

Practice-based research in children's play.

Russell, Lester & Smith (Eds), 2017. Review by Alexandra Long

'Practice-based research in children's play', edited by Wendy Russell, Stuart Lester and Hillary Smith provides a fascinating insight into how it is, to study post graduate play programmes at the University of Gloucestershire. Threads that run through the text are reflective of the expertise and research interests of the editorial team and the book is useful for anyone interested in the study of children's play. This is certainly an essential text for anyone considering undertaking postgraduate research in this area of study, as not only does each chapter offer a succinct and focused literature review, but the breadth of methods and research foci considered, is diverse.

The book draws together twelve summaries of practice-based research, undertaken by former students of the post graduate courses from the UK and USA. These contributions are collated as three loosely themed sections of: Time; 'Here & Now', Space; 'Here & There', and 'Playfulness & Well-being'. The editors offer an opening chapter providing the context for this timely publication and in this initial chapter, provide a sense of the personal value of engaging in post graduate study, specifically focused on the study of children's play. The inclusions of citations from the contributors capture, as Wisker (2008) identifies, the development of self-awareness and self-actualisation associated with engaging in postgraduate research.

Russel, Lester & Smith, outline how the contributors are making no claims for universality, generalisability or replicability, instead they are looking "for different questions to ask, different ways to see, feel and do the production of knowledge about children and playing" (p. 4) this is something evidenced throughout as contributors 'play' at evolving research methods. Both the opening and concluding chapters discuss the complexity associated with the production of knowledge in relation to children's play, attempting to propel the field in alternative directions for the identification of "other forms of value" (p 3) of children's play.

The chapters offer a snapshot of current and developing research. This is reflected in the evidently evolving thinking of some contributions and the partially formed nature of others. Nevertheless, as a collection, they confidently push at methodological boundaries, and offer suggestions for extending and developing future studies. The research studies are small in scale, undertaken by what may be perceived as novice researchers, though as identified by the editorial team, the contributors can by no means be described as 'novice' practitioners in their respective fields. As practitioners, they often fill senior roles and are embedded and engaged within their sector which include: Adventure Playgrounds, Children's Museums, Local Authorities and Sport and Physical Activity.

In Chapter nine, Fitzpatrick and Handscomb describe their research participants as operating as a community of practice, defined by Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner's as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (2015, Cited in Fitzpatrick and Handscomb, 2017 p. 153). This definition appears quite applicable to the chapter's authors as members of a community of practice within their particular fields, and as a collective of play and playwork researchers.

The chapters offer tantalising insights into the individual studies, frequently leaving the reader wanting more. In chapter six, Dickerson's study is a case in point. She explores child and adult

encounters with the spaces of children's museums, applying "alternative research methodologies drawn from diverse practices such as performance studies and performance art" (p. 96). Attempting to move the focus away from evaluation of the Children's Museum environment against education impact measures, Dickerson utilises arts based research methods to develop a 'ludoartographic' approach (p106). She provides a short summary of three experiments undertaken, based on three different art works. A particularly captivating extract from her research was based on the relational aesthetic artist, Tino Sehgal's work "This is So Contemporary" which focuses on interpersonal encounters (Art Gallery of New South Wales, ND). Dickerson instructs Museum Playworkers to engage with children, in a spy game, creating a relational experience between the children and the Museum Playworkers, evidently extending and deepening the level of engagement of the children and staff with the space.

There are many other highlights within the book: Coppard's involvement of different artists in her research, to observe children's play in public space in Chapter five, offers an opportunity to explore "subjective and embodied ways of knowing" (P.78) and in chapter four, Williams makes inroads in unpicking the unique offer of Adventure Playgrounds to children and communities. This is done through personal reflection and analysis of participant "Spoken and unspoken narratives" (P. 64), utilising participant memories and extracts from the data to provide a rich insight into the significance of the adventure playground environment for the users.

Stephen Smith, in chapter eleven, critiques the professional and ethical framework for Playwork – The Playwork Principles (PPSG, 2005), particularly in relation to their emphasis on the "freely chosen and personally directed" nature of children's play. He does this in relation to disabled children, specifically those with profound and multiple learning disabilities and seeks ways to support staff, in guiding their practice when working with this group of children.

Many of the studies use traditional qualitative research approaches, though much of the concluding chapter, authored by the editors, grapples with the epistemological, ontological and ethical divide, and suggests a middle-ground when researching children's play. They offer a challenge to what Sutton-Smith, (1997) discussed as the 'progress rhetoric' – the value placed on play as learning and development for children as future adults. Here, the editors offer recommendations for influencing policy affecting children's play, suggesting a move from the positivist focus of 'evidence based', towards an approach which influences policy in a way that "challenges the inequitable status quo" (p. 253). This they suggest, should reflect the actual way in which policy is influenced and argue for play advocates to find ways of articulating the intrinsic, instrumental and institutional value of play. They playfully suggest that "more-than-representational and diffractive methodologies can help enliven the drab accounting of linear and technical 'what works' evidences and can also open up the cracks to expose what these methods exclude" (p. 254), thereby providing opportunities of possibilities for new approaches to supporting children's play. This book certainly provides a starting point for this to occur.

The text offers anyone new to the study of children's play an insight into its diversity and the novel methodologies that can be applied to this child-centric area of study. 'The book's breadth and range affords it use and value to practitioners, students and researchers alike. This has the potential to stimulate 'novice' researchers to undertake new and novel research, providing

a supportive introduction to the wonders of studying children's play. It is a welcome and valued addition to our Student's reading list!

## **Bibliography**

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## **Biography:**

Alexandra is a Senior Lecturer and Course Director for the BA (Hons) Childhood Development & Playwork degree programme at Leeds Beckett University.