

The power of stories: using narrative methods in playwork research

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Abstract

Two academics from early childhood education, colleagues with some playwork involvement, offer insights into the potential for collaborative narrative research to generate rich and deep understandings of the value of playwork and its fascination for those who work in the field. Hazel Wright sets out the methodological framework she favours to explore meaning through biographical interviews; Paulette Luff shows how participants' written journal entries may capture elements of practice and convey meaning through reflectivity and indicates how these can be harnessed as an element of action research supporting positive change in a work context. Their joint account is clearly set within a playwork research tradition and draws on a small-scale narrative research study with playworkers, discussing their comments within a framework of key earlier studies. Overall the analysis reinforces the view that – and demonstrates how – playwork is a distinctive practice with a very clear ethos of play for its own sake.

Introduction

Playworkers beware! We, who write this chapter, are visitors from the sister discipline of early childhood education who have been invited to contribute to the debate about playwork research methodology from our parallel perspectives and joint experiences: as early years workers (a teacher and a pre-school practitioner, before the name was coined); as trainers in colleges; and as academics who both research and teach. We do have some experience of playwork through our mature students: our Foundation Degree courses have been open to both disciplines (but are, we admit, more heavily populated with actual and potential early years staff). This makes us aware of our different freedoms – for example, in terms of adult roles, children's choices to attend and participate (or not) and scope of possible activities – and we will try to keep our didactic voices under control. But we do see similarities in the ways our professions have developed – through volunteering and self-taught mastery; the sharing of 'what works' within communities of practice; the commitment to the future well-being of our children and young people; and shared frustration at the lack of recognition, status, pay and even job security in times of austerity when

services deemed ‘play’ are low on governmental lists of priorities. It is this parallel history, together with our belief that play really matters, that underpins our claim to sorority. So, what do we have to offer to the debate? We aim to make a meaningful contribution by sharing some of our experiences and ideas from our work within narrative and collaborative research traditions. Our views converge within these frameworks, although we arrived on separate paths and approach our research from different angles. For years, we have come together for mutual support and to learn from each other’s experience, to offer an insider-but-outsider viewpoint or become a willing mouthpiece or pair of hands when time pressures make practical support more useful. However, we are not relying purely on our own views of what is similar, what is different. Seeking a more knowledgeable perspective, we also carried out a small-scale research project using narrative interview methods to talk with members of a team of playworkers, and we will draw upon some of the information and views they offered, as relevant, throughout this chapter. As well, we will refer to examples within our earlier work when seeking to demonstrate particular issues.

About us: recognising the “I” in qualitative research

Hazel is an interdisciplinary researcher (her studies and practices span the social sciences) who realised that her core interest has always been people and their lives. So for her, it was involvement in life history (or biographical) research methods that stimulated a later encroachment into broader narrative frameworks. She encountered the pluralities of visual and creative narratives (art, dance, film, theatre, music, etc.) and grasped how the observational skills embedded through a long involvement in early years practice could play a significant role when collecting verbal data. So often what we say or don’t say, how we say it and our general demeanour add clarity to the overall beliefs of the person(s) ‘in the frame’. For Hazel, the ‘story told’ is analysed holistically *and* in detail for its deeper meanings, in an active process that requires the interviewer to think on her feet and probe or gently challenge the hesitations, deviations and juxtapositions of ideas that jar the listening ear, an approach for which she later found justification in Hollway and Jefferson’s (2000) work *Doing Qualitative Research Differently*. To evidence on paper those understandings that arose beyond the actual words said, she learned to use the tools of conversational (Ten Have, 1999) and discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013), and this will be further explained through a discussion of interviews with a

team of experienced playworkers that serve both as a direct contribution to the debate and examples for us to draw upon to demonstrate the points we would like to make.

For Paulette, the approach was somewhat different. She was an early years teacher whose research was embedded in pedagogic practice: one who quickly realised the benefits of reflective practice and since has found ways of seeing and knowing the work of practitioners and of using the stories that teachers tell within a broader narrative and action research framework (McNiff, 2017). Paulette's early work was through case studies (Luff, 2009), based upon close observations and discussions of life and work in early years settings. This moved on to cooperative and collaborative action research, based upon a belief that careful enquiry is an important means to make positive changes, gain insights and knowledge and to express a viewpoint (McNiff, 2017). This is inspired by the arguments of Dewey (1929), who identified that educational research is intricately bound within educational action and must operate through teachers' own planning, observation and reflective judgements. Paulette has used and supported action research in a variety of contexts – with childminders and other childcare professionals and, most recently, in an engagement between teachers in Essex and the Royal Opera House. In this project, teachers reported their experiences of experimenting with creative arts in their classrooms in the form of reflective diaries. The quality and qualities of some of these descriptions of classroom practices and processes took her even further into an appreciation of the strengths of narrative as a means of creating and communicating a way of learning and, consequently, ensuring further and embedded change.

