Bursting the bubble or opening the door? Appraising the impact of austerity on playwork and playwork practitioners in the UK

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Fiscal austerity and rolling back of the State in the UK

The Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition government that was elected to govern the UK in May 2010 initiated an 'austerity programme', which had the overarching aim of addressing a government budget deficit. The Coalition's Public Spending Review in October 2010 instigated a programme (framed as 'unavoidable', 'essential') to reduce national public spending by £81billion by 2015, via funding cuts to national government departments and Local Authority budgets (HM Treasury 2010). The Review was explicitly accompanied by calls to reform and rationalise service-provision, 'cut waste', and roll back the depth and breadth of government involvement in everyday life, retracting control and responsibility for direct provision of many public services (BBC, 2010).

As it is not a statutory service, play provision is not a direct target for budget cuts. However, its status as a non-statutory service means that playwork has been particularly vulnerable to secondary cuts and services are seen as more 'discretionary'. Tasked to operate with smaller budgets, local government has predictably sought to protect what is required to fulfil its statutory obligations, and swingeing cuts to non-statutory services such as play spaces, playwork and youthwork have been reported in many local areas (Vasagar, 2010, Kane and Allan, 2011, NYA, 2011). Indeed, emerging evidence from agencies such as NSPCC (2011), UNICEF (Ortiz et al., 2011), and the Family and Parenting Institute (Browne, 2012, Hopwood et al., 2012) suggest that statutory and non-statury services designed for children and young people are disproportionately vulnerable to servuce cuts and closures in contexts of austerity politics.

The Leicester Seminar: *Playwork in Times of Austerity*

In May of 2013, the Geographies of Children, Youth and Families Research Group of the Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) organised a one-day a seminar at the University of Leicester to discuss the issue of *Playwork in Times of Austerity.* The idea behind the event was to provide a forum in which academic geographers could interact with playwork practitioners to consider the issues and responses to what was pre-conceived as a contemporary crisis for play in the UK. In addition to some invited keynote speakers (Tim Gill reflecting on his experiences of New Labour's support for play provision; and Mick Conway's ruminations on a long and distinguished playwork career), the day afforded opportunities for a wide range of papers to be presented. Thirty delegates attended and eighteen papers were presented, with both delegates and presentations split equally across academics and playwork practitioners. In addition to Mick Conway's keynote address and two sets of three formal papers to the themes of 'cuts in focus' and 'rethinking what matters', there was also a Pecha Kucha session comprising nine mini-presentations, which provided concise and focused commentary on very specific aspects of 'play, playwork and austerity.'

This collection in the *Journal of Playwork Practice* brings together those six papers from the Leicester seminar that focused more directly on issues for playwork and playwork practitioners (as opposed to those papers that concerned broader issues around children's play). Three themes are addressed, i.e. 'the big picture', 'austerity as opportunity' and 'information for a change.' Although focused on the significance for playwork of 'the era of austerity', it is important to acknowledge that this fiscal climate does not operate in a vacuum; there are other significant and recent playwork developments explored below that may help understand the ways in which austerity has impacted on playwork in the UK.

Playwork context I: Professionalisation of playwork

The birth of the *Journal of Playwork Practice* is arguably indicative of the way in which playwork has developed in recent years, with moves to practitioner qualification, standardization of principles and approaches, and formal writing and scholarly activity in relation to playwork practice. More generally, professionalisation is now characteristic of the way in which many occupations prepare recruits for the workplace. Nurses, journalists,

designers and all manner of other professions now have a university degree pathway to enter the world of work. For others – for example, policing and business management – a university degree can be a pathway to accelerated promotion and career advancement. Playwork has been part of this trend. However, while there are a few university professors who specialise in playwork in the UK (Professor Fraser Brown at Leeds Metropolitan University and Professor Perry Else at Sheffield Hallam University) and a few universities that offer playwork qualifications (University of Gloucestershire and Edge Hill University, in addition to those in which Perry and Fraser are based), it is significant that other universities have withdrawn provision of playwork at full Degree level in recent years (e.g. Northumbria University and the University of East London has stopped recruiting to its *Playwork and Youth Studies* degree).

