a place for theory here; as MacLure (2010, p 277) says, 'we need theory to block the reproduction of the bleeding obvious, and thereby, hopefully, open new possibilities for thinking and doing.' This is not the theory that tucks a stable world into pre-established boxes to be ticked for the audit culture, it is the theory that 'defamiliarises, complicates, obstructs, perverts, proliferates' (p 5), in sum, that offends. It offends because it moves away from the individual psychological subject or sociological agent that we thought we could not think without towards decentring the human and attending to the entanglements of the nonhuman, of matter, movement, affect. It dissolves binaries such as nature/culture, adult/child, subject/object, theory/practice, discourse/matter; it is never complete, it is messy, fluid, nomadic. This is not only a question of theory as epistemology, it is an ethico-onto-epistemology that can move away from neat but exclusionary segmentations and categorisations to take account of the messy fluidity and heterogeneity of just getting on with life, to produce more just and equitable accounts.

It is hard, this theory, because it is so very different. It is difficult to step out of traditional ways of doing theory, of the language that locks ideas into the things it is trying to leave behind: certainty, interpretation, progress, fixity. Novelty is uncomfortable, as is uncertainty. It requires altering habits (of qualitative research, common sense understandings and language) and developing sensibilities appropriate to a methodological decentring of the human subject and disturbing of the status quo of worn out binaries and human exceptionalism.

As we introduced in the opening chapter, MacLure (2010) suggests one way of addressing this is through Massumi's (2002) 'exemplary practice'. This is not a matter of applying theory to examples, which Massumi says would change what is being explored through the application of the concepts. Massumi's examples are not generalisations or particularities, they are singularities. Although they are singular, they can stand for other instances. What matters are the details, and these details can be sites for connections, disruptions, digression and diversion, producing difference rather than more of the same. It is generative rather than restrictive, drawing in what has gone before and reading this diffractively through new insights. Examples can emerge from 'the wearying mass of ethnographic data' (MacLure, 2010, p 282) as a kind of glow, something that catches the attention in an affective, visceral manner. While all this may seem a far cry from the solid and certain evidence

required of policy makers, there is a space for enlivening 'evidence' through the telling of small moments of enchantment, stories, nonsense conversations.

Such approaches are beginning to be seen in collaborative work. One is the European COST-funded project on 'New Materialism: networking European scholarship on "how matter comes to matter"' (<http://newmaterialism.eu>). It can also be seen in the work of the Common Worlds Childhoods Research Collective (<http://commonworlds.net>), 'an interdisciplinary network of researchers concerned with children's relations with the more-than-human world' in order to trouble the normalising effects of anthropocentrism – or perhaps the anthroponormativity – of traditional childhood studies (Taylor and Blaise, 2014). As Lenz-Taguchi (2014, p 87), says:

the research produced is political in its emphasis on creating and inventing new forms of possible realities in the analysis. In this way the world might, as Haraway (2008) suggests, become a 'more livable place', where children have increased power to act, to play and learn together with performative agents that can also be other than merely human agents.

As a final provocation, intended to disturb what is held most dear, a couple of comments from the flip charts at the PDE event can provide some cautionary – and playful – troubling of the play field's 'endlessly repeated foundations' (Foucault, 1972, p 207) and 'reproduction of the bleeding obvious' (MacLure, 2010, p 277). Perhaps we should 'stop trying to overthink everything', and ask the question 'is play on too much of a pedestal?'

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