Together we find the narratives that we and our participants create are powerful tools for recognition and internalisation as well as for dissemination of the ideas each individual professes to hold. Reflection and action are also powerful learning tools so Paulette seeks to add a discussion about the purposes served by action research with a narrative slant to our overall debate. We carried out our small-scale research and initial analysis and drafting of this chapter with open minds and without prior knowledge of the four aspects of playwork research established in volume one of this series (King & Newstead, 2018) and were pleased to find them further validated within our data. It will be clear that 'our' playleaders (and we, the authors) work within a *rights-based* ethos, that we all value and use *playful* approaches and focus on *processes* rather than outcomes or products. We also concur that *critical reflection* is important and for us, it was a continual process throughout and after (supposed) completion of a project.

Precedents in the playwork and other literature

Investigating the literature – official and evidence-based studies examining the importance of playwork – we found an element of support for our ideas. In particular, when we came across Joost Beunderman's (2010) Demos report for PlayEngland that sought to evaluate the impact of staffed play provision on children, their families and their communities and chose storytelling as a legitimate evidence source. It is gratifying to hear stories mentioned in a text with 'impact' in the title and to read that:

Using storytelling as an approach to policy accountability or organisational practice might have been viewed with doubt in the past, but recent trends across the public and private sectors means that, increasingly, the power of stories is being taken seriously.

(Beunderman, 2010, p. 77)

This seems to us such a natural way to capture the value of play, an activity that those of us in playwork and the early years alike see as predominately child-led, free-flow, exploratory, creative, imaginative and essentially physical. We are not talking here of the structured play that offers ways of classroom learning that are, at least, child-friendlier than earlier behaviourist strategies (such as rote learning, copying, recitation enforced through reward and punishment), but of unstructured play where the children have freedom to choose and decide, control of their own capacity to learn and mastery of their own universe – in short, play where children's rights are paramount.

Drawing and painting activities have long been used to capture young children's understanding of their world, but the use of narrative takes us into deeper and potentially more explanatory levels, as the ability to talk and describe is a basic skill that develops early and independently, possibly innately (Chomsky, 1965, 2002; Pinker, 1994). Speech is not reliant on associated hand-and-eye coordination, visual perspectives or the availability of additional materials. It is a means in itself rather than simply a way to add captions to other modes of recording an individual's perspectives. If an adult assists a young person – as prompter and questioner, as scribe or reporter – this in no way detracts from the quality of the story, its veracity or authenticity. The narrator remains in charge of what he or she chooses to say, whether a young person or an associated adult, parent, carer, worker or researcher. Like the blogger, Madeleine Rex (2010, n.p.), we are willing to invert the more common phrase and claim that: 'A word can paint a

thousand pictures'. As she says: 'a single sentence can create thousands or millions of ideas', because each listener will uniquely construe what is heard and add layers of interpretation by evoking other ideas already stored deep within their minds and memories. This is a broadening process, one quite different from the condensing process whereby one image captures complex ideas in a single instant: the 'picture that is worth a thousand words'.

Beunderman (2010) refers his readers to *The Dreaming City* (Hassan, Mean, & Tims, 2007), a forward-looking publication emerging from an innovative 18-month engagement with the people of Glasgow who were encouraged by Demos to imagine what the city could/would/should be like in future. This was an experiment in 'mass-imagination' whereby people from all walks of life were encouraged to tell and write their own stories. This essentially creative process was chosen because: 'Stories are one of the main ways that we make sense of the world and understand and interpret our lives and experiences' (Hassan et al., 2007, p. 23). In effect, the project aimed to open up the city to its inhabitants, giving voice to those who, for whatever reasons, find official reports and the media exclusionary, not least the children and young people. As Beunderman (2010) writes: "The will to tell stories is innate"; this is a format to which children will respond with "eager willingness" (p. 79).

Dreaming City's design for 'mass imagination' started by catching the attention of the people through outreach initiatives and moved, through storytelling, to action via a sequence of naming pledges, contributing and disseminating ideas. This was a project that was invigorating and empowering because it focussed on inclusivity, on imagination not consultation, on encouraging a diversity of ideas and letting people decide for themselves how they wanted to take part. Such an ethos seems to fit well with that underpinning playwork where adults facilitate children's freedom to choose their own play, rather than prescribe or direct it artificially to ensure specific learning. One of 'our' playworkers clearly described it as 'play for play's sake'. Through combining aspects of narrative method and action research, there is scope to find out not only what parents and children want from playwork projects but also what playworkers want from funders and policy-makers, perhaps to move towards positive change. As *The Dreaming City* (Hassan et al., 2007) text clearly states:

There are essentially two ways that are helpful in structuring how we think about the future: what is possible and what is desirable. In other words, what could happen and what would people like to happen.

