



The value of playwork provision in Manchester

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The value of playwork provision in Manchester: a small-scale qualitative study

Foreword

This report opens with three observations of events that happened in different Manchester playwork settings:

- It is a busy evening at a playwork session based in a youth centre in North Manchester. Children are moving all over the setting, when at one point a playworker passes an older child, they both pause, stand facing each other and break out into a clapping routine, synchronising movements and rhythms before continuing on their way with smiles on their faces (HBYC Observation notes)
- Some children are sitting at a table with a playworker casually making things with available stuff (paper, pens, scissors, glue etc.) – as they sit, they are continually chatting away about the forthcoming school play, telling stories of getting into trouble at school and revealing nicknames. One of the girls turns to the playworker and suggests his name should be ‘weirdo’. This becomes a repeated refrain amongst the children for a short while, encouraged by the playworker who performs ‘weird’ movements and voices, and occasionally reappears through the rest of the session (BMCA observation notes).
- At an evening play session, children are moving in and outdoors. There are some children sitting on the floor in the cabin making things with cardboard boxes – one of the children puts a hinge on a box and then goes outside. He climbs into the box and pulls the lid down and then jumps up to scare children and playworkers as they walk/run past (AC observation notes)

These seem to be fairly mundane and banal moments that would largely go unnoticed in the frantic movements and noise within each setting. Yet these events, along with countless other examples from three case study playwork settings are significant and matter. In their small way, they contribute to creating an environment that is different from other settings in which children pass through in their daily lives. They mark out a particular rhythm and series of encounters, what might be called a ‘refrain’, that establishes a prevailing playful feel.

For the most part, playworkers seem to intuitively tune-in to this but often have difficulty in appreciating and articulating the value of such practices; as one interview reveals, there is a constant questioning 'does that make sense' when trying to explain the overall intention of their approach. Often the significant rhythms, routines, habits and events get lost by reducing what happens in these settings to activity (the children are doing arts and crafts, playing hide and seek or making a den).

The contention is that there is so much more happening here and this study attempts to bring this to the foreground in capturing the value of playwork. In doing so it also acknowledges some framing limitations, notably the short time scale to complete this study. This is an opening snapshot, an introduction to the ways in which three playwork settings actively create time and space for playing; it is far from definitive and does not seek to establish universal claims about what playwork offers. The hope here is to establish a way of accounting that does justice to these everyday practices and the contribution they make to co-creating unique environments with children. There is also an ambition that by doing so it offers some clear foundations for valuing the vital role that play has in children's lives, the contribution that playwork makes to supporting this and to shape the future development of play/work development and provision in the city.

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The value of playwork provision in Manchester: Executive summary

This report presents the findings from a small-scale research project that explores the value of playwork provision for children, their families and the wider community in Manchester. It adds to the limited research about playwork to highlight the importance of this form of provision and inform the development of the proposed Manchester Youth and Play Trust. The full report provides details of the ways in which playwork practitioners work with children to co-create environments for playing and what happens as a consequence of this. This summary provides an outline of the approach to exploring playwork value, key themes that emerged from the study and a series of recommendations for consideration by the embryonic Manchester Youth and Play Trust.

Part 1: Introduction

- While the evidence in support of the value of children's play is compelling (1), there is much less evidence that captures the value of playwork. That is not to deny the commitment, skills, and creativity demonstrated by playworkers involved in this study. However, there is little research into what playwork does and how this fits in with wider policy for children
- The relationship between playing and outcomes is ambiguous; most play scholars would express considerable reservations about making any direct cause-effect link with playing and specific and measurable benefits. However, there is agreement that the qualities of playing (unpredictable, spontaneous, emergent and pleasurable behaviour) make a significant contribution to children's well-being i.e. for the time of playing children feel better and this simply gives greater satisfaction in being alive. As noted in the main report, and contrary to popular belief, the opposite of 'play' is not 'work' but 'depression'. **As such, ensuring children have time/space for playing in their everyday environments is a foundational principle for any consideration of what constitutes a good childhood.** Yet, as noted by all parents interviewed in this study, contemporary conditions (predominately fear and anxiety about local environment conditions) limit children's opportunity to play outside of the home. Playwork provision plays an important and valued role in responding to this situation.

Part 2: The context for the study

- Manchester has a long tradition of supporting playwork provision, most recently through a commissioning process that supports 12 voluntary/community organisations in delivering playwork sessions across 20 venues in the city. The commissioning process identifies three strategic outcomes that suggest a link

between playwork provision and wider policy ambitions of tackling poverty and deprivation. While these are vitally important, the ways in which these relate to playwork practice and associated requirements to produce evidence of achieving these outcomes is less clear and there is a degree of vagueness between practice and policy.

- The study draws on and adapts a theoretical model which highlights the complex and multiple values attributed to children's play and by inference playwork provision. These diverse forms are summarised under themes of *intrinsic* (playing has value in itself as an enjoyable experience), *instrumental* (playing may contribute to the development of skills, learning, health etc. and as such can contribute to policy goals) and *institutional* value (playing has value for families and the wider community). These are intertwined and mutually reinforcing, all part of the same provision. **However, the significant feature of this model, and for playwork practice, is that instrumental and institutional value flow from the intrinsic value of playing.** Given this, the primary purpose of playwork is to work with children to co-create an environment that favours the intrinsic value of play. The relationship between intrinsic, instrumental and institutional value is indeterminate and not amenable to direct measurement but that does not preclude attempts to account for *how* playwork practices work and what happens as a consequence of this.
- Using this basic framework, three commissioned voluntary sector play organisations from across the city participated in case study research. Each setting is a unique composition with their own history, relationships, practices, habits, routines, culture and so on. The intention is not to produce a universal and generalizable account but to reveal the diverse processes by which each setting may contribute, or indeed inhibit, the possibilities of children's play emerging. In order to achieve this, a range of methods were used to get at the 'liveliness' of these settings including a range of observation techniques, semi-structured interviews with playworkers and other key stakeholders, and a brief review of available organisational documentation.

Part 3: What playwork does: the co-creation of a play environment

- If the focus falls on the ways in which playwork practice favours the intrinsic value of play, attention switches from specific and planned play activity to the ways in which the setting establishes a prevailing playful feel or atmosphere. **This is constituted and co-created from the arrangement of bodies, materials, patterns of movement, relationships and encounters between children and adults, memories and imaginations and so much more.** The term 'co-creation' implies there is no single organising component and it impossible to distinguish any specific

causal relationship. Part 3 of the report highlights some of the ways in which each setting creates conditions in which all kinds of playful experiences emerge across and is essential reading to get a sense of how playwork works. As the summary to Part 3 suggests each may appear to be relatively minor and insignificant but individually and collectively these moments matter for the children who attend the setting.

Part 4: Appreciating the value of playwork

- Children's active and playful participation in the setting and the pleasure they gain from this is evident across all observations, indicating the intrinsic value of play for play's sake. This is supported in interviews with playworkers who clearly acknowledge the value of provision for children to meet with their friends, mess about, to 'enjoy being a kid' in a relaxed environment and with adults who are different from other adults they encounter in their daily lives. These sentiments are shared by parents who also appreciate the opportunity that children have to do things they might not be able to do elsewhere. Equally parents recognise children's enjoyment of the play sessions and this becomes a prime motivational factor for children's continued attendance.
- Playworkers and parents also attribute instrumental value to children's time at the setting. For playworkers, this may be expressed as learning new skills (social, emotional, problem-solving etc.), yet this is largely secondary and incidental to the primary purpose of creating time/space for playing. A review of limited organisational documentary evidence presents a somewhat different picture by often highlighting instrumental value above other forms. Thus specific planned play activities are linked with outcomes, yet this approach is not evident in observations of practice or discussions with playworkers. Parents, when interviewed, do express instrumental value for children attending playwork provision over a period of time, notably increase in confidence and ability to make friends. This highlights the complex interplay between intrinsic and instrumental value; it is not either/or but mutually reinforcing. But, as the play value model suggests, any trickle down of instrumental benefits stems from the co-creation of playful moments. The evidence collected during this study strongly suggests that playwork makes a significant contribution to moments when children are being-well, i.e. playing, and this in itself should warrant greater value and attention. Alongside this, non-specific and unmeasurable benefits may occur over time.
- As well as intrinsic and instrumental value, the case study settings have considerable institutional value across two interrelated themes, namely family and community life. For parents and playworkers alike, provision is seen as having a 'compensatory' function, i.e. parents largely express grave concerns about letting

their children play out unsupervised, especially during the winter months. They are reassured by the sense of safety that is offered in these settings and at the same time recognise the enjoyment children gain from attending. Parents trust the staff and over time this leads to building positive relationships. Accompanying this, parents also value having some time to themselves to catch up with domestic routines and spend time with other children not attending. While happy with this form of provision parents also express some concern that children can't play out with their friends close to home due to a variety of factors including traffic and adult attitudes to children being out unsupervised. When looking at the origins of the case study settings, they are rooted in local community and resident organisations and have developed provision in response to parental anxieties about the lack of space for their children to play. Many of the playworkers currently working at these settings live locally and became involved as volunteers on holiday playschemes. As one centre manager notes, organisational support to children's play had been of great professional and personal value, building confidence and skills of local people and has acted as a key focal point for wider community development. Another setting reports of community engagement with children and their local environments (sweeping leaves and snow from pathways, litter picks and so on) which is appreciated by residents and challenges general assumptions about children and young people. The manager comments that this institutional value arises from children's enjoyment of being out in their estates, messing about and having drinks and cake afterwards! These are indications that playwork might have wider community value in terms of supporting more play-friendly environments for children. This issue is addressed in more detail in Parts 5 and 6 of the report.

Part 5: Accounting for the value of playwork

- Observations and interviews with playworkers, parents and other key stakeholders suggest that there is a shared appreciation of the value of playwork provision primarily as a place where children can go and play (intrinsic) with complementary instrumental and institutional value. But there are numerous issues in accounting for this. In the context of this study account-ability refers to the ability to articulate and evidence how playwork practice creates conditions for playing and how this relates to broader policy objectives. There are a number of interconnected factors which conspire to limit accountability, as identified throughout this report:
 - ⇒ While the evidence for the benefits of playing is compelling, the ways in which this is expressed in policy at national and local level is less clear. For the most part, the contribution that playing makes to children's everyday lives and being well is significantly under-valued.

- ⇒ In the absence of a clear evidence-led approach to policy making in terms of children's play and playwork, current commissioning outcomes and reporting processes fall short in establishing a congruent practice-evidence-policy framework.
- ⇒ This lack of clarity often results in playworkers struggling to account for their practice and capture the important everyday stuff that contributes to the value of provision.
- ⇒ This is not to deny the importance of the general outcomes determined for playwork provision. But there is much more to be done to articulate the connection between play, playwork and local policy in terms of anti-poverty and community engagement strategies.
- ⇒ In addressing this issue consideration should be given to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child General Comment 17 which calls for countries to pay more attention to the environmental conditions to support children's ability to find time and space to play and the concept of 'play sufficiency' as adopted by the Welsh Government.

Part 6: Conclusion and recommendations

Given the proposal to establish an independent Youth and Play Trust for Manchester, there is an exciting opportunity to re-vision what counts as a good environment by developing a strategic policy-evidence-practice framework that places playing as a central and essential component of children's daily lives. This framework should recognise, retain and enhance the vital role that playwork provision makes as part of a response to support children's health and well-being by creating valuable time/space for playing. It also offers the possibility for playwork to work in partnership with other key stakeholders in local communities to address some of the issues and barriers that limit children's opportunity to find time and space for playing in their immediate environment. As such the report makes a number of interconnected recommendations:

- I. The development of a coherent practice-evidence-policy framework for the future development of playwork provision. There is a compelling case to be made for the relationship between children's play and well-being (and associated benefits that arise from this) but this is undervalued and under-stated in policy and resource allocation.
- II. This study has employed a variety of practice-based methods to capture the value of playwork provision. Given the limited time available, this has been a research-led process. It is recommended that a participative action research project is established with the three case study settings to support practitioners in applying a

range of creative practice based methods and to collect further evidence of value. Over a longer period, this would also enable playworkers to collect meaningful evidence of children's lived experience and value of playwork provision and generate more effective and nuanced materials to evaluate the efficacy of playwork practice.

