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The efficiency of playwork as a universal service

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Playwork as public service provision

Although play should be valued for its own sake, there is growing acknowledgement of the positive contributions that play can make to children's personal development, family well-being and neighbourhood quality of life. Playworkers have a pivotal role in communicating this message locally and facilitating the positive outcomes that are so highly regarded and keenly sought by decision-makers. Inevitably, playwork becomes entangled in issues pertinent to public service provision. The inaugural edition of *Journal of Playwork Practice* considered the ways in which playworkers are responding to the growing pressure to reduce the money available to support playwork locally (McKendrick *et al.*, 2014). One issue that is central to this particular debate is whether play services should be provided for all children, or targeted at 'disadvantaged' children. Although there are some who would extol the merits of universal provision of public services (Common Weal, 2014), the orthodox position is that play provision, as with other public services, should be targeted at 'disadvantaged' children, particularly when resources are under pressure or scarce. The fear is that there is at present a race to the bottom as local commissioners struggle with diminishing budgets. Rather than challenge the inadequacies of the amount of funds allocated to set priorities the present culture is to try and squeeze as much out of the limited resources available, leaving very little for innovation and creativity. In this article, I argue that the focus of targeted approaches over universal provision would be misguided, and that a strong case must be made for universal playwork provision to be in the driving seat for change rather than the benign passenger.

The Development of Playwork in the Potteries

Since the 1970s, the organisation of playwork in Stoke-on-Trent (Staffordshire, England, UK) has changed several times. The antecedents of contemporary provision can be traced back to Bothen Adventure Playground, which served one small neighbourhood in the city. At that time, Bothen was one of the most disadvantaged communities in Stoke-on-Trent, services within the community were minimal, unemployment was high, what work was available was low paid and unskilled, poverty was the common denominator. This lack of investment and neglect galvanised local people's spirit to point where self-determinism was the only way forward. The adventure playground was a neighbourhood-led initiative, headed up by a management committee, the Hanley Youth Project (HYP), which aimed to support the community and its young people through various initiatives and campaigns led by, and for, the local people. Its motivation was to support young families and children in the local area and it became a powerful voice for the rights of children.

From its local roots, the playwork of the Hanley Youth Project expanded to serve the wider city. Similar community-led neighbourhood play initiatives blossomed elsewhere, one example being Chell Heath adventure playground which served the north of the city and also provided open access holiday provision. The majority of playschemes at that time (24 in total) were under the direction of Hanley Youth Project, and at this time the organisation had begun to develop its own working practices, training and a philosophy surrounding detached youth and play work. Under the guidance of its management committee chair, Angela Glendenning, and its senior manager Kevin Saunty (who are the current senior leadership team of Sporting Communities some forty years later) devised a national annual training camp at Keele University for detached youth and play workers which ran for several years into the early 1980s.

The emergence of a community development ethos as a way forward for communities and the success of the work of the Hanley Youth Project led to its incorporation in the mid- 1980s into the local authority in Stoke on Trent. This seemed a natural development at the time, as both bodies shared a commitment to a community development approach and shared leadership values and principles. Most significantly, the HYP management team were able to utilise newly acquired resources that were made available to them. A myriad of networks within communities across 52 areas of the city began to flourish, at the heart of which were open access playschemes. The detached youth work also began to emerge to compliment the need of communities served by playschemes, and this street based delivery model had a powerful impact on notable 'hot spots' within the city (Collins, 2003).

These grass roots services provided neighbourhood community focal points, and it also provided a vehicle for bringing together key community activists across the city who began to form themselves into a pressure group called Potteries in Play Association (PIPA). PIPA was established as an independent voluntary body supported by the local authority to champion children's play across the city. PIPA also ensured that there was a community-driven mandate for children's play. By the Millennium 26,000 children had access to free open access play within their own neighbourhood, regardless of whether or not that area was considered to be 'disadvantaged'.

After 2000, the priorities of Stoke-on-Trent City Council began to change. There was a much sharper focus on outcomes and much less support for grassroots work that was universal in its approach and not aimed at targeted families or specific deprived communities. At the time, much less was known about how to articulate the impact of play: service provision delivery always came above anything else and research was not a option. This lack of empirical evidence made the service susceptible to funding cuts as a result. Significantly, this predated the funding cuts which were later to impact on playwork in the UK as a result of the financial crisis toward the end of that decade (McKendrick *et al.*, 2014). In effect, a community infrastructure for play was dismantled, networks were fragmented and the commitment to champion children's opportunity for free play was diminished. The structure which allowed play to flourish in the city for more than thirty years was broken into bits and syphoned off into different departments, and naturally the skill sets of the main deliverers of these previously successful initiatives sought other employment elsewhere.

P.I.P.A campaigned vehemently as a collective against the local councillors and council officers decisions, culminating in a 2000 strong rally outside the civic offices in Stoke-on-Trent. Although unsuccessful in changing the decision, the strength of feeling reverberated across the city and may have played a significant part in the later deselection of the ruling party who were making significant decisions about what they perceived frontline services should look like.