(p. 170)

Their project used a combination of verbalisation of ‘wishes’, of questionnaires and focus groups and collected and presented data as a series of stories (among other creative methods). We, however, are talking about using narrative as both the means of data collection and the means of dissemination (although we fully accept that some of the narratives may be told in more than words alone – in art, music, drama, film and multi-media displays). As with the Glasgow project, when the researcher/facilitator is really interested and adopts a conversational (narrative) style of interviewing, it can make tacit knowledge more visible to the participants themselves. One of our playworkers wrote in response to our ‘thank you’ email:

We found it really interesting talking about the various aspects of playwork and playscheme as well, especially as it helped to clarify thoughts and feelings about various issues.

If the analysis is approached with empathy too, the narratives may clearly identify what people really think and want. Furthermore, the power of the engagement and the narratives that are told can capture the interest of others, creating the will for change; a move from mass imagination to mass collaboration. As Beunderman (2010) points out, the process is two-pronged as stories are: ‘an effective way to access the wider public’s play memories, tapping into the fact that all adults, even those without children, will have play stories’ but also: ‘Accessing such memories is a powerful way to connect with the wider public and increase understanding of the importance of play’ (p. 79). Like us, he subscribes to the view that narratives can be both a means of collecting data and a means of gaining support for a ‘cause’. Furthermore, they can provide evidence of how involvement changes lives. Beunderman (2010) quotes a Play Ranger manager who admits that, if time permitted, he/she:

would love to be able to sit down and write down the stories I know – and there are many, about individual children and young people, about their experiences about how their lives have changed. I think all playworkers know such stories and it would be so motivating to make more of them.

(p. 79)

Beunderman (2010) acknowledges the time pressures but suggests that:

given that such narrative knowledge is already implicitly held by playworkers, making it explicit by spreading the stories to a wider audience would certainly be a worthwhile effort, and one that will appeal more to many playworkers than the predominantly quantitative effort often required of them at present.

(p. 80)

Again, we find echoes of these sentiments among our playworkers who recognise the importance of research ('it's such a benefit'), but confess that there is little attraction to carrying it out or reading it when really busy and you 'don't really have the time to be going and looking at research'.

So, as senior academics who are expected to be research active, we felt justified in taking on some of this task on their behalf.

Narrative approaches

If we use the term narrative in a general way, it stands for any kind of continuous text, although some prefer to use the word 'account' for something that is purely factual, a listing of ideas or happenings ('we did this ... and then we did that ... and next day something else happened'). To use narrative is held to be a fundamental characteristic of humans; we can trace its use across cultural divides and back through history into ancient times. Indeed, in societies yet to develop the ability to read and write and ones where these skills were limited to a privileged educated elite, narrative accounts (sagas, ballads, epics) were a key way to maintain the historical record and pass on knowledge of it to the massed populations and to subsequent generations (Thompson, 2017). To make their narratives memorable, the tellers instinctively developed skills of rhetoric, of rhythm and rhyme, of repetition and, quite probably, a range of other expressive tools that nowadays the linguists have isolated, named and defined. Within educational psychology, Bruner (1986) identified two distinctive ways of thinking – the 'story' and the 'argument', each with a different way of constructing reality – and explained how they have different purposes. The story aims to convince the recipient of its lifelikeness and does so by drawing people into its world as if it were real, whereas the argument relies on logical steps and evidence to draw the recipient into accepting it as true. At a later date, Polkinghorne (1995) developed Bruner's ideas further, claiming that there are two associated types of narrative

enquiry. One seeks the stories people tell and then sets out to *analyse* them into their component parts: themes, categories and typologies, for example. Another type is made up of disparate elements, capturing data as accounts of events or happenings or answers to interview questions, and seeks to *synthesise* them into a coherent life history or case study: perhaps a story, ‘true’, credible or semi-fictional. However, in Hazel’s experience an individual interview often moves between the two styles, so part of her role is to leave space for such changes, to recognise and acknowledge them and to consider them further when later analysing the scripts.

Narrative interviews

When carrying out narrative interviews it is customary to identify a subject or focus and then encourage the informant to talk freely around this topic. If given this freedom, some respond playfully and tell you a story, while others offer a listing of events. Your job as interviewer is to listen closely (actively) and offer encouragement (maybe with nods or murmurs, or by repeating the last point made) if the teller starts to falter. When Hazel does this, she starts with a very open invitation to talk (in this research they were invited to ‘Tell me what it means to be a playworker’) and turns the ensuing monologue into more of a conversation before the informant begins to falter. If the telling moves too far off the focus of interest she may need to pull the topic back a little (always mindful that the direction may be leading somewhere relevant so should not be curtailed too quickly), or to intervene gently to keep the narrative unfolding. As the informant begins to relax it is possible to respond more naturally, to offer prompts or snapshots of parallel personal experiences to ‘nourish’ the conversation, and to probe into hesitations or awkward changes of topic that suggest there is more to tell that has not yet been made explicit. Like many ethnographers, she makes brief notes so that she can record body language or gestures alongside key elements of speech (Walford, 2009) and records the interview so that she can replay it and hear the nuances in the language, as these can be important for accurate analysis after transcription (Ten Have, 1999). When doing this arduous but important task, she follows the accepted practice of setting out the conversation as a sequence of utterances (or turns) each starting on a new line – rather like a play script (Ten Have, 1999).