Arguing that "professional, well-trained playworkers are a key part of the children's workforce" (SkillsActive, nd), SkillsActive aims to enhance the professional development of the playwork workforce, including those working in adventure playgrounds, play centres, after school clubs, holiday play-schemes, and mobile play-schemes operating from buses and vans. Playwork qualifications are available in award, certificate and/or diploma format at Levels 2 through 5. Furthermore, sub-Honours level *Foundation* degrees in Playwork can be pursued at the University of Brighton and several Colleges of Higher Education in England. The *Playwork Education and Training Council for the UK* and the *The All Party Parliamentary Group on Play* also have a remit to discuss issues of importance to playwork education.

Thus, the bulk of the professionalisation of the playwork workforce is at sub-degree level and the profession does not have equivalent status (and remuneration) to others which require a degree as the normal point of entry to the workplace. While it would be counter-productive to suggest that all playwork practitioners must be educated to degree level, it might equally be considered damaging to the profession that degree level qualifications are not required much more widely in the playwork sector.

Playwork context II: Compelling narrative for play … and playwork?

The play sector in the UK now presents a convincing case for play provision. Each of the national play organisations has its own briefing that extols the value of play (e.g. Cole-Hamilton, 2012 for Scotland). Play is promoted not only for its inherent value (most definitions of play make reference to play being 'intrinsically motivated'), but also for the contribution it makes to achieving wider social goals (Play England, 2009) (Powell, 2009). The seminal publication, in the UK at least, which stated the case for play was *Best Play,* the Department of Culture and Media commissioned report on 'what play provision should do for children' (Playlink, NPFA and Children's Play Council, 2000). According to *Best Play*, the benefits to children and young people, and the community from a strategic approach to play provision are profound. It was argued that play:

- Provides children with opportunities to enjoy freedom, and exercise choice and control over their actions;
- Offers children opportunities for testing boundaries and exploring risk;
- Offers a very wide range of physical, social and intellectual experiences for children;
- Fosters children's independence and self-esteem;
- Develops children's respect for others and offers opportunities for social interaction;
- Supports the child's well-being, healthy growth and development;
- Increases children's knowledge and understanding; and
- Promotes children's creativity and capacity to learn.

Best Play preceded *Getting Serious About Play*, a report to government, chaired by Rt. Hon Frank Dobson MP, which made recommendations about priorities for play provision (Department of Culture, Media and Sports, 2004). The investment in play provision that followed is testament to the veracity of the case that was presented.

Nevertheless, it might be questioned whether a compelling narrative in support of play extends to playwork and playwork practitioners. It is questionable whether as convincing a case has been made for the contribution of skilled professionals in ensuring that the benefits of play are realized. This is not to suggest that the case cannot be made. Nor is it to suggest that the arguments in favour of playwork are not being articulated (SkillsActive, 2011). Rather, it must be questioned whether the play message articulates the value of playwork as strongly as it articulates the value of play, and whether the playwork message is received as warmly as the play message by the wider public and those responsible for resource allocation.

Playwork context III: Emerging opportunities for new professional alliances

As already noted, a key aim of the Leicester workshop was to constitute an opportunity for playwork practitioners and academic geographers with research interests in childhood and youth to engage in discussion and debate. The discussions proved to be be fruitful, fascinating, thought-provoking, sometimes spiky, always impassioned, and certainly suggestive of all manner of opportunities for future debate and collaboration. Indeed, in our editorial conclusion to this collection we suggest four ways in which academic researchers and playworkers might productively work in collaboration: in developing new modes of playwork practice; as play champions; as research partners; and/or in developing new understandings of play.

