

## 8. Using the Playwork Approach Case Study

M undertook a degree in psychology and then did a Post-Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), subsequently becoming an infant school teacher. For the three years whilst undertaking her degree and during the holidays, M worked as a casual playworker for local authority playschemes run in community settings within deprived areas of her city. Between the degree and PGCE, M worked for a year as a childcare support worker in a school, working on a one to one basis with a girl with behavioural and emotional difficulties who had been attending a special school but was now integrating back into mainstream education. M has had the experience of working with children in three different contexts governed by three different ethos: play based, support based and education based. M explained that the psychology degree had only touched on play in relation to children's developmental milestones. The PGCE was specifically for working in early years and covered play in relation to Nursery and Reception Class teaching. She had had no formal playwork training but can see through her experience, the importance of freely chosen, intrinsically motivated play.

M said that having had the opportunity to work in all three areas she could see how very different they all were in relation to play. The playschemes were run totally in relation to the play needs of the children – there were no planned outcomes. It was all about the here and now. She could use very little of her play ideas as a support worker as she had to support the child to catch up with the national curriculum but felt that in actuality the child needed most support with socializing with other children and a playwork approach would have been more relevant. She was however able to form a good relationship with the child, although this was different again to those that she formed with children on the playscheme, having to be more formal in the school setting. M feels that there are a lot of constraints in education. As a teacher of a class of thirty children she had no time to get to know individual children well and form a proper relationship in the way that she could as a playworker or as a person working one to one with a child. She sees that in relation to learning some children learn well with a formal approach but there are many children who would learn far better through play or a play based approach.

M said that that she sees the great relevance of play in children's lives but although it goes against her beliefs, because she has a mind that likes rules and structures, she can fairly easily swap between the different approaches – going from totally informal to formal. She knows some of her friends and former teaching colleagues who find that too difficult. One of her friends can't abide the rules of education and would much rather that her children were left to learn through play. M considers the approaches to be very, very different but as she was talking suddenly acknowledged the strength of her training to be a teacher and said that she can't help seeing the learning opportunities in all activities such as with her own children when they were of infant school age, if they were playing at home with things of different sizes she would find herself inadvertently saying 'which of those is biggest?' and so on. She is no longer teaching but spends quite a lot of time looking after children of various friends, along with her own and their friends after school and she leaves them all alone to play in their own way and without her interference.

## Questions

### Chapter 1

- Are any of the Playwork Principles relevant here? How could M have been an advocate for free play in her role as a teacher?

### Chapter 2

- M's PGCE covered play as a tool for development and learning – basing play totally in the developmental paradigm. Do you think there is a place for all people who work with children to look at play from a wealth of different perspectives on play and if so what do you think is gained from this?

### Chapter 3

- M felt that the child she was supporting would have benefited from a playwork approach to help her socializing. How would this help a child to communicate and make friends with other children?

### Chapter 4

- M worked as a support worker for a child labelled with emotional and behavioural difficulties. What problems might that labelling have caused for the child and for M?

### Chapter 5

- In what way might M's question about size to her child when playing with things of different sizes adulterate his play? Are you aware of the sorts of things you say to children which in some way might adulterate or spoil whatever it is they are doing or have done?

### Chapter 6

- Children have the right to both education and play. Do you think that your current society has the right balance between these two aspects of children's rights and what makes you think that?

### Chapter 7

- M worked as a playworker on community playschemes in deprived areas of her city. Do you think that community playschemes or the like should only happen in poor areas or do you think that all communities in all neighbourhoods benefit from local places to play? What do you see as the benefits?

## Chapter 8

- It takes a lot of effort to overcome cognitive dissonance. M has worked on her potential 'cognitive dissonance' brought about by learning certain things about children and their play in her formal training. She recognizes that her teacher training still might impact on the way that she is with children in play situations. Do you recognize any cognitive dissonance in your own attitudes towards the playwork approach to working with children at play? Do you want to work on it in order to recognize that there are a range of approaches to fit different circumstances?

### End Questions

- Are there any recurring themes exhibited in the above play narratives and if so what are they?
- Why do children engage in often repeated play episodes that explore aspects of war, conflict, death, judgement, nonsense, destruction, rhythm, power, control (physical, personal and over others), domestic scenarios (of a gendered or non-gender stereotyped nature) ..... and how might they benefit from this?
- Why do many adults feel uncomfortable with some types of playing?
- Which types of playing do you have difficulty with? Why? Is this because of concern for the current well-being of children; future well-being of children or because of your own personal preference, concentration span, boredom threshold, comfort zone or other reasons?
- Have you done any research and/or a risk/benefit assessment of the value of that particular type of play for children in order to see if your concerns or personal problems are justified?