Analysing narratives

Ways of analysis rather depend on what one needs to know, but, in our view, the really important issue is to listen closely to the material collected, to interpret it honestly and to avoid fragmenting the data (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000) by looking at everything that is said, not just the parts that seem immediately relevant. As West explains: 'Narrative structures... may themselves organise and give meaning to experience rather than being simply reflective of it' (citing Lea, 1995; West, 1996, p. 11). However, narrative analysis can be challenging.

Informants' stories may be inconsistent or ambiguous (Spence, 1986), perhaps implying uncertainty or suggesting that what they really believe and what they feel they ought to believe are conflicted. Many narrative researchers listen actively (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995), focussing on processes rather than on products of meaning. They identify incoherencies that 'defy narrative conventions' and 'accord them due significance as evidence' (Hollway & Jefferson, 1999, p. 37). They will ask for clarification, and when the style is conversational and the interest in critical reflection is mutual, such processes can be playful and respectful of participants' rights. The contradictions may show that the researcher elicited greater clarity during the actual research conversation, but, sometimes, participants simply change their views and ideas as they are encouraged to think more deeply during the interview process. Hazel looks for layers of meaning. She examines the structures within the text – the use of language, the forms of expression – and considers whether the aural cues, added by using conversation analysis coding (Ten Have, 1999), change or confirm the initial interpretation. To give an example, an informant who once said 'of course I agree with government policy' used intonation and expressions that made it perfectly clear that she meant the exact opposite and these cues needed to be clearly written into the text. Hazel identifies and writes themes in the margins of the text and looks for examples of emplotment (Polkinghorne, 1995) – places where the informant actually tells a little story with an identifiable focus: a beginning, middle and end. Here the process is one of analysing (or deconstructing).

Separately, and very importantly, she also takes a synthetic approach. When someone is telling her about his/her own life, Hazel creates a timeline to put the detail into chronological order and identify the gaps (to fill which may require further contact – by email, or phone or through a second interview). She may turn the interview into a coherent account, a story or life history, and more creative colleagues have written fictional stories that captivate the audience, poems or

mini-plays or satires. In all these forms the analyst is creating a new narrative – the story ‘told’ becomes the story ‘retold’ (Mishler, 1995). Hazel will consider the interview holistically and ask herself why has the informant chosen to tell it in this way and include this detail? Does this seem rational? Do some of the elements jar – and therefore need to be questioned further? Are the different elements offered adding up to an overall point that has not been made explicitly? For instance, Hazel asks herself: what is the significance of the embedded story she finds when carrying out a structural analysis in a text that overall is quite disjointed? Here she is thinking holistically, having identified an episode structurally that needs greater consideration. To give an example, once a polished story about skidding when driving on an icy road alerted her to a parallel in the informant’s life that she knew about but had not been told about in the interview as not relevant to the focus. It was probably the nearest thing the informant had experienced to that of a close relative dying after crashing his car – something which was really important in terms of the informant’s emotional life, rather than irrelevant. Hazel understood this only because she wondered why, stylistically, it seemed so well rehearsed, eventually realising that this might be a consequence of it being repeatedly thought about and ultimately beautifully polished. Working with stories requires effort, but it is rewarding: as a form it lends itself to creativity, manipulation and interpretation in playful ways.

Alignment of narrative methods with playwork ethos and practice

Having looked directly at the methods, it now seems relevant to discuss some of the findings from our small-scale research project. The team is employed to run holiday play-schemes for a large institution but operates on a not-for-profit basis, so it has to cover its costs. It has a small number of full-time employees and calls upon a large team of (often but not only) young adults to staff the scheme. Some are able to commit to regular involvement, but many are not, so there is a continuous recruitment and training operation underway to ensure that all are aware of the ethos, purposes and legal requirements of the work. The schemes operate out of two sites hired from schools during the vacations and therefore have to transport their resources and set up and pack up everything six times a year. As the staff claim: ‘it’s a big operation’.

Because Hazel used a narrative interview methodology, she was able to focus on the issues that the playworkers thought significant, rather than predict and manage the conversation from the outset. In accordance with ethical guidelines, agreement was sought for material to be used in a

publication, participants were assured there was no intention to do harm and that they had the right to withdraw until this became impossible. Our work was respectful towards the material and offered the participants anonymity and confidentiality. The process encouraged the participants to engage in critical reflection and offered the space for them to tell what they wanted to tell, so the methodology is respectful of their individual and collective rights. Names used in this chapter are entirely fictitious but are introduced because, analysing holistically, it was possible to identify some very different sets of concerns among the participants as well as significant commonalities that are clearly stated and reiterated throughout the interviews. A common focus is the nature of play, voiced in statements like:

...it's play for plays sake there's no outcome to it only that that's what the children want to do.