Discussions which emerged during the workshop – and which are extended in the written papers presented in this collection – suggested that such future alliances between playwork practitioners and academic researchers could usefully address some specific issues, debates and questions.

First, there is surely scope for academic researchers and playwork practitioners to work together to develop and share more effective, robust, nuanced, transferable research methods to evaluate the efficacy of playwork practice. It is striking that so many playwork practitioners continue to be engaged in all manner of fabulous, affirmative, innovative work; and yet the published evidence base for the efficacy of playwork practice is arguably patchy. Certainly, the existing evidence base does not really do justice to the quality, richness and vividness of the playwork practice itself; certainly, in the eyes of austerity-lashed budgetary decision-makers, the extant evidence might not amount to a compelling case for investing in professional playwork practitioners. So, working together to enhance the quality and quantity of evidence about the worth and outcomes of playwork practice in diverse contexts would be valuable.

Second, collaborations between academic researchers and playwork practitioners could also develop and demand more robust and careful evaluations of larger-scale policy interventions relating to play provision. For example, the decade around the Millennium was one of unprecedented national investment in children's play in England: with grant funding for national play organisations (1997-1999), the National Lottery 'Better Play'

programme (2000-2002), the National Lottery 'Children's Play Initiative' (2003-2005), and investment by the then Department for Children, Schools and Families to support a National Play Strategy (2006-2008), over £400 million pounds was invested, specifically to improve provision for children's play… However, the indicators which are employed to evidence the outcomes of this investment are rarely compelling. Towards the end of this period of investment, 'satisfaction with parks and play areas' was one of the portfolio of National Indicators used by central and local government to monitor change in key aspects of life in England. For example, evidence from the first two years of data collection reported a shift from satisfaction with parks and play areas in England being a minority experience for children in 2008/09 (46% of children were satisfied) to a majority experience in 2009/10 (54% of children were satisfied) (Data4NR, nd). Satisfaction reportedly increased in each of the nine Government Office Regions (i.e. throughout the length and breadth of England) and in all but four of the 143 County Council/Unitary Authority/Urban Boroughs which provided sufficient data for both years. However, only collecting data about children's satisfaction with *parks* and *play* areas will invariably fail to provide a full assessment of the quality of play provision experience *as lived* by children, young people, familes and playwork practitioners (see Lester and Russell 2010). There is no evidence to suggest that this particular indicator can effectively capture the wider totality of play experiences. This preoccupation with parks and play areas is just one example of the relatively limited metrics which are often used to assess national play policies. So, there is work to be done to develop and disseminate more effective research and evaluation practices in relation to large scale play provision interventions.

Third, geographical researchers and playwork practitioners could work together to develop better understandings of the spaces where children, young people and familes play (or *do not* play). At the Leicester workshop, it was notable that practitioners and academics alike possessed a wealth of knowledge about opportunities and barriers to play in diverse settings… but there was a sense that both constituencies could do more to share evidnece and know-how, to each-other and to other communities of policy-makers, practitioners and stakeholders. This is particularly important since there is abundant evidence that many chilkdren and young people do not live in environments which are particularly conduicive to play. For example, evidence from households with a child aged between six and twelve in Scotland (using the Scottish Household Survey) (Scottish Government, 2013) indicates that

one-in-ten children have no access to a play area in their neighbourhood (12%) and the majority do not have access to a neighbourhood games pitch (56%), open space or field (51%), school playground (66%) or natural environment or wooded area (57%). A significant proportion of those with neighbourhood access to such play environments are concerned about children's safety in travelling to these areas. For example, one-in-three parents (33%) do not consider it safe for children to walk or cycle alone to their neighbourhood playground, and one-in-four parents (27%) do not think it would be safe for them to do so even in the company of two or three friends. Parental concerns for personal safety *in* neighbourhood play environments are also high – ranging from 43% who would be concerned that their child would be the victim of bullying by children when playing in parks to 28% who would be concerned at bullying from children on neighbourhood streets and roads. Similarly, parents are concerned that their children would be harmed in neighbourhood playspace by adults; ranging from 46% for natural play environments, to 27% of parents expressing concern at the threat from adults on neighbourhood streets.