- III. Findings from this practice-based research would be transferable across all playwork settings in the city. It points to the importance of supporting the emerging Manchester playwork network as a practice forum for sharing examples of good practice and reflect on issues they face in their everyday relationships with children and parents.
- IV. Continued support to the case study settings in the application of a range of practice-based research methods and dissemination with the wider playwork network would also lead to the formation of a practice-evidence based approach to quality of provision in which practice stories, observations, reflections and so on are used to evaluate organisational effectiveness in supporting children's play ('measuring what matters'). It offers the promise of developing a strong community of practice, that can work together to enhance the quality and quantity of evidence about the worth and outcomes of playwork practice in diverse and unique contexts.
- V. While the focus for this study is on commissioned playwork projects, there is a much larger group of playwork practitioners, notably After-School clubs and holiday care schemes who make a significant contribution to supporting children's opportunity to play. It is important to encourage these settings to participate in the play network and ensure that their strategic role is recognised in the Youth and Play Trust
- VI. But there is a greater ambition here. Playwork contributes to *some* children's opportunity to co-create playful moments but if playing is vital to a healthy childhood, then more needs to be done to redress some of the inequalities in the distribution of resources (time and space) for playing in children's everyday environments (institutional and community space). Parents are generally reluctant to let children play outside unsupervised and place great value on playwork provision as a safe place for their children. At the same time, parents often wish that children could play out close to home with friends in a more spontaneous and unstructured manner. Studies with children would certainly support this desire. Playwork settings offer valued 'compensatory' space **and** far greater effort needs to be made to ameliorate and improve the conditions that limit children's opportunity to play out in their local neighbourhoods.

The Youth and Play Trust faces some considerable challenges. Given current political and economic conditions and forces, simply trying to manage services on ever-reducing budgets hoping that things might improve is not sustainable. But there may be other ways of doing things that connect with a broader agenda of building more resourceful communities. Traditional 'dependency' relationships between public services and the community become reconfigured to think and act differently. Playwork also needs to respond to this challenge by taking a leading role within local communities to support the opportunity for children to find and create time and space for playing in the places they live and pass through in their everyday lives. Historically, as noted by the case studies, children's play has been an important issue which brings local communities together; a focus on local 'play sufficiency' can contribute to making local environments more liveable for adults and children alike.

The value of playwork provision in Manchester Part 1: An introduction and background to the study

This report presents the findings from a small-scale research project that considers the value of playwork provision in Manchester. Such a study is timely given the proposed changes to the ways in which Manchester City Council non-statutory services for children and young people will be delivered in the future and is designed to address a number of interconnected themes:

- * To articulate the value of playwork provision in supporting opportunities to play for children and the importance of this for their parents and the wider community
- * To add to the growing evidence base for the value of playwork. Until very recently the lack of research has been a significant weakness and contributes to a general lack of clarity and understanding of the purpose of playwork.
- * To inform the development of a coherent and robust set of values and principles for the proposed Play and Youth Trust that in turn will help shape approaches to the future design and commissioning of playwork services in the city.
- * To look ahead to the changing context for service delivery to consider the role that playwork could have in supporting the development of play-friendly local communities in Manchester. It will pay particular attention to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) General Comment 17 (1) and children's right to play.

1.1 The value of play

A wealth of research evidence exists to support the claim that play is important in children's lives (2). There is general agreement amongst play scholars that play is a voluntary process in which children can co-create time/space that is under their control and when life is a little more vibrant and pleasurable. For a short period, the performance of playing unsettles and enlivens the order of the 'normal' course of life. Such moments also generate a sense of hopefulness, not for some far-off future, but a feeling that there can be more opportunity for playing to come in the present and near-future. Playing arises from a particular disposition to the world i.e. an arrangement of sensations, perceptions and movements that generate an 'anticipatory readiness' (3), alert to the possibilities present in the environment to create a more pleasurable state. As one of the world's leading play scholars notes perhaps the most significant feature of playing is that it simply offers, for the time of playing, greater satisfaction in being alive. He also goes on to say that contrary to popular belief, the opposite of 'play' is not 'work' but

‘depression’ (4). **Given this, ensuring children have time/space for playing in their everyday environments is a foundational principle for any consideration of what constitutes a good childhood.** This is clearly acknowledged in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) General Comment 17 which makes a series of recommendations for countries to ensure that children’s right to play is given higher profile in policies and practices that shape the everyday environments of childhood.

Yet while adults recognise the importance of playing, the value that they attribute to this form of behaviour varies considerably. This is clearly evident in the findings from this study with diverse and sometimes contradictory expressions of ‘play value’ from a range of stakeholders. Such diversity, and the ways in which some of these values gain dominance over others, has significant influence in shaping beliefs and actions in support of children’s play (what might be termed ‘material-discursive effects (5)). The implications of this will be explored in greater detail in this report.

1.2 The nature of playwork

The aim of this report is not to re-state claims for the value of play but to look specifically at the contribution that playwork makes, and can continue to make, to the lives of some children, families and local communities. Most adults, when asked, would appreciate that children generally gain great pleasure and enjoyment from playing. Children can and do play anywhere and everywhere where conditions allow. Yet increasingly for some children, their ability to access time/space for playing may be less than favourable. Again, this is recognised in UNCRC General Comment 17 which cites a range of factors which may contribute to this including poor environmental conditions, educational pressures, adult attitudes and so on. These global concerns are reinforced in this study by parents who consistently express fears about children playing out unsupervised and value ‘safe’, supervised play settings. As one parent comments:

I grew up on an estate and 25 years ago everybody knew everybody and you couldn’t get away with anything – now I think it is not the same – it is not like my days – we didn’t want to go far, played up at the bank – parents just wanted to know who you were playing with... I wouldn’t ever let my children play on the street especially in the winter when it is dark like at this time but even when it is lighter I more or less never let them play out on the street... this for me and really for them is the best outlet for play after school.

This suggests playwork offers a valuable 'compensatory' function in recognition of children's loss of opportunity to play out unsupervised. It underpins a long history of supervised play provision that is shaped and influenced by wider views about the period of childhood. This encompasses two dominant and interconnected strands of thought and practices in which children are portrayed as 'angels and devils' (6): on the one hand childhood is an innocent and dependent state and children need to be carefully supervised and protected; at the same time unsupervised children, especially as they grow older, are seen as 'risky', a potential threat to social order and need to be in the 'right place'.

Mixed-up with this is an over-arching value that play, and by inference playwork, is beneficial for promoting learning and healthy child development. At the same time, and somewhat counter to the previous viewpoints, children are acknowledged as highly competent and active in creating their own worlds and play is a primary expression of children's agency and culture. From this perspective play, rather than preparing children to be better adults, may simply help children be better children.

These themes become entangled in adult practices to support play and some may gain greater prominence according to the audience being addressed and the demands and expectations of policy makers, funders, inspection regimes and other influential stakeholders. In seeking to navigate this, playwork has developed a set of principles (7), endorsed by the playwork sector as an ethical statement of the primary purpose and associated practices of playwork.

For the purposes of this study, there is an opening premise that playwork has the potential to develop a different environment and an environment of being different. In other words, the expectations on children are unlike being at home, school or unsupervised in public space and, because of this, children can be different and express this potential through moments of play and non-sense. Thus, for example, children readily become growling animals crawling on all fours over, under and around a small climbing frame while occasionally breaking out into singing 'Jingle Bells' (BMCA observation). This example, composed from a distinctive form of relationships and arrangements between bodies and things, contributes to what might be termed a 'prevailing playful feel' that generates the possibility of many more of these moments happening, albeit in an indeterminate manner. There is no knowing in advance that becoming singing animals will materialise, it is just one of countless possibilities that exist at any given time within the environment.

Playwork provision attempts to keep this playful potential alive by building and fostering relationships with and between children, designing an attractive environment, and

developing habits, routines and practices that establish and maintain the possibility for moments of playing to emerge. It constitutes a particular atmosphere that supports well-being rather than 'well-becoming'; the future-focused progression that prevails in other childhood institutions are set to one side. Of course, both are vital and inseparable but playwork is complementary by being different and not more of the same.

1.3 Brief context and background to the study

Manchester has a long and proud tradition of playwork provision that includes holiday playschemes, evening play centres, junior youth provision and adventure playgrounds (8). For the most part, the Local Authority has supported playwork through grant-aid to local community groups and city-wide organisations. At national level children's play and associated recognition of the value of playwork was a key element of New Labour's social policy for children as evidenced in 'Getting Serious about Play' (9), the Children's Plan (10) and the English Play Strategy (11) and this led to expansion of provision in Manchester, notably the development of play ranger (Parktastic) sessions in local parks and community spaces and the provision of new and upgraded children's playgrounds.

However, the Coalition government distanced itself from strategic and financial support for children's play, stating that this should be a matter for local communities. This is just one element in a political manoeuvre to reduce state power and impose austerity measures resulting in a protracted and on-going period of cuts to Local Authority services. Playwork provision is non-statutory and discretionary and therefore targeted disproportionately when local authorities are faced with difficult decisions regarding budgets and the need to protect statutory services (12).

This is further exacerbated as the most disadvantaged areas, generally where playwork provision has been more prominent, have experienced a significantly higher reduction in local authority budgets than more affluent areas. Many playwork organisations have closed or experienced funding reductions (13) and are increasingly isolated as local authority play development and support services have been reduced or cut altogether. At the same time, settings are facing increasing pressures to demonstrate outcomes while resources are dwindling and opportunities to update professional skills and knowledge have all but disappeared (14).

In spite of these severe pressures, Manchester City Council has to its great credit maintained some support to local playwork provision through a commissioning programme. Currently 12 organisations are commissioned to deliver playwork sessions at 20 venues. In addition, there is also funding for community groups to run holiday playschemes. Given the limited time available for this study, it only looks specifically at all-year round provision, some of which operates for two-hours every week while others

more often (e.g. case study three offers 5 sessions a week). In line with all services, playwork organisations are increasingly subject to the wider 'New Public Management' systems that have introduced market mechanisms into Local Authorities with an emphasis on establishing and measuring objectives and outcomes and where judgments of 'quality' are generally reduced to results-based accountability and cost-effectiveness. As part of the Commissioning process, City Council funded playwork settings are required to show contract compliance against three broad outcomes:

1. Provision understands and meets the needs of communities at a locality and neighbourhood level, and is targeted to where need and demand is greatest to tackle child poverty and deprivation
2. The number of children from identified vulnerable groups accessing play services increases
3. Local community involvement in the delivery of play provision is enhanced

Setting outcomes is always, by default, a process of defining what matters and undoubtedly the importance of tackling the impact of poverty and deprivation should be considered a priority by local authorities when it comes to planning and allocating resources. However, while the commissioning outcomes are well-intentioned, they give little attention to *how* playwork might matter within broader anti-poverty strategies. It is also evident that the outcomes pay little direct attention to the nature and value of the provision for children and what counts in terms of creating environments for play.

The intention of this study is to redress this imbalance by giving higher profile to playwork practice than currently exists in accounting systems, to capture what matters for children and their families. That is not to deny the usefulness of population data and deprivation indices, and recording numbers and background of children who attend each setting; but there is so much more at stake here.

The casual dance and clapping encounter between playworker and child, sitting around chatting and general teasing over nicknames, hiding in a box to scare other children and playworkers as they pass, and the many other examples featured in this report are minor everyday examples that contribute to the unique feel of a play setting. It is from these encounters that other outcomes and benefits *may* accrue. Practitioners working in an environment where 'effectiveness' and 'quality' are externally defined and where outcomes are pre-established face considerable difficulties in making judgments that are relevant to the context of their everyday working practices. There is a real possibility that

the important ways in which playworkers actually get on with their day-to-day tasks and relationships become de-valued in accounting procedures. Indeed, practitioners often have difficulty in articulating the value of their practice; as interviews reveal, they are infused with doubts that descriptions of practice may not be valid in terms of expected outcomes. As one playworker notes. 'we are creating an environment where kids can mess about but we can't say that' and so they adopt a different language which generally seeks to justify provision in terms of the presumed relationship between play, child development and learning.