...to my mind it is freely chosen, personally motivated, intrinsically valued not prompted. It's when children are choosing to do something they want to do and playwork can facilitate in a number of ways: by creating a play environment that is going to be appealing to children's ideas, by occasionally being a resource in themselves – sometimes ... they can join in and ... sometimes it's providing additional resources.

Play comes from children so the playworkers' role isn't to take over play...

which clearly identify the centrality of children's choices. It is clear, too, that the play should be free-flow with open access to indoors and outdoors whatever the weather and with the children choosing whether to take part in activities, play in groups or opt for time alone. Hazel can clearly see that the staff also like the freedoms inherent in the work, 'the freedom of having the whole day to follow the child's interests', the fun element, the opportunity to really get to know the child and the parents. They value play for itself and are clear that it is good for children and, in turn, for society as the opportunity to interact freely with others develops life skills.

...there are so many benefits come from play, health, mental health, developmentally all these things ...Children who are deprived of play are being deprived of all these opportunities.

...diets, looks, gangs, knife crime. I can't prove it but perhaps if these children had had the opportunity to play cops and robbers, cowboys and Indians – there was that whole period of time when it was 'we don't play guns here', so children didn't have the opportunity to go

through that real first-hand experience ... to role play that situation and think about the consequences. So, they are going out and doing it for real in the real world and don't realise the consequences until....

There is an interesting, if understated, insight here that, like nursery rhymes or violent fairy tales, combative play offers children a 'means of addressing psychological conflicts' (Cashdan, 2000). This claim is much debated (Woods, 2013), but it seems likely that combative play can be cathartical, helping children learn to manage their wilder urges and giving them the chance to explore the 'real/not-real boundaries' (Woods, 2013), chance to try out negative consequences in a way that causes no permanent damage to selves and others. The claims made for the more violent rhymes and tales are here applied to contemporary problems, surely a notion that deserves further consideration.

Less dramatically, there is also a common discussion of the status of playwork and how little users and policy-makers understand its value:

I think that it's only childcare isn't it – when I sit with parents when they complain and I say let me give you the background information it's 'really you do all that just for a playscheme'.

I think depressingly a lot of parents view us mainly as a source of childcare.

It's always one of those things that I'm not sure comes up in the consciousness of people if they don't have children or don't interact with children regularly.

I don't think we are seen as useful from the children's perspective which is a shame because we are....

If we link these two points together, the lack of interest in children's play could possibly have more serious consequences than our policy-makers currently comprehend. When children commonly play alone in their homes with their electronic devices there is not just an element of nature deprivation (Louv, 2005) but 'catharsis deprivation' (Wright, in this chapter), as they may engage in on-screen fighting play, but they lack the opportunities to act this out with others. Perhaps, unless they play out conflict and experience the emotions associated with hurt and defeat, they may, as one playworker reflected, end up 'doing it for real'.

Yet 'our' playworkers believe that their job is 'seen as inessential. It's not seen as necessary', and thinking more deeply still, one of them makes the point that playwork could be inessential 'in the perfect world':

...to be fair I think that in an ideal world playwork wouldn't be necessary. In an ideal world, children could just get together and play, as in our kind of childhood.

In the perfect world where all children grow up in this big group with all the resources that they want around, to have a bit of freedom.

However, maybe caught up in this utopic vision, she is overlooking the valuable role of a knowledgeable adult in facilitating children's play and she has certainly made much of that in other parts of the interview/conversation.

Focussing on just two of the team, a team in which all members are very knowledgeable about their work, it is possible to identify distinctive personal perspectives that are also clearly articulated when the conversation is allowed to run freely as in a narrative interview.

It is Caroline who voiced the concerns that children may need the chance to playfight, but she is also keen to stress the broad nature of the job and very aware of the responsibility for ensuring children's safety in a group that caters for a mixed age range and free choice of play activity and playspace. She several times mentions not only the overlaps with 'social work' when discussing the tasks she undertakes, but also (we noted) her dislike of the alignment with early years which forces staff to do lots of paperwork for the four-year-olds. At one point she confesses this directly, making a statement that our broader experience suggests many of those who work with children (teacher, early years and playworker alike) would subscribe to:

I don't really like doing paperwork' [that] is the crux of it. I like doing the play, I like following the children's interests, I just don't see the point of having all these lengthy observations of children if it takes you away from doing the work with the children. I understand the importance of needing to know what the child is capable of and how to progress them forward but I felt that I could do that without having all those hefty observation forms you could do without – I knew it all... and then all of a sudden, I had to write it all down and if I didn't write it down I had to prove to them that I knew the children.