Funding for open access play provision has diminished significantly in recent years, being replaced by more targeted services aimed at early years, and more recently focusing on a 'troubled families' agenda. In my experience, tackling an issue with such a directly targeted intervention with specialised staff purges a situation temporarily but does not necessarily change a culture within a community. In one such setting our method was to recruit key members of the family unit and provided them with training and mentoring to become playwork practitioners. We have found that adopting a gentler approach via a play scheme or after school club provided a more genuine vehicle for people to engage in. More importantly, that they were able to do so under their own self direction brought about a close working relationship with individuals which resulted in real change.

New (grass) roots

Now is a time for a re-think and to take a softer approach to build communities from the bottom up. Three years ago Sporting Communities was formed from the original Hanley Youth Project as a Community Interest Company: a company which is set up like any other business, but with ethical aims and objectives which allows it to trade services and reinvest profits into community or public service delivery. Sporting Communities is currently promoting the resurgence of free and open access play across Staffordshire as a conduit to communities. The service currently provides a

menu of approaches and resources that wrap around the needs of a neighbourhood or a setting, the first approach always being to listen and then to look at a co- designed strategy that helps to bring about the desired outcomes. Recently the service has been working with one particular group in the Newcastle-under-Lyme area of Staffordshire called 'Project House'. In partnership with this small charitable organisation Sporting Communities staff have delivered a range of play intervention and sport programmes that have brought about a significant impact on the community's perception of their children's needs and aspirations. As Ann Spilsbury, the Project Manager at Project House put it;

"Even in such a difficult economic recession we were still firmly committed to developing a strong, sustainable and independent youth service especially for children under 12. We had to find ways of providing effective, low cost activities that would have an impact on young people and the local community. Our relationship with Sporting Communities was based on their specialist knowledge and understanding of the local community and centred on fun, team games and empowering the young people. Not only were we able to attract increasingly large numbers, but local residents noted how well children of varying ages and abilities were able to play together safely and socially. This dispelled the fear of walking past groups of youngsters as the gathering of young people was so evident in a non- threatening situation."

This work has also created a less tense community environment and more substance in the way of engagement from parents, with additional unforeseen positive outcomes, such as increasing the volunteer pool. The project is viewed by locals as a focal point for the community whereby playworkers, coaches and support workers provide not only a safe place for children but a valuable arena whereby listening to feelings and concerns can be distilled down to a point where people feel that they are heard and valued.

In service of society: utilising the universal appeal of play

Playwork in the Potteries has been a valuable resource that has been utilised by other service providers to achieve their own ends. For example, when marginalised communities were embracing the neighbourhood-oriented playwork of the Hanley Youth Project as it expanded provision across the city in the 1970s, statutory services realised that this provided an 'opening' in what had proven to be 'difficult to reach' communities. Playwork became a vital conduit into neighbourhoods who were, as a general rule, suspicious of outside help and reticent to engage with other providers or state assistance. During this time, funding for playscheme services came directly from the local authority Social Services department who had the foresight to see the valuable contribution Hanley Youth Project was having by way of providing children's services, and felt that it could provide a necessary release valve for families, particularly during the long holiday periods.

However playwork was more than a means through which access to communities could be facilitated for third parties. Playwork was at the heart of a philosophy of building neighbourhoods, networks and relationships. Play was a natural platform for the development of richer community involvement across the city, and the new 'localism' that is desired by government in the UK today was being realised through playwork in the 1970s. Strong communities were facilitated through the medium of playwork and people became connected to their communities through being involved in a voluntary capacity through their local playscheme.

Playwork continues to serve wider functions today. The Cross Heath community of Newcastle under Lyme witnessed two fatal stabbings in 2014 in relation to a drug- related incident. The response was to fracture the community; some were shocked and dismayed, others were fearful, while some youth and children used the incident as a 'badge of honour' as they were caught up in the excitement and media attention. However, for the majority of the residents, the incident was an indicator of the harsh realities of the dangers that lurked amongst them. In a collaborative response, the Borough Council's Anti Social Behaviour team and Sporting Communities CIC provided a highly visible play presence in the evening on the very spot that the two murders had

taken place, sending out a strong message to the community that their streets were safe. Children's presence - 'being seen and heard' playing – was a key part of the rehabilitation process, providing a positive community marker and reassurance to children, youth and wider community.

In service of play: the necessity of universal playwork provision

Arguments for promoting playwork should not rest with the acknowledgement of its universal appeal in facilitating wider goals (access for other service providers, community development and community rehabilitation after challenging experiences). The importance of play, in and of itself, must also be promoted, as well as its beneficial outcomes for children.