While the value of playing is indisputable, it is very difficult to attribute any direct cause-effect relationship between playing, playwork and specific and measurable outcomes; indeed, this may be difficult to prove in any public service yet this is increasingly the yardstick for policy and service provision (15). However, this does not preclude approaches that attempt to account for value.

The question is less about why play is important but to consider what are the valuable processes and practices of playwork (*how* does it work?) and what happens as a consequence; it is a qualitative perspective that considers the range of actions and relationships developed in playwork provision, their influence on children's ability to play and the contribution this makes to families and the wider community. As such, the study seeks to pay more attention to the messy, embodied, performative skills, intuitions, sensations and practices of playwork that generally defy explicit articulation and representation, what may be referred to as an 'ineffable knack' (16). By doing so it offers the possibility of establishing promising foundations that can establish meaningful indicators for quality provision that do not distort or dismiss practice.

Given the proposals to reconfigure the strategic focus and infrastructure to support the future delivery of playwork services in the city, this study is also an opportunity to shape some key values and principles to take forward into the development of the Manchester Youth and Play Trust.

Part 2: Developing an approach

2.1 Introduction

As noted in the previous section, the intention of this study is to explore the contribution that playwork makes to the lives of some children, families and local communities. In order to undertake this task, it is important to clarify a position and establish how this affects the approach. While the case for the value of play is well-made, the same cannot be said for playwork. That is not to devalue the creative, sensitive and innovative practices of playworkers, but more about the failure to develop methods that can capture this in meaningful ways. . One notable exception is Beunderman's (17) research for Demos/Play England and this is adopted and adapted to this study.

A starting point, and in line with the discussion to date, is the recognition that play has diverse 'value' for key stakeholders. In very general terms these may be summarised as:

- **Intrinsic value:** For children, play is valued for moments of pleasure, being with friends, messing about, and having a brief period in their everyday routines when the pressures of being a pupil, son/daughter, future-citizen and so on are set to one side; in Beunderman's model this is termed intrinsic value i.e. play has value in itself. This value is evident in much of the contemporary studies of children's play which highlight the *immediate benefits* of playing (18). The dilemma for research and policy is that much of this is difficult to articulate. When children are asked about what they have been doing, they may often respond with a shrug of the shoulders and say 'nothing'. For example, an observation in one play setting reveals the following:

Children and playworkers are sitting at a table with range of drawing materials – the children want to do a picture for a school competition to design a cover for the school Christmas play programme. There was a great deal of 'nonsense' as children were drawing - initiated by one child talking about the three 'rice men' which led to lots of laughter and word play between children and adults that somehow including an ironing board and a peacock. Further bouts of playful banter and laughter around adult and children's pictures followed, one child suggesting that a design looked like a pizza. Another child drew a snowman on top of a stable 'I didn't think they had snowmen in those days' commented one child – which led to further nonsense which involved 'an ironing board with a penguin on it' (AC observation)

Children are unlikely to recall this moment if asked by an adult ‘what do you like playing’? It does not translate into a rational and linear account; its very irrationality defies description to someone who is not part of the event. But feeling compelled to answer questions about likes/dislikes children may offer answers that are consistent with adult expectations, often describing a specific activity (football, pool, arts and crafts, den-making and so on). While these have value, the naming of an activity glosses over all the other things that contribute to children’s enjoyment. This will be discussed in more detail in Part 3 of the report.

- **Instrumental value:** Alongside this, there may be other forms of value; for example, policy-makers and funding-bodies may prioritise *instrumental value*, i.e. the contribution that playing makes to specific policy concerns (exercise, anti-obesity, learning, social skills etc.) and more generally the relationship between play and learning/development.

From this point of view, play is valued for what it does after play, or *deferred benefit*. Thus some parents interviewed in this study highlight the value of children learning social skills from their time at the setting. Despite the common-sense of this long cherished belief, there is little direct evidence to support claims that playing leads to any specific improvement in skills learning, health etc. Rather the benefits may be more immediate (19), i.e. for the time of playing, and that such benefits arise from the distinguishing features of play introduced earlier in this report. However, this should not be seen as an either/or position: invariably what happens in play may trickle down into non-play contexts but not in any determinable manner which precludes any attempt to ‘measure’ this relationship. The issue with a dominant belief in play as an instrument of progress is that it gives licence to adults to ensure the ‘right’ kinds of play are taking place (‘play properly’) and inhibit/prohibit other playful expressions that are perceived not to contribute to learning such as irrational, trivial, destructive, and disgusting play forms. Yet, as numerous observations from the three playwork settings illustrate, it is often these play expressions that children most value.

- **Institutional value:** Equally, the numerous settings that children pass through in their daily lives may place value on play for the promotion of the ethos of the setting, most notably in schools where playtime often has institutional value for reinforcing school ideals of sharing, being co-operative and so on. While these may be present in children’s play, there are also many occasions when the opposite occurs. In this study, institutional value is

considered from a family perspective and the wider value that children's play, and by association playwork provision, may have at community level.

There are times when these values are in tension: studies in children's play suggest that play is not always active, nice, inclusive, creative and safe. Yet these experiences may have considerable intrinsic value and contribute to the enhancement of a range of key adaptive systems (stress response, emotion regulation, attachment to people and place, and creativity) or what is generally termed 'resilience' (20)

Most importantly for this study, **Beunderman's triangular model (see figure 1) places the intrinsic value of play at the apex in recognition that institutional and instrumental value flow from the pleasure, excitement, control, uncertainty and so on that children generate when playing.**

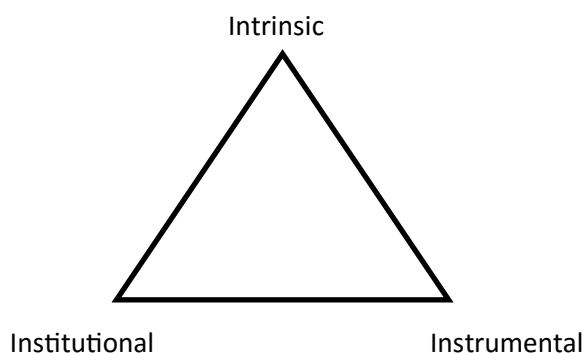


Figure 1: Play Value Triangle (Beunderman, 2010, p76)

Any attempt to subvert this process (e.g. by placing instrumental value as the driving focus) will diminish or even eradicate the potential benefits of playing. That is not to deny that play-based learning, or play and exercise and other instrumental forms of 'play and...' have value within the institutional contexts in which they are promoted, but in playwork the focus is clearly on 'play for play's sake'. In terms of playwork practice, this positioning of the intrinsic value of play becomes the organising principle for provision. Of course, given the often apparently competing values attributed to play, in particular from an instrumental perspective, playwork practice is entangled in highly complex ways, attempting to maintain a favourable balance between perceived external expectations, personal beliefs and values, intuitions. 'common-sense' and the uncertainty and indeterminacy of children's play. There is no blueprint for the ways in which practitioners get on with everyday practice, everything is contingent and contextual. Given this, it is important that playwork

organisations are attentive to the ways in which policies, practices and everyday routines and rhythms of the setting enhance or constrain children's ability to co-create time/space for moments of play?

2.2 Designing an approach

Adapting the model above, the study focuses directly on the ways in which playwork settings go about creating environments that favour the intrinsic value of playing. In doing so it adopts a case study approach in recognition that each playwork setting will have its own history, memory, relationships, practices, habits, culture, etc. which are inevitably, because of the nature of their purpose, ever-shifting and dynamic. Playwork settings are formed or co-created from complex relationships between organic and inorganic materials; a case study approach investigates the specific features of each case. It is not an attempt to draw universal claims but to work with the particularity of each setting to better understand the processes at work and the ways they contribute or inhibit the possibilities of children's play.

Three playwork settings were invited to participate in the study, based on geographic spread, long and exemplary history of support to children's play, different organisational contexts and physical/material environment. Brief details of these settings are given below:

- ◇ **Barlow Moor Community Association (BMCA):** A well-established community centre in South Manchester which currently offers two play sessions per week on Tuesday and Thursday evenings. Because of demand, these are split between 5-9 year olds and 9-14. An interview with the Centre manager reveals the long-standing support (over more than twenty years) to providing time and space at the centre for children's play. From the outset children's play was a big issue for the local community with a shared concern that 'our children have nowhere to play'. Following the success of running a holiday playscheme with local residents, the Centre obtained funding from Children in Need to run evening play and junior youth sessions, again with the support of local volunteers. These sessions have continued to the present time, with various sources of funding, the most recent being through the City Council Commissioning process
- ◇ **Anson Cabin Project (AC):** operates from a small portacabin in the grounds of a local resident's association community house in central Manchester. Consultation with residents identified that a key priority was provision for children and young people. The project commenced in 2001 with the local resident's association working in partnership with Greater Manchester Police (GMP), a relationship that has continued to this day. The original building, described by the manager as 'dead

cold, dark and dingy', was replaced about eight years ago with a new cabin. There has also been some small scale development of the outdoor play area including a climbing wall, a wobbly bridge, bench and stepping stones. The setting receives funding from a number of sources to run a playgroup, four evening and Saturday afternoon playwork sessions, and youth provision including delivering the Duke of Edinburgh Award to young people from the area.

- ◇ **Manchester Young Lives, Higher Blackley Youth Centre (HBYC):** Operating three sessions per week at a local youth centre, this is part of a larger organisation which offers a number of play sessions at different venues across the city. The organisation has 'been providing play and youth work to generations of young people for nearly 50 years' (21). The two-hour sessions are for children aged 5-13. After using the Youth Centre for a holiday playscheme several years ago, there was a strong demand from parents for all year round provision and the organisation secured some funding to operate an evening play centre before the creation of a north city outreach 'Parktastic' programme. During the summer period, two of the sessions are held outside but in the winter months all sessions are run from the Youth Centre. As the manager observed:

...a lot of the kids in the centre have come from the parktastic sessions – they joined in the park which is a different side to the centre – so they have realised there is a centre here that they can come to and they have just carried on coming – they come every single night and it is one of our busiest centres.

It should be noted that the three case study organisations also offer youth work provision, often using the same sessional staff, at these venues. This falls outside the remit for this study. However, there was some discussion on the difference between youthwork and playwork with one interviewee suggesting 'youthwork is informal education...and the major difference is playwork does not exist to educate children it is just giving them time and space to play' (BMCA manager interview). However, this is not so clear cut as the manager recounts a recent youth work residential (15-21 year-olds) when the young people spent every evening playing hide-and-seek, 'tiggy-it' and manhunt and when asked what the best thing was they ranked these playful activities above the planned outdoor pursuits (zip wire, gorge walking, archery). It would be interesting to explore this in more detail at a later stage.

2.3 Accounting for value

While contemporary research suggests that it is the subjective, immediate and intrinsic value of play that drives other outcomes (instrumental/institutional) this is

rarely explicitly appreciated and articulated in the formation of policy and allocation of funding in the public sector. One aspiration of this study is to bring these strands closer together to support the strategic development of the Manchester Youth and Play Trust.

The misalignment between the everyday practice of playwork and measurable outcomes may inhibit the development of practice-based methods that are attuned to and account for the ways in which the setting supports children's play. This study employed a range of observational methods/techniques to look at the liveliness of playwork settings and findings from these will be discussed in Part 3. It is worth noting here, and something that will be re-considered in the concluding sections of this report, that these methods also provide a series of practice-based research tools that may be embedded in playwork routines to capture value and support the development of quality provision. In the context of the discussion to date, quality is not simply demonstrated by measurement against externally determined standards but achieved by gaining deeper insight into everyday practices, relationships, movements etc. and the ways in which they contribute to co-creating a 'playful feel'. Given the nature of playwork settings, quality is always provisional and open-ended; the methods developed for this study attempt to work with this rather than reduce it to simple cause-effect judgments and include:

- Observation: Detailed recordings of children's relationships with each other, playworkers, materials, and the ways in which playing emerges from these conditions.
- Semi-structured interviews with playworkers that encourage reflective stories and explore justification of practice, everyday routines and approaches in supporting children's play.
- Semi-structured interviews and focus group sessions with parents/carers whose children regularly attend the settings to explore the value they place on playwork provision.
- A brief critical review of relevant documentation including policies and procedures, playwork records of observations, feedback from children and other methods used within the setting to provide evidence of quality.