Yet she is passionate about the job, even giving positive examples when asked ‘what is the worst thing about being a playworker’. For her, making an impact is important as she feels satisfied when children who attended the group want to come back as workers at a later stage.

Cara, too, focusses on safety: ‘Safeguarding is our highest concern, it really is’, but this discussion centres on risky play and the inevitability of there being occasional accidents. She finds reassurance in the realisation that when one occurred ‘We’d done everything right’. She is fascinated by the ways the children behave and amused by their idiosyncrasies, rejoicing in the ones ‘who crack me up because they are like on another planet ... playing these elaborate imaginative games’. Understandably, she finds the continual setting out and packing up a nuisance. For her:

In this perfect world we would have our own building that we could maintain and keep set up and hire out when we are not using it and that would be ... wonderful rather than having to go and set up every holiday – I hate set up day ...

Cara bemoans the continual testing that characterises the contemporary English education systems and sees it as detrimental to children’s well-being:

...you can watch these kids getting stressed and I think ‘you’re 7’ and it made me feel really sad... the system... was putting these children through stress that they should not be feeling... you did want to go, ‘go on, go outside and play. Here’s some toys, here are some things that you can play with. Go out and have some fun’.

When Caroline and Cara’s stories are considered together, it is clear that they not only value the opportunities for freedom and fun that playwork offers the child but also appreciate these as characteristics they would like in their own lives, suggesting that to offer children play you need to value the playful. There are not only pull factors that bring them into this career, but also push factors that make playwork preferable to other options. They accept the need for planning, for training, for safe practices, for good policies and for recording matters of importance (‘I’m used to logging everything now’) but have a balanced view on how to interpret documentation. Parents may lack this balance, some ‘are concerned that play is not entirely risk free....’.

... we still get emails from parents that are just like ‘my child has come home with three accident forms today and at school they only get one a week ... but that’s not something they

should be worried about necessarily it's a part of childhood and of play that you run around and occasionally you fall over and you bump your knee. It's just kind of one of those things...

Taking the interviews as a whole, there is a clear underlying message that in playwork fun and freedom (within safe limits) are vitally important and perhaps a hint that to be a successful playworker it might be useful to be at least a freethinker, someone who can thrive in a slightly unconventional setting where there is still a little space for resourcefulness and inventiveness and opportunities for creativity alongside children with a mix of ages. Caroline dislikes curriculum constraints because 'I don't actually want to fit into it' and believes that the learning 'naturally comes out if you have good playwork and the children are willing to be involved' and is 'quite rigorous about attending training, keeping abreast with current affairs'. Cara understands that: 'Children have to learn things for themselves'. We have to curb our adult desire 'to want to teach them all the things that we have learned' as 'that goes in one ear and out the other'. Most importantly you need a sense of humour to see children as children and enjoy 'the funny things' rather than trying to eradicate them. Staff need a large element of common sense when running a playscheme (but this is a plea that should not be limited to playwork).

Prompted to consider the role of research, Caroline believes this to be important but thinks it should be a collaboration between researchers as 'I wouldn't know where to start, pinpointing it down' and those on the ground 'because they understand the ethos of playwork'. She would like action research projects that focus on 'getting children playing' to combat the modern tendency to grow up fast, for 'they are children or teenagers trying to live in an adult world when developmentally they are not ready to be in that world, for they haven't played it out'.

In terms of research Cara points out that although she feels competent herself, for many playworkers it 'can be a little hard to penetrate' due to the jargon and complex citations. However, research is not something she would undertake personally as 'usually I have other things that I need to be worrying about'. She thinks that the researcher should be both impartial and informed, with some knowledge of working with children, and that the research should have practical applications – so again action research would be appropriate. Anyone interested in taking up her challenges might like to note that she would like research-based evidence to answer questions such as:

How we can best facilitate children's play?

And what we can do to make the play most beneficial?

What kind of resources we can include?

When in the day it might be best to put out resources that are going to prompt different types of play?

The playworker narrative study stopped short of adopting an action research methodology to identify and implement positive change. However, in keeping with the Glasgow project endorsed by Beunderman (2010), we will now discuss this aspect through Paulette's work with the Royal Opera House and the teachers who took part in that project.

Action approaches: using reflective narratives to work towards change

The accounts discussed earlier indicate an understanding that research could provide useful insights to inform practice. Cara asks specific questions and displays her curiosity and desire for evidence as a basis upon which to develop and guide actions. Her questions would lend themselves well to collaborative research to explore and understand processes, such as how she might structure the environment and resources to facilitate different types of play or organise the days in ways that would engage children more and use their natural cycles of activity and lethargy. Caroline identifies broader concerns and a desire for research to challenge the social status quo. In both cases they want their own understandings of playwork to be valued but would welcome the support of somebody with expertise in research. Dewey (1929) described the potential of such collaboration as 'the vital current flowing between the field worker and the research worker' (p. 44).

