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Junk modelling at the British Science Festival: A reflection on non-directive play practice

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Swansea University run a Masters course in Developmental and Therapeutic play. This course has both an academic and practical component where students are required to run six play sessions to deliver and reflect on non-directive play practice. Non-directive play practice is underpinned by the eight principles of Axline (19xx) where children are encouraged to lead and develop their play supported by the adult and using reflection as outlined by Kolb (1984) using the four areas of: concrete experience; reflective observation; abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. Both non-directive play practice and reflective practice are used in many different contexts that include therapy (Jennings, 1999) and Playwork (Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group (PPSG, 2005); Kilvington & Wood, 2008).

In September 2016, Swansea University played host to the British Science Festival (BSF) where between the 6th to the 11th September a range of lectures, seminars and workshops were organised to show the diversity of work and research in Swansea across the scientific spectrum. This included staff and students, with support from Trysordy the scrapstore in Carmarthenshire, to run a series of Junk Modelling Workshops as part of the Family Weekend at the National Waterfront Museum in Swansea. The workshops aimed to encourage families to engage in play and to consider the science of play and the brain with regards to the theory of loose parts (Nicholson, 1971). The theory of loose parts states “In any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it” (Nicholson, 1971: p). With scrap supplied by Trysordy, the range of loose variables were as small as

buttons to as large as five feet cardboard tubes, old records, material of all shapes, sizes and textures, glue and strong adhesive tape. As families played with the scrap material, our students also discussed how play can stimulate all areas of the brain using large scale 'flashing brain' constructed for us by the Swansea University Engineering department.

What turned out initially to be 4 x 45 minute workshops for 25 people (a total of 100 people) turned out as a 5 hour continuous workshop with over 300 people. Children, with their parents and grandparents spent between 5 minutes to 90 minutes making a range of models from as small as pencil holders and flowers to as large as dinosaurs, planes, a totem pole and even a swing. From an observational stance, children and adults were engaged in play supported by our students and it was evident that the different supportive intervention roles as outlined by Sturrock and Else (1998) where the students intervention was at a minimal and was on hand if needed (play maintenance), provided resources when needed (simple involvement) and engaged in helping to make models together (medial intervention). It was clearly evident the students were engaging in non-directive play practice and using the Kolb Cycle, two of our student provided a reflective account of the 5 hour play session:

Reflection 1: Sally Fung, part-time student in Developmental and Therapeutic Play

“The architect, Simon Nicholson, wrote in 1972 that the greater the variety of objects available the more creative and inventive children would be. The vast number of objects on offer at the Junk Modelling session had a variety of textures, size, materiality and colour. It was exciting just to unpack the materials and set them up for the children as ideas flowed through the minds of the playworkers. One type of object, a heavy cardboard spool from a woollen mill, was used by different children, to make a sheep, a robot, a girl, the cone of a rocket and a monster, amongst other

things. The children were enthusiastic and excited in their discoveries and there seemed to be an organized chaos as the design processes of the creations evolved as more materials were found and used. The parents, led by the children, were actively participating in discussions about design and construction. One observation they seemed to be enjoying the making of objects as much as the children with one family of four creating a six foot totem pole. They were also able to impart practical skills to their children in a relaxed and enjoyable environment, leaving all with a sense of achievement and pride in their various constructions.

The non-directed play session allowed families an opportunity to create something together from scratch, without any judgement or criticism, and have fun together. It allowed children a chance to explore diverse textures, empowering them as they were in control of the design. The play session allowed children to use all parts of their brains as they excitedly talked about what they wanted to make, walked around rummaging for different objects to use and manipulating those objects into a design that they had thought about. As Nicholson said ...”all children love to play, experiment, discover and invent and have fun...” and this is exactly what they did”.

Reflection 2: Kate Ashton, second year part-time Masters Developmental and Therapeutic Play student

“As the room was being set up in readiness for the day consideration was given to the accessibility of the resources to ensure that all children would be able to explore and choose what they required in order to build their model. A wide variety of materials were on offer which offered a range of textures, size, colour and malleability lending themselves to be adapted in a variety of ways, which according to Nicholson (1971) would encourage greater creativity and imagination from the children. As the day progressed resources were monitored and replenished when necessary, it was intriguing to see how different children used the same item in varying ways but also how many children made similar models such as

space rockets – this demonstrated affordances and was an example of this theory in practice (Heft 1988).

Initially the plan had been to run workshops lasting approximately 45 minutes but a decision was quickly made to amend this to the day being run as drop in sessions which was felt would better serve the varying needs of the children and this was proven to be the correct decision with some families remaining for approximately 30 minutes yet others for up to 2 hours. By adapting the day in this way children were able to set the pace of their creations and a play cycle was observed to take place within many families as the child considered what resources were available to them then, having chosen their objects, took them to their families as a cue to invite them to play with them. As the child chose what it was they wanted to create a play frame ensued with the parents responding and assisting in the creation of the model – creating a flow in play. Varying levels of intervention were observed among the families generally depending on the complexity of the constructions with adults at times only being required to hold an object for the child whilst at other times complex assistance was required from the adult. There were occasions where adulteration was observed as adults attempted to enforce their ideas on the child in order to, in their eyes, improve the model . Interestingly on most of these occasions this was rejected by the child. On one occasion where adulteration was observed however the child quickly lost interest in the model and went off to make something else independently, leaving the adult to complete the original model by themselves. Once the children had had enough of modelling or had completed their model annihilation took place with the child coming to a natural end in their play cycle and leaving the environment (Sturrock & Else, 1998).

Throughout the day it was interesting to observe the dialogue between the children and adults as they problem solved how best to achieve the desired model, on occasion trialling a

number of different methods. Opportunities were provided through the non-directive approach for the children to construct their models with the full attention of the adult in a safe environment free of criticism, involving the adult in the process whilst at the same time allowing the child to maintain control. Above and beyond anything else it was apparent that if they had gained nothing else from attending the workshop they had had fun and enjoyed spending quality time as a family creating a model with the various creations being taken home with pride”.

From the first observation, the comment on “flowed through the minds of the playworkers” identified the aspect that as practitioners we have our own ideas, and although these should not dominate the play situation, these ideas can often spark thoughts and ideas in others. Another important point raised in both reflections was the “relaxed and enjoyable environment” and the “safe environment free of criticism” where families were manipulating the resources available into a range of models. Burghardt (2006) under his fifth criterion for recognizing play makes reference to the “relaxed field” (p77), where if animal is free from stress, fed and healthy, they are more likely to engage in play behaviour. Although no food was provided, what we did notice was that over the five hours the workshop ran; we did not notice or hear any ‘disruptive’ or ‘negative behaviour’. No children were being ‘told-off’ and parents and children were actively engaged in making models.

Whereas the workshop team engaged in play maintenance, simple intervention and medial intervention, it was observed that parents not only participants in these roles, but complex intervention was occurring (Sturrock & Else, 1998). Parents and children were talking together, using their imaginations and playing out scenarios, as indicated in the second reflection. This reflection, as well as both children and adults working together, there was also occasions where the adult (parent) attempted to take over the play, but was ‘rejected’ by the child.

The non-directive approach to play within these workshops reflects the many aspects of the Playwork Principles (Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group (PPSG, 2005) where the child directs the play and the adult supports the process of play rather than the outcome. Non-directive play practice, as shown within the reflective accounts, can support children's play in a range of different contexts, this one a family junk modelling workshop at the British Science Festival in Swansea.

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