Alongside this, and where appropriate, interviews were carried out with other key stakeholders (Community centre manager, management committee representative). It is acknowledged that this aspect was limited due to the short time period to carry out this

study and a more detailed analysis to explore play and playwork value with influential stakeholders would be beneficial.

The study did not carry out direct formal consultation with children: this was deliberate in that children's full participation in the setting is evidenced through the ways in which they use the available space and materials, relationships with adults and each other to generate moments of playing. This is not to devalue the importance of children's voices but so often in consultation events this often becomes disembodied as children are asked to articulate what is generally beyond representation in language. Within the limitations of this study, detailed observations of children's and adult movements and encounters are more meaningful than asking children about play. But this does not rule out capturing the more informal expressions that children make through their everyday participation in the setting and any relevant feedback (from children and parent/carers) collected by playworkers. This can be simply illustrated by a brief conversation with a couple of children in one of the play settings who asked what I was doing. I replied that I was watching and writing about what was happening in the setting. The girls continued by saying that they came here every week, and I casually asked 'why do you come?' to receive a straightforward reply 'Because it's fun' (HBYC observation notes).

Part 3 What playwork does: the co-creation of a play environment

3.1 Introduction

Having briefly outlined some key principles and associated methods for conducting this study, this section will introduce some of the major findings. In doing so it is important to reiterate that there is no attempt to present universal claims; what is discussed at this stage reflects the unique contexts and practices associated with each of the case study settings. The following example, taken from an observation, offers an opening illustration:

Three girls are in the corner of the hall and have assembled a range of materials that were lying around (black foam pieces, plastic bricks, small cable reels and other bits of stuff); two girls balance lengths of the black foam between the cable drums and then carefully support this by placing the plastic bricks underneath. One girl attempts to balance across this and as she does so the playworker offers a helping hand. The structure collapses almost immediately as the girl steps onto it. There are shrieks of laughter and the girls start to rebuild it – this time it is even more precarious with a similar outcome as the girl tries to walk along it and more fits of laughter before the girls move into the adjacent area (HBYC observation).

This is a singular example, just one of many drawn from observations of children, adults, and things in motion. There is no way of knowing in advance that this event will occur, and having come to an end, there is no telling what might happen next. The idea that playworkers identify ‘bridge building’ on a play plan prior to the start of the session and then facilitate this activity with children (‘who wants to build a bridge’) is a completely different mode of operation. This example emerges from the unique prevailing conditions at that moment; it is particular, can only stand for itself and cannot be generalizable. However, it is possible to discern patterns and connections across a series of particularities which constitute the ‘playful feel’ or atmosphere of the setting.

Arrangements of materials, patterns of movement, relationships and encounters between children and adults, memories and imaginations and so much more play a part in co-creating moments of playing. The term ‘co-creation’ implies there is no single organising component and it impossible to distinguish any specific causal relationship.

The specific formations that produce this feel of space may increase or decrease the potential for playful moments to emerge. An interview with a playworker highlights how paying attention to these elements leads to attempts to mitigate negative influences:

... a couple of children seemed edgy when they arrived and we sensed that if they just lingered this could move into disrupting other children. A playworker suggested playing hide and seek outside in the dark. Both playworkers tripped over obstacles while playing with children and hoped that children didn't see them but they did and of course this promoted much laughter and the children and adults played outside for 2 hours (AC playwork interview).

Given the primary purpose of playwork is to create an environment where children can play, taking account of these patterns becomes a prime consideration of everyday practices and is a central focus for this study.

3.2 Contributions to a playful feel

The constituents of a playful feel outlined above is not definitive and all the elements are thoroughly entangled. Some of the distinctive ways in which the three playwork settings co-create these conditions are discussed below. It should be stressed that the themes are cross-cutting and should not be viewed in isolation; collectively they confirm the ways in which each organisation produces environments that value children's play for the here-and-now of playing (*intrinsic value*). By doing so, there are associated reports of potential instrumental and institutional value, explored in more detail in Part 4.

3.2.1 Movement: The co-creation of pleasurable moments is supported by the capability to sense and move to those features of a setting that are attractive and to avoid those that are not. This is not an expression of individual choice; sensations and movements are always co-produced. Given this, freedom of movement, to joyfully assemble with other bodies and things, is an integral element of a playwork setting. It was evident from observations and discussions across the three case studies that children had largely unrestricted movement through the available indoor and outdoor space. This could appear at times to be quite frantic, energetic, and wide-ranging, while on other occasions and interwoven between the rapid movements are more sedate and tranquil moments often situated in one specific location. But even then, the range of movements suggest that children are not 'sitting still' as a detailed observation of a young girl over a four-minute period suggests:

Young girl (aged 5/6?) walks around the arts and crafts area, stepping sideways as if dancing and then sits down, reaches to the centre of the table and picks up paintbrush - gets off her seat as another child arrives at the table and walks over to her, sitting alongside the child chatting – then moves to a kneeling position on the chair for about 30 seconds.

Then gets off chair and walks round to the bottom of the table, standing to wash her brush and then returns to her original seat where she sits and paints on the paper for a very short period before getting up and carrying picture with her – at this point the other children at the table move away and she is left on her own – she stands still and looks (somewhat anxiously) at where they are going – after about 10 seconds some of the children return to the table and she carries on painting/ chatting and looking at what other children are doing (HBYC observation).

Movements may appear, in one sense, to be ‘aimless’, improvised and alert to the possibilities at any given moment. There is no single choreographer determining next steps. The following example illustrates a more exuberant expression of playing:

In the gym area children are playing tug-of-war with a long length of rope – it appeared to be a random game with kids sliding on floor, standing on the rope and laying across it with lots of different movements accompanied by appropriate noises – chants, squeals of delight and anguish, laughter. The game organises itself into boys against girl’s formation but this is loose with cross-overs according to who was winning and at one point everybody fell to the floor. Girls sit on floor wanting to be pulled by the boys, one boy stands on the rope to prevent this but gets pulled over. Older girls now helping to pull and occasionally the playworkers join in and the noise levels rise – most of the children from the setting are involved at this point (HBYC observation).

At the same time two younger girls are running around the gym; they jump over the rope as it lay on the floor and then begin jumping over other things in the area - badminton rackets, a small plastic truck, plastic blocks etc. - before running back into the main room (HBYC observation). Discussion with the playworkers at this setting indicated that children seemed able to intuitively navigate their way through what might appear from the outside as a chaotic and frenetic setting. There are numerous examples from across the three settings that further illustrate this sense of playful movement:

Outside 2 girls are climbing on wall – this has footholds low down but children are very agile at pulling themselves to the top of the wall and sitting there or even climbing across to the top of the outside porta-cabin/ storage area. Shortly afterwards a game of hide and seek commenced –

there seemed to be an interesting lead in to this as children stood in a circle, some with torches and talked about 'charms' – the broke out of this and ran to hide as 'it' counted loudly – then broke into frantic chase – children moving all over the outdoor space while at the same time another group was playing dodge ball between this game (AC observation)

Hide and seek in the 'dark' (in recognition that there is ambient street lighting to illuminate this area), with numerous variations, is a significant playful refrain in this particular setting at this time of year, and playworkers recounted stories of the highly innovative and creative ways that children managed to hide themselves, including a small child who held on to the upright post of the 'wobbly bridge' – raised herself off the floor and covered herself with a coat so it was impossible to see her, 'She was only this big so it was very good –we ran past her a few times' (AC playworker interview). The discussion continued:

You should have been here last night, it was dark, you only think there are simple places but they were behind there (pointing to corner of the playground), underneath the bridge (which was a very narrow gap on the floor) and hiding under the leaves that had been blown against the fence (AC playworker interview).

Paying attention to patterns of movements increases awareness of the ways in which routines and habits may limit playful possibilities. This was particularly noticeable in one of the settings where the outdoor play area was deemed to be 'out-of-bounds' during the winter period. This seemed to be a taken-for-granted state of affairs with no explicit policy or explanation; 'it is just something that always happens that we don't play out in the dark – we have just got into that routine – but for us it is stressful' (BMCA playworker interview) Following discussion with the playwork team this appears to be a legacy from when the outdoor area was grass/mud. Since that time the area has been covered in artificial grass (apart from the far edge of the area) and fears of making the floors wet and slippery are no longer an issue. During the next session children were informed they could go outside and a subsequent observation reveals a degree of hesitancy from children about this change in habit:

...one child came to a playworker to ask if they could go outside; the playworker said 'yes' and child ran around the room in an excited fashion saying 'we can go outside' but then stayed indoors. Another younger child asked the same question and received the same reply;

the child wandered over to the door and looked back at the playworker and asked 'can I go out'. The playworker replied 'yes' but child still stood still until the playworker playfully adds 'try and open the door, pull it and see what happens'; the child opens and closes the door. Meanwhile the older child who initially asked to go out puts shoes on and runs outside and other children followed (BMCA observation notes).

This relatively simple change to established routines had significant impact, and as the observation notes recognise, there is a different rhythm from the previous session and while there are still moments of frantic movements there is more space to do this in:

Boys and girls run inside to get dressed up, trying on various costumes and one boy saying 'I am getting a bandana' as girl tied a length of material around his head and then running outside, followed by other children who had wrapped pieces of material around each other....Outside there are lots of small 'games' happening – one small group features a boy dressed as a 'ninja' and he calls himself a 'ninja grandma'- they have taken cushions outside for pillow fights – the child dressed as ninja finds a clear plastic box which he places over his head and invites others to hit him (BMCA observation notes).

A playworker from the setting comments 'it is a totally different vibe when everyone is moving in and out...– there was a group playing catch outside and a group inside with pillows - throwing pillows at each other and stuff – it is just more space whereas a week before when you were here they were doing that but all together'. Playworkers are also aware of how they can affect movements by slight changes in the layout and the introduction of new materials, for example, bringing a length of rope into the main hall mid-way through a session brought children together, instantly changing the atmosphere of the setting. Another simple experiment led to changing patterns of movements and associated noise:

A playworker laid some bubble wrap on the floor and children began jumping along it with higher and higher jumps to make loud 'pops' – lots of noise and the cabin shakes with the heavy landings – the playworker then walks along trying to be as quiet and light as possible to avoid popping the bubbles, some children follow but soon revert to jumping heavily – the digital recording highlights the noise of children moving

along the bubble wrap, and also the casual conversations that accompany this, 'I am a giant' (AC observation).

At another setting, simply taking a small group of children outside to play football altered the mood of the indoor space, becoming less noisy and leaving more room to develop the 'balloon race' in response to request from a group of children. This intuitive awareness of the mood or feel of space generally precludes more formal 'activity planning' as interviews with playworkers from the three settings suggest; one playworker notes that unlike being at school children are not expected to sit at tables but have freedom to wander around at their own speed. Another comments:

...through trial and error we have realised that trying to do structured arts and crafts they will go off with what they have got anyway and make something completely different so we have realised that doesn't work and they love using their own imaginations...they will pick things up and move it around – that's why we put everything in the middle but they tend to move where they need to move (HBYC playworker interview).

Capturing the range of movements across the three settings over a relatively short period of time suggests these are lively environments in which bodies imaginatively experiment with becoming different with each other and the materials at hand to produce moments when things are generally more pleasurable.

3.2.2 Imagination: Movements are fuelled by and fuel imagination leading to the formation of a range of dramatic, creative performances. Thus, for example, in one setting:

Three young children (2 girls, one boy) going into corner with settee/ cushions – 'shall we make a den' – other girls arriving 'I'll make up the bed – also two younger boys in the area, one with a drill 'I'm building our new house' and then using the drill to 'shoot' the other boy. Children using stuff lying around in the immediate area and going to bring more stuff – the girl had finished making the bed, and she and small boy lie under the covers – the girl ordering younger boy around and boy following orders. Other children arriving – an older child takes the drill and starts shooting others, younger boy says 'it's not a gun you know'.

At another setting, children developed a play narrative that extended over the entire session:

A small group of girls cooking outside in the 'mud' area (small patch of land left over from recent astroturfing of grassy area – to make it playable throughout the year. Three girls have old pans and had collected some water 'we are making some food for animals' – whole make-believe play extending across outdoor area. At one point a playworker provided containers with left-over water-paints and the girls added this to their mixture. This continued for most of the session and at one point they approached the playworker and myself, asking if I would like some curry/steak/fish and making birthday cake for the playworker – with candles, singing happy birthday (AC observation).