Dewey's description of active cooperation between professionals and academics was realised in the pioneering work at the Centre for Applied Research in Education (CARE), founded in 1970 at the University of East Anglia. Here it was Lawrence Stenhouse who saw the importance of teachers as researchers, actively working to develop the curriculum through their practice and, like professional actors, artists and musicians, improving their skills through the learning process. His definition of research as 'systematic enquiry made public' (Stenhouse, 1979, p. 11) described patterns of learning through seeking answers to questions and problems, with findings utilised as a framework for action and published to invite critical response. The ways that

teachers worked with children, in encouraging their learning through inquiry-based learning projects, were in parallel with the support provided by universities for teacher action research. These ideas were developed by his colleague, John Elliot, who adopted the term ‘praxiology’ to describe action research designed to bring about change in educational settings and transform professional cultures.

Nowadays, action research is common in all phases of education as a means to develop professional knowledge and to transform classroom practice. It is often characterised by an ongoing, cyclical process of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. This emphasis upon reflection and analysis of experience reflects its roots in Deweyan pragmatism. Following this tradition, Hammond (2013) describes a form of inquiry that is focussed towards practical and worthwhile action, underpinned by an ethical commitment to democracy and the agency of participants, with collaboration facilitating the generation of applicable knowledge, drawn from both insider and external perspectives.

The main aim of action research is:

To make a difference, to have an impact, to improve practice, to gain insight and knowledge, and to learn for the future

(Zuber-Skerritt in Murphy, 2000, n.p.)

and to many, as in *The Dreaming City*, it can be motivated by a collective will to work together and find and/or achieve a common goal.

Action research begins with hopes, dreams and desires. An action researcher hopes that they can create a change for the better, dreams of a better world and desires to make a difference.

(MacNaughton & Hughes, 2009, p. 51)

The *Creative Writing through the Arts* project (CWttA) running from 2016 to 2019 was funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation ‘More and Better’ fund through the Royal Opera House Bridge and five Teaching School Alliances in Essex. Its aims were two-fold: to develop teachers’ confidence and skills in teaching through the arts and evaluation and establish a supportive peer-network for teachers; and to increase children’s motivation to write, imaginative skills and ability to critique and improve their own work.

Paulette played an instrumental role in supporting the teachers to engage in educational action research. Each term the teachers took part in an ‘inspiration day’ that was led by a creative artist.

On these days the teachers participated in arts activities and acquired various tools and techniques to implement in their classrooms. The teachers then trialed the new ideas with the children and explored the benefits of these learning processes upon children's engagement with their learning and their skills in writing. Each term was a cycle of action research. One of the means by which teachers recorded the findings from their classrooms was in reflective diary style narratives of their own classroom activity in each school term of the project. These 'blog style' narratives, some illustrated, are mini informal research reports in their own right and will be published on the website that is being developed to support the project. The narratives were also shared between teachers at research meetings. This provided an opportunity for teachers to identify and discuss common themes that were expressed within their own narratives and those of others. The narratives were then further analysed by the researchers with further thematic findings shared and discussed with the teachers. The bringing together of key findings from corroborating (and also conflicting) narrative accounts across several classrooms provides an important source of credible evidence to contribute to the overall evaluation of the CWttA project.

A synthesis of our ideas

So, what do we have if we co-consider our learning from the literature, our own experiences of working with children and adults and the views expressed and attitudes observed within our individual and multiples research projects, acknowledging that these are but small samples and not necessarily generalisable? Overall, we claim that this chapter offers material that both endorses and embellishes the four playwork research perspectives of rights, playfulness, process and critical reflection but that, appropriately, the approach is neither systematic nor prescriptive. First, we hear that for playworkers it is the children that come first, their freedom to choose what they do and how they do it in their spare time, their right to play alone, with friends and in groups where adults play a part either as a facilitator or as a co-player sensitively to meet the wishes of the children. This both recognises children's rights and the playful nature of the playwork tradition. We see, too, that the playworkers are aware that there is a lot more they could do if society were to better value their work and further resource it. However, there must be some recognition that if that were to happen some of the resourcefulness (and consequent freedoms) might be lost.

This chapter clearly reinforces the view that playwork is a distinctive practice with its own ethos and a very clear focus on play for its own sake. One playworker, Cara, actually draws attention to the way that those in sister disciplines (early years work and teaching) need to be more aware of the importance of play and that ‘includes teachers and schools’. She believes that ‘teachers do know really but... sort of forget when [they] have to get resources ready for the next lesson’.

Cara is very clear that playwork is more than just play and uses the nouns as active verbs, talking about going to ‘playwork’ with the children or being invited to ‘play’ with them. This distinction is so embedded in her own mind that she is scarcely aware that she is making it until this is pointed out.