Lester and Russell (2008) concluded that 'Playing helps to build resilience through developing regulation of emotions, attachment to peers and places, stress response systems, emotional health through pleasure and enjoyment, and physical health.' Play England (2010) report that opportunity and space for children's play is in decline; 90 per cent of adults played out regularly in their street as children, but one in three of today's children say they don't play out in their street at all. Children's playtime at school has substantially reduced over the last 15 years (Blatchford & Baines, 2006). In 2010, only a quarter of 7 – 11 year olds are allowed to come home from school independently – compared with over three quarters in Germany (Policy Studies Institute, 2010). In 1971, almost half of seven year olds in England were allowed out alone, now it's less than 10 per cent (Policy Studies Institute, 2010).

There is a need to evidence the long term cause-and-effect of the reintroduction of free open access neighbourhood playschemes in our communities as a cost saving strategy to our ailing health and social care budgets. Although it would be naïve to attribute increased rates of childhood obesity in Stoke-on-Trent solely to the loss of universal open-access play provision, obesity has recently reached epidemic levels across Stoke-on-Trent; 12% of 4-5 year olds, 24% of 10-11 year olds and an estimated 28% adults are obese (City of Stoke on Trent). The rapid rise of obesity has been attributed to the changing physical, social and cultural environment of modern living (City of Stoke on Trent). In Litchfield the Borough council invested time and effort with the local GP surgeries encouraging them to promote playschemes as a proactive antidote to obesity, and they eventually adopted a 'Play on Prescription' scheme to promote the health benefits of play. Following this example, playwork needs to articulate the financial benefits of long-term investment in preventative playwork as a clinical approach, or in terms of other public outcome measures such as crime prevention. In Staffordshire, where areas of universal provision provided in the form of playschemes we have evidence of a 3% crime reduction in antisocial behaviour in each location which equates to tens of thousands of pounds of resources being able to be allocated elsewhere (City of Stoke on Trent). By taking those savings and turning them into universal provision we could reduce the overall cost to the public purse and at the same time build capacity within communities so that they become resilient from within. In addition to the potential benefits for individual children, the work of Sporting Communities and the earlier work of the Hanley Youth Project has demonstrated that playwork can be an integral part of a well-functioning community. Playwork has proven to allow relationships to develop at the pace of the community. We are seeing at first-hand families and children who otherwise would not access services place their faith in the staff and start connecting through an advocacy approach. This would not have happened if we did not first have the foundations right and those footings were very much grounded in children's play. This is not to repeat the earlier arguments that playwork serves wider interests in society; rather, it is to emphasise that this is a positive outcome that results from community-oriented playwork.

More generally, there are inherent risks in the targeted approach compared to universal playwork provision. Focusing energies on a targeted few and ignoring the majority runs the risk of creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. Inevitably over time situations and issues bubble up within communities and escalate to a point where interventions are needed to remedy behaviours. Ignoring the needs of the majority within our communities and allowing for alienation and resentment to fester can create a natural breeding ground for discord leading to eruptions such as the 2011 London riots, which were led primarily by young people. Although there were multiple factors leading up to these

disturbances back in 2011, earlier systemic failures were identified in meeting the needs of young people (Morrell, Scott, McNeish & Webster, 2011). Morrell et al (2011) found that how and whether young people acted for the buzz, to get 'free stuff' or to get back at the police depended on a range of factors. Boredom linked to 'nothing better to do' was described as an important 'nudge' factor by young people and those that were unemployed or had no structured activities in their lives were more likely to get involved (Morrell et al, 2011). The report said: "Young people described their normal lives as boring and talked about "nothing happening around here. The riots were seen as an exciting event, a day like no other." Providing universal provision may act as a thermostat on a pressure cooker, negating the need for targeted intervention in crisis situations.

Conclusion

When asked recently, what does 'return on investment' look like in relation to children's universal play work, I answered, over time, a well balanced adult who makes a valuable contribution to society. It just takes a little bit of investment, patience and humanity to make any real difference. Like most effective strategies, keeping the vision and approach simple gets results.

Our children deserve a better stake in where they live, and it is we as the adults who have the power and influence to make a stand for the rights of children. Political leaders and policy makers should look closely at the positive impacts of what play has to offer and how this correlates with developing communities, the enrichment of community life and general wellbeing. New models of cost/benefit analysis are required to evidence the serious impact of what playwork can bring to this agenda, and decision makers who are searching for answers to social problems must reconsider the apparent value and appeal of a focused playwork approach as an early intervention strategy. Our leaders need to have the courage to lean into the discomfort of the unknown by embracing universal playwork provision as key component in building our communities.

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Biography

Ross Podyma is Director of Social Change, Sporting Communities Community Interest Company, UK. Ross is passionate about building relationships in communities to activate people and create social and political change through collective action. He advocates for playwork as an integral strategy for community change and wellbeing. Prior to his current position Ross worked in various roles with British local authorities including management and strategic responsibilities and commissioning services for children and families. He has managed play services, detached and centre based youth provisions, children centres and neighbourhood transformational initiatives.