While the two examples illustrate extended periods of play, creative imagination, expressed through nonsense, improvisations, banter, and so on permeates each of the case study locations. What is apparent is that these are fairly minor, low-key moments that appear and disappear in the everyday routines and relationships of each setting. But they play a very significant part in establishing and maintaining a playful feel and as discussed later in this section, some of these become 'legends' that are recalled at various times, further reinforcing the distinctive culture and feel of each playwork setting.

3.2.3 Materials: The examples of playful co-creations introduced in the previous sections also highlight the imaginative use of materials found within the settings. At each of the locations, a range of 'non-specific', attractive play materials (or 'stuff') is freely available. The use of the term 'attractive' implies that such materials have a degree of power in the formation of playful moments and the following examples illustrate this process. The first of these is an experiment in observation that switches focus from what children are doing to trace the 'power of attraction' of a large teddy bear (TB) left out from the daytime playgroup session that shares this environment. This edited extract from observation notes starts with TB sitting in a corner of an area with settees and large floor cushions. A boy and girl enter the area, pick up TB and start playing tug-of-war with it before the girl lies on TB while the boy drags her along the floor before being discarded. TB is then picked up by three boys who start chasing around the room:

... one child hit another with it, child fell over and child just checked to see if he was ok – not a big deal – child gets up and carries on chasing

other boy with TB. The three boys abandon the TB mid-room – a girl picks it up and carries it into the corner with cushions – a boy runs by and casually kicks it (like football) – another boy then takes it into the corner and sits on it, gets up and runs away – at this point TB is in corner between wall and settee. A small girl picks it up and puts it on her back, runs over to a playworker and bumps into him with TB, leaves TB lying on the floor where it stays for a while before a boy dives on TB and pretends to fight it, picks it up and play fights with one of the playworkers who then holds TB and gives voice to it while wrestling boy with it and then makes playful threatening gesture with TB to a girl before talking to her via TB and gesturing with arms. The TB is left slumped in a corner before being picked up by a girl and carried on her head for a while. At this point there is a change in rhythm in the room as children get involved in making sandwiches - the TB is placed face down on a table by 4 children and a playworker who begin to perform heart surgery – one girl with stethoscope. The playworker says that they have saved TB's life but another girl saying 'no, he's got worse' obviously wanting game to carry on. Children place hands on TB to give him an electric shock and putting a large cushion under his head before going off to make snack. As boys run past the table, one picks up TB and throws it to the floor – girls run and pick it up and place it back on the table.

During the period of observation, movements, imaginations and materials cohered around TB in a variety of expressions, most were short-lived and fairly casual engagements but occasionally, as with the 'heart-operation', a longer play narrative develops. Similar instances can be traced with a variety of 'found' materials at other case study settings. As one setting explains, 'sometimes we just put random stuff out to just see what they do... it's like nobody might touch any of the stuff for 30 mins and then it moves all over the place' (AC playworker interview).

Playworkers may also initiate playful use of materials, for example, a playworker starts playing an impromptu game with a child that involves stacking plastic cones in the fastest time, starting with one cone and using this to pick up another and so on (AC observation notes). After the game the playworker moves off and other children start playing - one girl begins balancing cups on her head and then two children move into playing tug-of-war with them as they try to pull them apart. The cones appear later in the session in the children's 'cooking' game and as a sieve for sifting sand. At the same setting, rolls of tape offered a central point around which children improvised a range of

playful actions, starting off with a small group of girls sticking strips of tape to their arms before peeling off (with accompanying conversations about 'waxing'). One child then placed tape over their mouth – with sounds of 'mmmm' and gesticulations. Other children copied this and ran outside to perform a dance routine before returning indoors to dance to music. There are more sounds of 'mmmm' as children attempt to talk to each other when a playworker offers a challenge 'let's see who can scream the loudest' (with one particular child producing a piercing scream!). Shortly afterwards children started to also tape hands and legs together before moving outside. As the observation record notes 'the tape seemed to foster/afford highly novel and exaggerated movements and sounds throughout this period' (AC observation notes).

Another example of 'lively material' at a different setting featured some lengths of fairly rigid black foam mats – as used in the example of the children building and balancing across a precarious bridge. During this period of observation two boys had arranged floor mats together and ran a single line of black foam down the centre before carefully placing plastic foam blocks around the edge. One child then proceeded to tentatively walk along the black foam and jump over the blocks at the end. As he did so, he hit one of the blocks, stood it up and said to the other child 'do you want to have a go'? but before he got a chance to answer another child came over and jumped across the construction. As he landed on the black foam a number of blocks fell over, he jumped back and even more fell, at which point the three children moved off. A short while later a group of children put pieces of black foam in a line and started to lay some small cable drums along the length of the foam and place hoops at the end. The children then followed each other as they balanced along the drums before acrobatically jumping into the hoops. Later in the session, pieces of foam were used in a play fight between a playworker and older child; as one placed the foam over their head, the other would hit them with their piece and this was then reciprocated. As this was happening, a girl balanced a piece of foam on her head and with arms out wide to balance herself, carefully walked between the two before eventually joining in on the side of the boy against the playworker.

3.2.4 Encounters and relatedness: The examples to date illustrate the ways in which children, adults, materials, movements and so on become caught up or entangled in the production of playful moments. They emerge in an indeterminate and unpredictable manner and arise from the relationships and encounters that form the environment; as such playing should not be seen as a 'separate text' that exists outside of everyday practice and routines (23). Playworkers are not detached and passive observers of what happens in these settings but actively contribute to (or inhibit) a playful atmosphere by

their very presence in the setting. Practice emerges through and as part of their on-going entangled relationships. Playwork is concerned with cultivating affirmative modes of relations as well as transforming negative forces which may constrain children's capability to co-create playful moments. Interviews and observations with playworkers consistently reveal stories of everyday 'care' from the moment children arrive at the setting – casual conversations about school, guessing games about what they might be having for tea etc. and this continues throughout the sessions. The following conversation took place between a playworker and child during the previously described taping of mouth, legs, and hands:

Child (to playworker): Look at me I am a squared

Playworker: A square?

Child: No a squid

Playworker: You look more like a starfish, mate – so what are you a squid or a square

Child: I don't know (AC observation)

On another occasion, a child and playworker engaged in a conversation in which the young girl (aged 8) said she had fallen-out with her 'boyfriend' and was not going out with him anymore to which the playworker asked 'are you a single pringle?' – to which the girl smiled and said she was 'not really going out with him anyway'. An interview with parents highlighted the value of these forms of relationship, commenting that playworkers seemed to be able to develop a particular style with children (not parents or teachers) and that 'they are cool, not like us, we are not cool anymore (laughter), so [child's name] came in dressed as Marty McFly and the workers were like ah, that's 'Back to the Future', and he thinks that's really cool' (BMCA parent interview). The discussion also highlighted that, from a parent's perspective, the relationship was 'different from a teacher at school or me or whatever', and another parent added 'Yes they have more of a friendship but it is definitely a respectful relationship' (BMCA parent interview). These forms of relatedness occur in a very casual manner during the habits and routines of each setting; for example, some children and a playworker are making toast, when the playworker starts singing a song and children respond with cries of 'that's disgusting' (HBYC observation notes). The provision of snacks is a common theme across the settings but this is performed in a very informal manner and children are often engaged in helping and taking responsibility. The following observation illustrates the seamless way in which this routine becomes part of a general playful rhythm within the setting:

A small group of children started to make their own sandwiches from ingredients on a table (ham, jam, cheese, chocolate spread). One girl very carefully putting ham, chocolate and cheese on a sandwich – and put these

on two paper plates, before showing her younger sister how to do it (sister had just started attending as she was now five-years old). This was a single example of the ways in which the older child helped her sister with routines of the setting. The younger child, with assistance, made her sandwiches with ham, jam and cheese before being guided over to a quieter part of the room where the older sibling arranged a small table to sit at before going to get her sister a drink. They were soon joined by other children sitting at table nearby and a playworker kneeling on floor to chat with them (BMCA observation).

For the most part, these everyday ways of relating go largely unnoticed until brought to the foreground through detailed observation records. However, there are occasions when more specific attention and care is given to the formation of relationships. This was evident during a post-session interview with playworkers who spent some time discussing and showing a map of the London Underground system produced by a child during the session. The playworkers revealed that the child had autism and had only recently started to attend the setting. A playworker comments:

This is the third time he has been – he doesn't come every Saturday – on the first visit the child didn't interact but now is just starting to move around more – and kids starting to ask '[do you want to come out and play' – initially he didn't but towards the end of the session he put his coat on and went out – and today he put his coat on and is following them all - he is not playing with them yet but we think he will with time (AC playworker interview).

At the same setting, a playworker relates a story of another child who has attends the setting:

The child had been in non-mainstream school for his behaviour and he came in one day towards the end of term with news he was going to mainstream school – what we found was that he always sat and spoke with [name of playworker] and that's what he wants. So when he wants that one and one we will leave it to the playworker who is always having these little chats 'what's it been like today' 'it's been good/bad' 'what has gone really good today' 'what's bad' and one day his mum came in and she said she found it really hard because he doesn't talk to her or anybody and the playworker said what he did – she was surprised and pleased that

he had found someone he could connect with and have these conversations with (AC playworker interview).

The other case study settings tell similar stories of support for specific children, usually associated with identified behavioural problems and disability but this level of scrutiny is rarely explicitly given to 'other' children.

As well as these casual ways of getting on together, there are more overt demonstrations of playful relationships. For example, in one setting a playworker is playing a game of pool with an older child:

... as the game nears the end the playworker is losing and the game starts to descend into chaos as the playworker teases the child as he was about to take his shot and then nudges his arm. The child playfully complains to another playworker as he passes who smiles and then walks off. The child returns to take his shot, misses and then more messing about starts and escalates as balls are rolled into pockets – when all balls are cleared boys move off and other children ask the playworker if she wants to play (HBYC observation).

In a discussion with the playwork team, an experienced playworker commented that this was a prime example of playful relationships, 'it was friendly teasing and joking – she was proper winding them up – it was perfect – it got them in a brilliant mood otherwise it would be a boring game of pool'.

Playworker interactions are largely improvised, for example, one playworker casually tosses a hat towards a child's head, the child attempts to catch it without using his hands, fails, picks up hat and throws it towards the playworker who attempts to do the same. The hat is eventually caught by the child to cheers and they move off in separate directions (BMCA observation notes). There are numerous accounts of playful encounters and often these become a legendary part of each setting. Thus, for example, an interview with a playworker reveals an occasion when the setting hired an inflatable pirate ship during a summer playscheme, with the playworker and a volunteer supervising children. At one point the volunteer had tried to climb over it but got stuck and the only way to get her out was for some children to push from behind while others pulled from the front 'everyone, including the volunteer, was laughing so much and I couldn't move because I was laughing so much' (AC playwork interview). The playworker notes 'the kids sometimes bring it up – remember when [name of volunteer] got stuck on the pirate ship'.

Observation notes across the settings comment on the ways in which children get on together and this is demonstrated in the playful manner in which they tease/word play/banter as expressions of care. The following casual conversation occurred between two young children creating bead pictures when the boy invites the girl to guess what he is making, the girl looks and says 'a tiger?' and the boy responds 'no', the girl looks again and says 'a pyramid?', the child says 'no' and then continues 'I am making this for you' (HBYC observation). At the same setting, a young girl complained that she wasn't feeling well and an older girl looked after her for a while after which time the child seemed to make a full recovery. Observations at BMCA highlight the numerous bouts of play fighting that occur within the five-nine setting but it is very rare that children hurt each other in these moments as noted:

In the settee corner two boys are play fighting in what appears to be a very aggressive manner (lots of noise, shouts of 'get off' etc.) but they do pull their punches when the other child is 'defenceless' e.g. turned his back to avoid getting hurt and they are happy to continue playing (BMCA observation notes).