We clearly see that (within our small sample, at least) playwork is attractive to those who are playful, can think independently, can tolerate daily life being ‘a bit chaotic with children...’ and who can align their own beliefs that free-choice matters with their views about how children choose to interpret this and act it out – not always an easy task for adults who are used to being in control and who have an overall responsibility for safety, parental satisfaction, regulatory requirements, budgets and other constraining realities. Like ‘our’ playworkers, they may also need to be able to cope with working irregular and less popular hours and meeting the needs of a continually changing number of children and parents, often in spaces that they neither own nor manage, places they do not have exclusive rights over nor permanently laid out facilities and where they may have to establish boundaries as to how far the children can go to play. Schemes are often subscribed on a ‘first-come’ basis or may be drop-in facilities if held in public spaces within the community when the local authorities can afford to fund Play Ranger schemes. These were all aspects covered within the interviews even though not given detailed treatment within this chapter.

It is clear the playworkers take their work seriously, and enjoy it immensely, but they can at times feel frustrated by the associated activities that take the focus away from play itself: the paperwork and other administrative tasks. However, talking to parents is something they recognise to be important and which they respect, perhaps enjoy, even when the focus is to help the parents better understand the contexts within which playschemes operate and the first point of contact for complaints. This underlines the ‘family/community’ nature of the work as distinct to possible educational and workforce support service interpretations and demonstrates how rights entail responsibilities.

With regard to research it is clear that (to our interviewees) this is seen to be important but something that needs to be carried out, at least collaboratively, with competent researchers who have the skills and experience to plan the research and ensure that it is done in such a way that it carries benefit. Beunderman's (2010) study draws attention to the efficacy of stories as a means of recounting what matters within a playwork context, and there is plentiful evidence within these interviews that when asked about things, the playworkers are able and willing to illuminate their points with examples from their day-to-day work that are about specific incidents or children and take a storied form. That these are rapidly called to mind and recounted so clearly suggests that they are internalised as interesting anecdotes soon after they have occurred but also that for the playworkers the children and their rights are at the core of what they do. McNiff (2017) reminds us that 'the world is made of stories' and that 'we live by stories', humans are essentially playful (Huizanga, 2002/1949). Storying is both the means of comprehending and memorising events, and a way for later recalling and retelling what has previously taken place. Stories, and, therefore, narrative approaches 'matter' and 'work' as a methodology for capturing what goes on. From *The Dreaming City* and Paulette's research with teachers and the Royal Opera House we see how narrative (through the processes of critical reflection and creative writing) can become a form of action research that then allows a collaborative will to identify and commit to changes that matter. We think that researchers and playworkers could usefully consider developing these combined activities for themselves as they are formats that are flexible and capable of personalisation to fit the requirements of those engaged in the processes of 'finding out'.

Important, too, are matters of accessibility of research data, both physically and in terms of level. The playworkers are keen that research is user-friendly. 'Our' interviewees are highly educated and well-able to cope with academic studies, but they have neither the time nor inclination to do that too often and understand that this may even be quite difficult for some of their staff. There are issues around access to research material as only some of it is open access, and 'often it's not written for everyone to understand'. Moving slightly away from research itself, the playworkers are busy people. Even when asked about whether there is a need to influence external views of playwork, Caroline's response is that it is important but she hasn't 'got the motivation to do it', but she might play a supportive role: 'that doesn't mean I wouldn't back someone who does'. We take on board the need to try to make our work readable and try (as in this chapter) not to

focus too much on listing lots of hard-to-find references, merely to acknowledge our sources and point those who want to read more to publications that may be helpful to them.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have explored a process that begins with information gathering using narrative research methods to elicit playworkers views of their role and any problems that need to be addressed. We then demonstrate how this opens up possibilities to use an action research methodology to identify spaces for change in playwork settings, to suggest better ways of working and to support putting these into practice, drawing on antecedents in the literature in the work of Beunderman (2010) and The Dreaming City study initiated by DEMOS (Hassan et al., 2007). We have shown that such a *process* can be *playfully* organised, collaborative and respectful of participants' *rights*, but also mediated by *critical reflection* to ensure that it is congruent with core playwork values. This combinative methodology adheres appropriately, if loosely, to the four key perspectives that underpin research in playwork.

The research project itself demonstrated the commitment of playworkers to these perspectives even when using different wording. The participating playworkers value children, childhood, play, freedom and fun even as they feel that parents and society value these less highly, instead of gauging success in terms of paperwork that (negatively) shows how many minor accidents occur or (prescriptively) spells out what children would learn/have learned.

Finally, we suggest that playworkers who value the freedom to play may well find they can relate to the freedom of narrative approaches where data collection can be simply a case of finding the time to jot down what they see and do, even of letting others jot down what *they* see them do. Whether or not playworkers have the time and inclination to engage in the exciting later analytical stages is something that they can individually decide. Like children in the best playschemes, playworkers involved in the best collaborative research projects have the freedom to choose what they do for themselves.

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