Fourth, as these latter points suggest, there is a need for academic researchers and playwork practitioners to do more to collectively question, debate, critique and tackle contemporary cultural norms and anxieties about play. For example, playwork practitioners and academic researchers surely have a critical role to fulfil in reshaping contemporary assumptions about risk and safety. The full play potential of neighbourhood play resources will not be realised until parents (and other responsible adults) are reassured, better informed and relaxed about the dangers that children are perceived to face. In part, then, we might work together to develop better understandings of the roots of parental anxieties, and develop playwork practices which address and allay these fears. In part, too, we might engage in more debate and self-reflection: to consider how we might be complicit in reproducing assumptions about risk, anxiety, 'stranger danger' and public space, or nostalgia about the 'good old days', in our actions as practitioners, educators, or family and community members.

The potential benefits to be gained through these kinds of alliances require a commitment for academic researchers and playwork practitioners to do more to engage and accommodate one-another. For example, these alliances will require commitments to:

- **Sharing resources** – For example, academic researchers should ensure that relevant evidence is disseminated in an accessible language, and also provide opportuntites for insights and data from peer-reviewed academic publications like *Children's Geographies* or *Children, Youth and Environment* to be shareable with playwork practioners.
- **Developing collaborative working practices** – Academic researchers and playwork practitioners should find innovative ways of of involving one-another in debates, events, projects, activities, funding applications and everyday practices. Perhaps we should simply try to do more stuff together.
- **Fostering a culture of debate** – Academic researchers and playwork practitioners should work to develop a culture of communication and willing to be open and accomodating to one-another's positions, imperatives and experiences. This might take some time, but the benefits could be considerable.

Introduction to this collection

The opening theme comprises two papers which take different approaches to chart *The Big Picture.* Mick Conway, a highly respected and leading figure in the UK playwork sector for a quarter century, reflects on a career's worth of effort as a playwork practitioner in 'making the case for play'. Noting that the world of playwork and the world in which children play have both changed, Mick considers whether playwork is still able to demonstrate its relevance in responding to the key challenges of the day. An overview of a different sort is provided by Chris Martin, Playwork Convenor of UNITE's Community and Youth Worker's National Committee. Chris reports from two recent national surveys (2011, 2013), conveying not only a sense of the scale of the cuts, but also eliciting thoughts on what these cuts mean for playwork and the playwork practitioners who must deal with them.

Austerity as opportunity is the second theme that is considered. It can be argued that government cuts to play provision are not necessarily all bad news. Although Fiona Thompson, a Senior Play Officer within East Riding of Yorkshire Council would not argue that the cuts in her area are to be encouraged, she explores whether they inadvertently provide opportunities for collaborative practice and permit playwork practitioners the opportunity to apply their inherently creative approach to play to the organizational workplace. Paul Hocker, Development Team Manager with London Play considers whether new

opportunities extend beyond forging alliances across the corridors of local government. Paul is involved in the street play movement, supporting residents and grassroots organisations to reclaim their street as a playspace for children and adults alike.

The final theme, *Information for a change,* comprises one paper that considers the ways in which playwork practitioners can evidence the positive impact of the work that they do. It is authored by a playworker who straddles academia and the wider world of play. Hilary Smith has a more conventional playwork background and is highly regarded for her work in supporting the learning and development of playwork practitioners in the south-west of England. Based at the University of Gloucestershire, Hilary argues that there is a need for playwork practitioners to provide robust evidence to demonstrate the value of their work and finds the concept of 'well-being ' one which has currency in advancing arguments in support of play and playwork.

Finally, the authors of this introductory note return in conclusion to summarise the key points. We identify four overarching themes to emerge across the papers and identify action points for playwork and playwork practitioners in the UK, and beyond.

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