Of course, there are minor disputes and arguments, indeed these are an integral part of playing and one would expect this in a playwork setting but by and large children seem to be able to sort things out for themselves. As one playworker comments, they 'do not want to isolate children, to lecture them about behaviour but simply to get over it as quickly as possible' (AC playworker interview) and that children are generally good at doing this. There were very few occasions when playworkers needed to intervene directly in response to what was happening or reprimand children. In one setting there was a minor incident when a child appeared to deliberately kick a cardboard box at a child who was sitting on the floor making stuff. While the girl simply shrugged this off, it brought a casual and quiet comment from the playworker 'you need to calm down' (AC observation). On other occasions e.g. when girls ran into the toilets to escape the chase from boys and the boys followed them, the playworkers brought the children away from the area and reminded them about the physical boundaries for play after which the children carried on with their chasing game away from the toilet area (HBYC observation notes).

A final and significant component of this theme is the relationships that are developed with parents over time. As noted in one playworker interview, there is regular contact with parents attending playwork provision and this leads to a series of casual

conversations which over time ‘they get to see what we do and why we do it – we get to explain our side of the impact which is really important’ (BMCA interview). Alongside this parents express their gratitude for children attending the session and often give feedback on children’s experiences of being at the setting, ‘sometimes you don’t appreciate the value that this can have for parents’ (BMCA interview).

3.2.5 A soundscape of playing: Collectively, the singular examples introduced to date are productive of a distinctive atmosphere that generally defies capture. The following extract is another experiment to overcome some of the limitations associated with reducing play and playwork to mere classification of play activities by paying particular attention to the soundscape – the background noises that distinguish a playwork setting. Playworkers carried a digital recorder for a short period as they performed their practice and then passed the recorder on to another worker and so on over a thirty-minute period. An edited transcript reveals the distinctive features:

The first extract from a playworker sitting at arts and crafts area has no clear conversations – but does produce a soundtrack of the setting, centred on the area where the children are sitting making stuff. What is noticeable is the speed of the conversations as the children rapidly talk with and over each other – and this is against a more general background of children’s conversations and occasional shouts, the noise of the table-tennis ball on bat and table and so on. Occasionally something becomes clearer – one child talking to another about school play. At one time they break out into song and another child ‘guess what M said to L’? – ‘what did she say?’, ‘you can’t sing’... At this point recorder passed to playworker sitting in corner with group playing on games machine (5 children all chatting as they played) – ‘how long left’ to child – ‘who has first game’ – children swapping over controllers one child ‘come on start now’ – some banter between kids and then a player shouts ‘shut up’ – with laughter from others – ‘he snides me’. Playworker chatting with one child ‘you’re through, you’re through’ with accompanying banter from children ‘that’s not fair’, ‘cheater’... [recorder passed to playworker sitting with children making Christmas decorations] one child talking about school ‘I had to do 4 minutes, ‘4 minutes of silence’ ‘4 minutes of silence wow’ – which led to other children joining in – sharing their experiences, one child telling of time she had to do 5 minutes silently and then at end went ‘yeah’ ‘I got a cross’ ‘shall we do balloon races?’ ‘yeah’ said chorus – playworker putting on funny voice which brings responses from children

‘why do you put on that weird voice’ – picking up on weirdo theme again
‘cos that’s how I talk see’ (in funny voice) - other child shouting over ‘can I
do the balloon race?’ ‘how do we do it?’ The playworker inflates and
releases a balloon – as it flies across the room everything seems to stop
as attention is turned to the random flight of the balloon and
accompanying ‘fart-like’ noise followed by much laughter before things
carry on.

The full recordings highlight a complex layering of sounds that might just appear to be
‘noise’ but express the ways in which bodies and things create their own unique spaces
alongside, between, and interpenetrating the environment and all that is contains to
compose the feel of the setting. When combined with observations of individual and
collective movements, interviews, tracings of materials and so on, they produce a
complex ‘map’ of relationships and encounters that capture a playful refrain with an
overriding tenor of pleasure and enjoyment.

3.3 Summary

One could go on; even though the observations took place over a short time period they
produced rich materials that suggest playwork settings are locations in which children can
play in all kinds of ways. What is evident is that relationships, movements, sensations,
imaginings, and materials are productive of distinctive moments – indeterminate and
responsive to ever-changing conditions. These examples are not grand, life-changing
events – they are low-key, banal, everyday ways in which kids and adults can get on
together – each setting is unique, and the patterns and rhythms of each setting are
constantly shifting according to what happens. While they may appear to be relatively
minor, they matter to children who attend these settings; this is clear from the ways in
which they participate in the co-creation of time/space The next section will switch
attention to the ways in which these playful moments, the very heart of playwork
practice, are valued (and possibly undervalued) in adult accounts.

Part 4- Appreciating the value of playwork

4.1 Introduction

Part 3 of this report highlights the everyday ways in which adults and children can co-create moments of playing. Through a series of complex processes, each of the settings has established their own distinctive and dynamic patterns of relationships, histories, arrangements of space and materials and so on. But while this is a unique configuration, they have a common focus in creating a prevailing playful feel or atmosphere. The settings are attractive for children who appear to gain great satisfaction from co-creating moments of play and nonsense. What is remarkable is the 'un-remarkability' of these moments; they are created from fairly mundane materials and for the most part escape capture.

As noted at the outset, widespread and prolific research studies have established the nature and value of children's play for supporting well-being. Children's ability to co-create time/space for playing makes an important contribution to being-well for the time of playing and this may enhance a range of adaptive systems – but this is not a direct cause-effect relationship and depends on a multitude of variables that shape the conditions of children's lives. This section will focus on the different ways in which adults, in a variety of stakeholder roles, appreciate and value this provision.

4.2 The intrinsic value of playwork

When playworkers are asked to identify the main purpose of provision a common theme emerges, namely the importance of providing somewhere for children to play, 'mess about' and be with friends, as the following interview extracts reveal:

[The setting is] just for them to come and be free – they are not at school, they are not at home, they still probably get to meet all their friends – they go to the same school – it's just to enjoy being a kid – just have fun when they are not arguing! (HBYC play work interview).

The value for the kids is the memories they are making – because we have the older kids who used to come here who say 'do you remember when we done this, remember when we did that – a culture of play. I think as well a sense of adventure – when they come out with us it's like alright you can climb a tree – yes you can do this, yes you can go into the sea – on site the friendships are important – mixing with children from other cultures, other schools – children are from different schools not from one local school – playing and making memories definitely (AC playwork interview).

Just a place to hang out, meet friends and be silly (AC playworker interview)

For the most part, parents share these values and highlight the pleasure and enjoyment their children gain from attending the sessions. As one parent comments ‘the best thing for me is that here they can get dirty and muddy, do all the things they can’t do at home...I say ‘no you can’t get that out’ but they can come here and just get on with it’ (AC parent interview). Another parent values the provision because her son ‘is out of the house and he can socialize with other children – so he is not in a school setting - it is not structured so he can just have a bit of fun, running around, be himself, dress up as Doctor Who or whatever’. Certainly all parents interviewed place great value on children being with friends, ‘It is a lovely meet-up place as well – my daughter’s friend have gone to a different school but they all still meet up at the club’ (BMCA parent interview). Equally, parents comment that their children are very eager to attend which suggests that they enjoy the sessions.

However, there may be some discrepancy between parent’s expectations and what actually happens at the settings, as a playworker comments, often parents ‘walk into the setting and go “how do you cope with the noise” or “wow it’s so busy in here”’ but for the playworkers this is just everyday ways of playing in the setting (HBYC playworker interview).

Without doubt, as noted in Part 3, playwork practice intuitively favours the intrinsic value of playing, as the following illustrates:

For me, as an adult if I feel pressure in both the other ones [working in early years and youthwork] it is nice to have that middle one when things are more relaxed – and that might also be the value for kids, they have a lot of pressure on them to do homework, schoolwork – I don’t know – I have never thought about it really I just do it. Just time to be them – does that make sense – do what they want to do instead of doing this because somebody said they had to – not being shaped I suppose into what they are supposed to be –does that make sense? I feel it doesn’t but in my head it does. I think you need that – it’s like when I go home at night and I need some time for me – I think that is the same for a child – I don’t think we would be sane if we didn’t have that time (BMCA playwork interview).

This comment is significant in that it acknowledges the value of children simply having time and space for playing in its own right but also presents the dilemma of being able to fully articulate this. This is shared by other playworkers, who when asked to elaborate on how they go about supporting conditions for playing struggle to express what is largely intuitive practice:

I don't know – we just do it, I don't know how to say it - just being relaxed having facilities/space for them to come into – I feel like I would have to say to the kids, what is it we do that makes you feel like we are not teachers – but I am not sure they could answer that – they would have the same problem as me (BMCA playworker interview).

Discussions with a playwork team highlighted similar difficulties when asked to explain what they do to create a supportive environment for playing and one responded in a joking manner 'nothing' and went on to qualify this:

it does sometimes feel like nothing because we are so use to it – we know what they are doing, what they are like and sometimes we are just observing and a lot of people would say 'what are you doing-nothing' – get a proper job! (AC playworker interview).

Another playworker commented 'when people from other settings come here they look at us and think we are doing nothing but we know what is going on – and while they might be anxious about something – in their body language – we are more relaxed'.

4.3 The instrumental value of playwork

This apparent ambiguity about capturing and representing the nature and value of playwork does lead to some potential tensions. The gap created between practice and ability to articulate and evidence the value of 'play for play's sake' is generally filled by traditional accounts of play value, especially the presumed link between play and learning. This is evident in the promotional and policy literature associated with the case study settings. For the most part organisational documentation suggests that children are engaged in purposeful play, e.g. 'elemental play to learn about nature'. Discussing this with one of the case studies a playworker responds 'well we do, we let the kids play out in the rain – they play with sand, climb a tree'. But this does not align with the impression that adults are organising children to achieve a specific outcome. The playworker tellingly comments 'that's not what children wanted to do' but this is somewhat problematic

when accounting for children's play for funding purposes; the idea of children 'messing around' and all the expressions of this may be seen as fairly trivial and purposeless and settings fall back on making instrumental claims for the value of what they do.

Another setting identifies a series of activities that are promoted as part of their provision including 'cooking and baking -learning all about healthy eating and cooking on a low budget; recycling workshops – learning the benefits to recycling and what can/can't be recycled; educational awareness projects; and environmental workshops – learning what we can do, to be kind to our planet' (HBYC discussion). Yet the limited observations and discussions suggest that these 'public-facing' intentions bear little relationship to what actually happens in practice. When discussing this with the playworker, there was a recognition that 'until play is recognised as having value in its own right we are tied in to seeking funding around specific projects and outcomes...it is a way of surviving' (HBYC playworker). This pragmatic position leads to numerous qualifications on the intrinsic value of play by playworkers, who often express learning new skills (practical, social, communication, problem-solving, risk-assessment etc.) as a consequence of playing as the following extract suggests:

The setting is for children, chilling out, and some children will only see certain friends at our play sessions you know if they are at certain schools – it's a way of meeting and playing with them – it's a way of meeting new people and learning new stuff (HBYC playwork interview).

What is important here is the emphasis on the first part of this statement and the term 'chilling out' as an expression of the playful feel of the case study settings; the 'learning new stuff' is not specific but incidental to playing. This also relates to parent's observations about children's progress, particularly in the area of growing confidence and forming friendships. As one parent comments 'it just gives him more confidence in team building, more confident to join in, they all get involved in the activities'. An interview with a parent of a child with a learning disability highlights the particular value of playwork provision as an opportunity for her son to mix with other children from the same school and that he had gained skills in communication and making friends (HBYC parent interview). A number of parents also express value in terms of play and learning 'it is nice just to know that there is somewhere safe – they do cooking – loads of things here that are dead educational and I think it is a nice break for me as well definitely' (BMCA parent interview). The final part of this statement is a common expression from playworkers and parents and may be described as 'institutional value'

as discussed in the next section. While valuing these 'developmental' benefits, parents appreciate that the primary motivation for children to attend is to have fun and be with friends, expressed by one parent as 'he wouldn't mither me to come straight from school if he didn't enjoy the club' (HBYC parent interview) and another comments 'it's never that they have to come, it's always because they want to' (BMCA interview).

Undoubtedly, the stories that playworker's relate about individual children's development and progress would suggest that children gain considerable benefit over time from regularly attending provision, although these stories of change are largely limited to children who may not readily 'fit in' at the outset (see earlier discussion). A further example is offered from an AC playworker interview:

We have stories we can tell – we had some children from Lithuania – when they came here they weren't in school, they could barely write their names or speak English but now they can't shut up – chat, chat, chat... they get involved in the jokes but they don't always get them!... We took them to the pantomime a couple of years ago and they absolutely loved it – they sat there all the time wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

This mixture of intrinsic and instrumental value should not be seen as clear cut, either/or positions and highlights the complex interplay of these two broad themes. A manager from one of the settings neatly captures this by noting for children, these sessions provided a degree of consistency – a regular time/space when children could go and play - in lives that were at times chaotic and where adults may be transient. For parents who are generally not confident to let their children play out unsupervised, provision is valued for giving children somewhere to play and so a degree of supervision is attractive to parents. It also allows them to have time to do things – citing an example of one parent who valued sessions as time to be with her older child and help him to do homework for GCSE's. In other words, they have multiple and complementary value. But, as noted by Beunderman, any trickle down of instrumental benefits stems from the co-creation of playful moments. Such benefits are not specific and directly measurable or attributable solely to attending playwork provision. However, the evidence strongly suggests that playwork makes a significant contribution to moments when children are being-well, and this in itself should warrant greater value and attention.

4.4 Institutional value of play and playwork

The final element of Beunderman's model refers to the institutional value of playwork which in this study is adapted to two interrelated themes, namely family and community value. One parent highlighted the significant value of provision, 'when we moved around here this was a really big incentive to move because it has a club that didn't cost loads', which hints that playwork is an attractive community asset. When playworkers are asked to identify the possible institutional value there is a general consensus that it offers parents a break, a 'bit of peace and quiet' and peace of mind 'they know that they are here and enclosed – that is value for parents and they can do their shopping on a Saturday – also a bit of time out with other kids who do not attend the session – a bit of time to do something else' (AC playworker interview). These perceptions generally align with what parent's reveal during interviews and focus groups, as the following extract suggests:

But it is also a really good break for me just on an evening on a Thursday – especially now that my little one has been coming – normally I would go home and do the washing but I don't mind doing this [interview] for a bit (laughter) (BMCA parent interview).

The parent of a child with learning difficulties acknowledged that the provision, while being valuable for her son, also gave her a break as well 'as he can be demanding when at home, always by my side and constantly requesting stuff' (HBYC parent interview). But this is generally set within the broader value of children's enjoyment of attending provision; as a parent comments 'Well it gives me a bit of a break – when I bring them home from school – but this is more for the children and not the mums really' (HBYC parent interview).

The most significant value for all parents interviewed is the reassurance that children are playing somewhere safe and supervised, typified by these responses:

It is a safe place out of school – I wouldn't ever let them play on the street especially in the winter when it is dark like at this time but even when it is lighter I more or less never let them play out on the street – obviously they are still very young – my eldest is nine. it is nice just to know that there is somewhere safe (BMCA parent interview).

They should have something like this everywhere, especially today it is awkward to let kids play out – I am constantly window-watching and they are not allowed to play out in the dark anyway, they are not allowed to play out at all and I know that might seem really strict but

that's just... this is a main road and there is an awful lot of speeding traffic I did speak to the Cllrs and they did put up speed signs – and they drive on the path (AC parent interview).

These views are echoed by playworkers who often cite the important 'compensatory' function of playwork provision as somewhere off the street away from traffic, 'where children are not sitting at a computer - it is just a communal area where they can come and enjoy being a child' (HBYC playworker interview). Some parents however do wish that children could play out independently:

I live on a corner plot and it has a ginnel and a big gate but I did say that next year my neighbour's kids could play out – I have got my 3 and my neighbour has 3 so they play out the front and all these kids and half the estate end up sat outside my house – that's what happened this summer and there are a couple of elderly neighbours and it's not too good for them – the kids are only playing and our kids are good kids and they are not causing any nuisance (AC parent interview).

In an interview with the Youth and Play manager at BMCA, there were similar concerns around the perception of children being in public space, citing that there were many complaints of anti-social behaviour which in effect is just kids playing out; 'there is not a lot of free space for children to play out or possibly there is free space but the parents aren't comfortable with them not being supervised by adults – so we provide that element of free play with adult supervision'. Further discussion reveals:

[The PCSO's] tell us that someone has been complaining and there is a lot of noise outside houses – a gang of lads hanging out – and we might know one of them – they tend to be 12 so they do fall under our play age – and we will kind of ask them what they have been doing and why they hang around there – we will have a chat and find out what it is... it is just somewhere they can hang out, be together and have a giggle – and if you ask the PCSO's what the complaints are it's noise, laughing and giggling – it's not disturbing anyone's property or breaking things or anything like that – all they want to do is play.

The interview continues to explore this theme; the manager appreciates the value of playwork provision in giving children and young people a comfortable place 'to be able to play and socialise without having a label put on them of being anti-social...they can try things out, have a bit of a laugh and giggle – and no one is going to say 'quieten down'. But this is only for

two hours and while children obviously value their time at the setting it is a relatively minor part of their weekly routines. This is readily acknowledged by the manager who suggests that children and young people will always 'find time to be with their mates, even walking to and from school' but at the same time they will be stopped and asked what they are doing, encouraged to move on, and 'may get pushed from pillar to post... they will find somewhere to hang but they might get into trouble from the local shopkeepers, the police or even just neighbours if they are standing outside people's houses'. In response, there is recognition of the need for increased resources to be able to offer additional sessions but this does not resolve the issue of children wanting to play out unsupervised in their local neighbourhood, as the manager comments it is not either/or and children should be able to do both. This is a reminder of an important playwork principle 'playworkers act as advocates for play when engaging with adult led agendas'⁽²⁴⁾ which suggests there is a valuable but largely unexplored role beyond provision to work with the local community to explore ways of making the general environment more playable for children:

There is a beautiful community feel here on this estate and if we did try this I think they would support it – it is a strong community and the centre is involved with children from young age through to grandparents – we have a good feel of the community

Playwork provision, as well as supporting a number of families, has institutional value for the wider community. This is certainly evident in two of the case studies (BMCA and AC), and to a lesser extent the third setting (HBYC), which is a reflection of the relatively short period of time in which this setting has been operating. But even in this case, there is evidence of the ways in which the development of provision has been responsive to local needs, as expressed at the initial holiday playschemes, and resulting in session running from the Youth Centre during the winter months, balanced with more outdoor sessions during the summer.

The origins of playwork at BMCA and AC are rooted in local community and resident organisations responses to parental anxieties about the lack of space for their children to play. Many of the playworkers currently working at these settings live locally and became involved as volunteers on holiday playschemes, with the following story being a fairly typical experience:

I have been here 13 years – I started as a parent volunteer - volunteered on a summer playscheme and that was it – I had my son who had just started and they were short of staff and asked if I

would help on a trip – I said if you need a hand over the summer I would help because I only had my son – and then they asked for a hand on playscheme – ‘I may as well come in every day’ ‘yes that would be great’ and that’s what I did (AC playworker interview).

A community centre manager described how over a considerable period of time organisational support to children’s play had been of great professional and personal value, building confidence and skills of local people. It was acknowledged that for those people who had become involved and in some cases found employment there was significant positive impact on family life. The discussion continued with the manager highlighting that provision for children’s play was a key focal point for wider community development, ‘it is a way of bringing people together, and parents find it easier initially to talk about children than themselves’ but with time this leads to developing stronger relationships with adults, as a parent comments, ‘it is the whole community centre – they always do extra things – it’s not just children – at the youth club you hear about all the different things going on in the area so I think that is a really good thing’ (BMCA parent interview).

This value of playwork provision was echoed at another case study setting and a playworker highlights that many residents were ‘glad that kids aren’t kicking footballs at their gates probably’ (AC playwork interview). The playworker qualifies this by noting that ‘to be fair a lot of people on this estate are really good’ and went on to cite an example of generally elderly residents who live close to the centre who come over to playwork events, with one particular neighbour asked to be a judge on their X-factor show:

...she enjoys it – it is a way of getting out of the house – she has come over on our fundraising days and brought prizes for the raffle and ‘do you mind if I hang around - we just make her a cup of tea and she sits down (AC playworker interview).

The discussion continues with stories of taking children over to residents houses to sweep leaves from the path and shovel snow ‘and they have really appreciated things like that’. Children have also been involved in community litter picks, but the important point made here by the playworker is that children love things like this, ‘they love playing with the litter picks, messing around, having a nosey around the estate – they love getting back and having a cake and biscuit’. So there is mutual value in terms of seeing children out and about and making a contribution but as the playworker points out play value must be

the priority 'because the kids enjoy it, they are messing around' and if you tried to prevent this then the community value would not exist.

While playwork settings are valued as safe and enclosed spaces for play, and in light of the previous discussion around adult attitudes to play, the visibility of playing children in their local environment is vitally important as a counter to the general fear that these are unsafe places for children. This section ends with an apparently mundane observation from one of the case study settings:

A playworker, in response to request from a small group of children, takes them outside to the front of the building, a public space of wide pavement, entry to a gated block of flats and a small patch of grass that separates the pavement from the centre car park. A game of football develops; this is obviously a regular feature as boys and girls move seamlessly into playing dribbling/tackling and chasing. While there appears to be no explicit rules, the children and playworker intuitively adapt to environmental conditions, e.g. pausing when the ball goes into the road, checking and then retrieving the ball as quickly as possible. At this time of night there are quite a few people passing by and children dribble the ball around them and occasionally this draws adults momentarily into the game. At one point a woman walking by stops to talk to a couple of the children. There are accompanying shouts of 'pass', 'foul' and other playful banter (BMCA observation).

For this fifteen-minute period, public space is turned into play space with the watchful and playful attendance of a playworker. While this is a minor example, there are some significant implications for thinking about the future of playwork and the broader issue of creating environments that value and support children's opportunity to play anywhere and everywhere. This will be further explored in the conclusion and recommendations to this study.

Part 5 Accounting for the value of playwork

The observations and interviews with playworkers, parents and other key stakeholders suggest that there is a shared appreciation of the value of playwork provision primarily as a place where children can go and play. Observations of playwork practice highlight a range of sophisticated and inventive ways in which practitioners contribute to creating conditions in which children co-create moments of playing. But as noted there are numerous issues associated with accounting for this; accounting in this sense is not a technical measurement, but refers to account-ability, i.e. the ability to articulate/capture how practice affects conditions for playing, what happens, and how this relates to policy objectives. There are a number of interconnected factors which conspire to limit accountability, as identified throughout this report:

- ◆ While the evidence for the benefits of playing is compelling, the ways in which this is expressed in policy at national and local level is less clear. Historically the dominant value attributed to play is for instrumental or utilitarian purpose (25). More recently, the Coalition and Conservative governments have shown little interest in this significant aspect of children's lives in England where policy for children is largely pre-occupied with issues of education and safe-guarding. Under this regime, for the most part, the contribution that playing makes to children's everyday lives and being-well is significantly under-valued.
- ◆ In the absence of a clear evidence-led approach to policy making in terms of children's play and playwork, the City Council commissioning outcomes and reporting processes fall short in establishing a congruent practice-evidence-policy framework. This presents considerable challenges for practitioners who during interviews highlight the gulf between everyday practice and what they are expected to report to the City Council. As one playworker says 'we have stories to tell...but there is nowhere on the reporting forms to tell these stories' (AC playworker interview). Another playworker comments that the outcomes are very broad which while giving some freedom to practice may also suggest the ways in which this practice contributes to the lives of children is under-appreciated. City Council reporting systems are 'not about what is going on but about the numbers – how many kids attended, how many play sessions, how many boys/girls/ages' (AC playworker). The discussion continues by suggesting 'for me the play outcomes should be that children have engaged in a positive play session' or indeed simply 'play' (AC interview).

- ◆ Alongside this, playworkers often struggle to account for their practice and capture the important everyday stuff that contributes to the value of provision. As one setting comments, 'we have a portfolio where evidence of kid's art and craft work, photos of them doing den-building - photos are great but we are just capturing that image'. The discussion continues to explore this issue by noting that the focus for this tends to be on representing a specific and static play activity rather than the processes under which this emerges and develops. Thus, for example, taking a photo of the young girl sitting at the 'arts and craft table' may simply capture a girl sitting and possibly looking quite bored. But when more careful attention is given to the movements over a 4-minute period then suddenly you realise there is an awful lot going on that just gets missed. This is a symptomatic of a general professional issue associated with playwork:

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 (26).

One setting does maintain a portfolio developed to achieve the Play England QA scheme 'Quality in Play' and it contains observations and a number of selective case studies along with a range of policy documentation but it is not clear how this actually informs practice. The approaches developed in this study (and other creative techniques) go some way to address this; they are practice-based (re)search methods i.e. looking or searching in more detail at the particular ways in which playing emerges from environmental conditions. While each of these produces partial and particular information, collectively they start to work with the unique patterns and rhythms associated with each setting. It helps practitioners develop insight into the how things work, to make judgment about the quality and value of their practice and to act accordingly (account-ability and response-ability). This is an ethical position founded on ideas of equity and justice by caring for and co-creating conditions in which adults, children, materials and so on produce playful moments in which there is a greater capacity to act and life can go on in an affirmative manner.

One of the case settings is enthusiastic in exploring the application of these noting that 'I am using the idea of maps and post-its we did on the recent workshop sessions – we are all going to have different coloured post-it notes – to capture a moment' (HBYC interview). But this can be demanding i.e. it requires a degree of focus and attention to what is going on and to capture this. The limited evidence of where these methods have been applied suggests they are now embedded in everyday routines and have made a significant impact on practice (27). However, this potential may be compromised where practitioners are generally sessional workers and have little support, opportunity or time to develop these skills.

- While playworkers recognise the ways in which practice may get lost in the current outcomes framework this is not to say that the intentions of the outcomes are inappropriate, far from it. But there is much more to be done to make the connection between play, playwork and policy in terms of anti-poverty and community engagement strategies. While a full analysis is beyond the scope of this study, there are valuable examples of an innovative coherent and integrated approach in the Welsh Government's (WG) 'play sufficiency duty' (28). There are obviously different historical, political and policy contexts between Wales and England and the possibility of a statutory duty for children's play in England is remote in the current political climate. Nevertheless, there are some valuable and worthy principles and approaches to draw on from the Welsh experience to inform the future of play and playwork services under the proposed Manchester Youth and Play Trust. Some of the central themes are introduced here to signpost a possible direction of travel:
 - ◇ Wales is the first country in the world to legislate for children's play by the enactment of a statutory duty on local authorities to assess and secure a sufficiency of play opportunities. This requirement is a central theme in the WG's Children and Families (Wales) Measure and recognises the value of playing for children's everyday lives and the contribution it makes to children's well-being and resilience, factors which may contribute to mitigating some of the effects of poverty and deprivation.
 - ◇ Central to this is a shift in focus from a 'needs' to a rights-based approach. This counters, to a certain extent, the dominant child as 'angel/devil' rhetoric which portrays children in need of protection/supervision and associated instrumental value attributed to play in policy terms (play and exercise, play and skills development etc.). A rights based approach positions the intrinsic value of play as fundamental to a good childhood and places responsibility on local authorities and other key stakeholders to pay attention to environmental conditions that will support opportunities for playing.

- ◇ This connects with CRC General Comment 17 on Article 31 – children’s right to play - and a series of recommendations designed to promote sufficiency of play opportunities. Given the research evidence on the links between play and well-being, children have a right to navigate to health giving resources within their local communities and local communities have a responsibility to negotiate conditions to support children’s navigation – these are the hallmark of resilient communities (29). The argument presented in this study suggests that navigation in relation to play simply means children creating time/space for playing in the environments they pass through in their daily lives. For adults, this implies accounting for current environmental conditions (in public and institutional spaces) and the ways in which they might support or inhibit play and to take action to ensure there is an equitable distribution of time/space for playing in children’s daily lives.

Playwork provision, as discussed throughout this report, makes an important contribution to the lives of some children, their families and the wider community. They are a vital part of the ways in which local communities ‘negotiate’ conditions for children’s play. The study highlights the ways in which playwork practice contributes to co-creating environments that favour the intrinsic value of play and from this there are associated but indeterminate instrumental and institutional values. As such they have an important role in supporting a sufficiency of play opportunities.

But there is much to be done, and a potentially greater role for playwork, in the creation of play-friendly communities. Given the relationships the case study settings have developed with children and local parents (and others), there is considerable local knowledge and practice to draw on in developing a series of strategies/actions that can negotiate better environmental conditions for playing.

The proposed development of the Manchester Youth and Play Trust offers an exciting possibility to think beyond traditional ways of valuing and accounting for children’s play. The case study settings expressed some strong reservations about these proposals, mostly to do with the lesser value that appears to be given to playwork in consultation and decision-making processes. The following extract from an interview expresses a common concern:

...I find it very frustrating that play has been thrown into it so as to be seen to be doing something but it has not really been taken into consideration. I feel youthwork dominates discussion – my worry is you will have a lot of people fighting for youthwork and forget about playwork and as a consequence in the next 18 months or two years playwork is dropped and it becomes a youth trust and playwork has been lost somewhere.

While having some sympathy with these anxieties there is an opportunity to re-vision what counts as a good environment for children, and to develop this into a coherent policy-evidence-practice framework that places playing as a central component of children's well-being. By doing so it recognises and retains the vital role that playwork provision makes in some local communities across Manchester and to enhance this in areas as part of a negotiated response to support children's capability to navigate to health giving resources i.e. to find time and space for play.

But there is a more challenging long-term aim alongside this, namely to draw on the experiences to date of the WG's play sufficiency duty to develop an approach that goes beyond segregated, enclosed provision for play. While there is no play sufficiency duty in England, Local Authorities and other key stakeholders can develop local approaches to improving environmental conditions for children's play and there are signs that small-scale interventions can contribute to developing more playful communities (30). It is here that playwork can have a central role as advocates for children's play to work with key local stakeholders to identify and respond to conditions that may inhibit children's ability to co-create moments of playing.

Part 6 Conclusions and recommendations

There is no doubt during the limited period spent at the three playwork settings that practitioners are highly committed, creative, sensitive and responsive in their relationships with children and make a significant contribution to support children's capability to co-create moments of play and shape the play environment in unique ways. Yet the complex and rich practices associated with this are often obscured – both within playwork teams and importantly with key stakeholders, most notably policy-makers and those responsible for resource allocation.

As stated at the outset, the aims of this study are to:

- I. Articulate the value of playwork provision in supporting opportunities to play for some children and the importance of this for their parents and the wider community.
- II. Add to the growing evidence base for the value of playwork. Until very recently the lack of research has been a significant weakness and contributes to a general lack of clarity and understanding of the purpose of playwork.
- III. Inform the development of a coherent and robust set of values and principles for the proposed Play and Youth Trust that in turn will help shape approaches to the future design and commissioning of playwork services in the city.
- IV. Look ahead to the changing context for service delivery to consider the role that playwork could have in supporting the development of play-friendly local communities in Manchester with particular reference to UNCRC General Comment 17 on children's right to play.

This final section will draw together some key themes from the study in relation to the above intentions and make recommendations to inform the re-configuration of play and playwork services in the city. The opportunity to spend time looking at the micro detail of playwork practice reveals what this form of provision can offer children. The three case study settings are exemplary organisations that work with limited resources to develop a dominant playful feel in which children can co-create novel moments of playing, as the observations highlight. There are occasions when things don't quite work out: children might hurt themselves, argue and fall-out, playworkers might misjudge situations, but the prevailing atmosphere and relationships between children and adults means that these are largely minor occurrences and quickly resolved. What happens in playwork provision may appear to be fleeting, trivial and frivolous when compared with the seemingly more important stuff of 'growing up'. But collectively these experiences make a significant

contribution to children's well-being and as such they matter. Given the relationship between playing, pleasure, attachment, enhancement of stress response systems and creativity, which are the foundational components of resilience (31) or what has been referred to as 'ordinary magic' (32), the argument would be that in times of hardship, austerity, and increasing inequality it becomes even more important to ensure children have time and space for playing rather than reduce opportunities.

While the case study organisations are somewhat suspicious of the move to establish a Youth and Play Trust, this is balanced with hope that it will be an opportunity to bring additional resources and support to the sector. The following recommendations, while presented as separate points, should be viewed holistically; they are designed to shape the strategic direction of the 'play' strand of the embryonic Manchester Youth and Play Trust.

- 1) The central recommendation from this study is the development of a coherent practice-evidence-policy framework for the future development of playwork provision. There is a compelling case to be made between children's play and well-being (and associated benefits that arise from this). This relationship lies within the intrinsic value of playing – play for play's sake – but this is undervalued and understated in policy and resource allocation. This also influences playwork expression of value: playworkers may intuitively value the ways in which they co-create moments of nonsense with children but this gets lost in accounting system and appeals to funders, replaced by largely instrumental value. While actual practice may ward-off the worst excesses of this (planning and delivering specific activities with children to meet pre-determined outcomes), it also limits the development of practice-based evidence to inform policy. Given the proposed development of the Youth and Play Trust there is an opportunity over the next period to develop a cohesive and coherent strategy that brings together policy with practice-based evidence.
- 2) Connected to this, this study has employed a variety of practice-based methods to capture the value of playwork provision. Given the limited time available for the study, this has been a research-led process. The three case study settings have expressed a desire to continue to participate in research, but as active participants rather than research subjects. It is recommended that a participative action research project is established with the three settings to support practitioners in applying a range of creative practice based methods and to collect further evidence of value. Over a longer period, this would also enable playworkers to collect meaningful evidence of children's lived experience and value of playwork provision and generate more effective and nuanced materials to evaluate the efficacy of playwork practice (33). Increasing practice-based evidence also strengthens the case for why playwork provision may be an important element in a negotiated response in local communities to support children's right to play.

- 3) The emergent and on-going findings from practice based participative action research would be transferable across all playwork settings in the city. It points to the importance of supporting the emerging Manchester playwork network as a forum for sharing examples of good practice and support group for practitioners to reflect on the issues that they face in their everyday relationships with children and parents.
- 4) Continued support to the case study settings in the application of a range of practice-based research methods and dissemination with the wider playwork network would also lead to the formation of a practice-evidence based approach to quality of provision in which practice stories, observations, reflections and so on are used to evaluate organisational effectiveness in supporting children's play ('measuring what matters'). It offers the promise of developing a strong community of practice that can work together to enhance the quality and quantity of evidence about the worth and outcomes of playwork practice in diverse and unique contexts. This would, in turn, continue to inform the strategic development of play services across the city.
- 5) While the focus for this study is on commissioned playwork projects, there is a much larger group of playwork practitioners, notably After-School clubs and holiday care schemes who make a significant contribution to supporting children's opportunity to play. It is important to encourage these settings to participate in the play network and ensure that their strategic role is recognised in the Youth and Play Trust.
- 5) But there is an even greater ambition here, as noted at the end of Part 5. Playwork contributes to *some* children's opportunity to co-create playful moments but if playing is vital to a healthy childhood, then there needs to be more done to redress some of the inequalities in the distribution of resources (time and space) in children's everyday environments. Parents are generally reluctant to let children play outside unsupervised and place great value on playwork provision as a safe place for their children. At the same time, parents often wish that children could play out close to home with friend in a more spontaneous and unstructured manner. Studies with children would certainly support this desire. While playwork settings offer valued 'compensatory' space, more needs to be done to challenge the conditions that limit children's opportunity to play out in

The Youth and Play Trust faces some considerable challenges. Given current political and economic conditions and forces, simply trying to manage services on ever-reducing budgets hoping that things might improve is not sustainable. But there may be other ways of doing things that connect with a broader agenda of building more resourceful communities. Traditional 'dependency' relationships between public services and the community become reconfigured to think and act differently. Playwork also needs to respond to this challenge by taking a leading role working with key stakeholders within local communities to support the opportunity for children to find time and space for playing in the places they live and pass through in their everyday lives. Historically, as noted by the case studies, children's play has been an important issue which brings local communities together; a focus on local 'play sufficiency' will contribute to making local environments more liveable for adults and children alike.

Perhaps the most aspirational challenge is to establish Manchester as the first city in England to adopt a 'play sufficiency measure' in full support of UNCRC General Comment 17 and children's right to play.

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