

PARS Playwork Conference Notes

<https://commonthreads.org.uk/>

Streaming LIVE from the UK

October 14, 2023

The usual disclaimer is as follows: these are highlights from the notes I took while the presenter was talking and some thoughts I had as to some of their comments. This overview is for your own general info and should not be used as any kind of source material but rather a jumping off point for your own research if any of the topics pique your interest! It was a 12 hour conference with speakers from all over the world and was 100% worth the 3AM EST start time! There is a link to a page with the speakers bios and topic abstracts at the end of this for you!

General takeaways:

- 1) Naomi Lott, England, made a strong reminder point that just because a country has ratified Article 31 doesn't mean they are putting it into practice. She also reminded us that play is a *right*, which means it's not something a grown-up can just randomly take away as a punishment or to feel "in charge" - it is not something to be given or taken. I appreciated the "given" part of the statement as I think we focus more on not being allowed to take it away, but it's not yours to *give* in the first place. It's a *right*. SIDEBAR: I wish I had re-read these notes before podding with Nerd!
- 2) I was reminded that just because a country has a "playwork presence" and Adventure Playgrounds (APGs) it doesn't mean they are free from their own unique issues and roadblocks.
- 3) That even self-professed playworkers still struggle with definitions, implementation and understanding their roles within the space and, at least during these workshops, the **control** piece and wrestling with the play/learning false dichotomy (do a task (work) /get a reward (play)) appeared to be quite common
- 4) A play space, regardless of what it is called or who it is affiliated with needs to emerge from the community and must be relevant to the people who use it. APGs intend to meet needs that are not met in other parts of a child's life.
- 5) The notion of **compensatory practice**; meaning, in this space, a child gets things that they don't get elsewhere. Like what? moveable parts, freedom, choice, gardens, woods, to be hidden, mud, autonomy, agency and the realization that they can be wrong about something and it doesn't matter... *here*.

- 6) SIDEBAR: this is one area I feel US based CCCs could be influenced by playwork. How might CCCs engage in compensatory practice? And (from me) how is *anyone* able to provide true compensatory practice when there continues to be an across the board over-emphasis on clothes, staying clean, avoiding the mud and water, tidying up, having to watch out for the walls and the floor, not to mention the higher levels of risk taking... concerns which were echoed by other speakers including Becky Jackson-Reece of England. Of note though, many of the PARS practitioners, including Jackson-Reece, Tracy Chen from Taiwan, Ada Wong from Hong Kong and Polly Howard from Australia shared anecdotal evidence that the PARS playwork framework helps parents and staff overcome seeing these things as challenges and, specifically from Polly Howard, provides a common language for reflecting on their practice and their programs.
- 7) Angus Gorrie, Australia, stated that believing in play isn't enough - the grown ups must be able to support and deal with **scrutiny of the space** SIDEBAR: this called to mind what Mimi-Chenfeld reminds us, that great will be the day when we no longer have to defend what we do, but right now we do, so we need to be armed with an arsenal of information! We must be able to deal with scrutiny of the space with confidence and chutzpah!
- 8) Realizing that **risk aversion** is a much bigger issue (outside the USA) than I thought it was
- 9) Gorrie connected the dots between high levels of risk aversion (scrutiny of the space!) and the aesthetic (or lack thereof) of the play space and referenced Tim Gill's *risk paradox* which is when we project our risk/fear onto one part of a child's experience but not another. Example: "No you may not play at the APG! It's too dangerous. Now go get your rugby gear, it's time for practice."
- 10) Hanne Warming, Denmark, asked how playwork fits in the child care world. She continued by wondering if we see children as *becomings* instead of *beings*. Children are seen as raw materials to be managed so they can (eventually) produce in the global economy. Obviously this is a concerning thought. It was during Warming's session the idea of **childism** (like feminism, but to empower the children) was introduced. This idea was expanded when John Wall, USA, added **adultism** to the vocabulary line-up and spoke out against adult domination over children. Wall elaborated: "adultism is built into social systems." We see adultism as: domination, misuse of power, disrespect, oppression, discrimination and marginalization. Children become invisible due to adult made assumptions. Adulthood is the norm that measures everything in a child's life. He looks to combat this and stated his concept of childism can overcome adultism. How?
 - 1) childism means empowering the lived experience of children
 - 2) childism means deconstructing historical oppositional adult/child binaries
 - 3) childism means reconstructing new forms of social relations

- 11) Wall offered that the way to get from being an **adultist** to being a **childist** is through play: which is the human capacity to create and recreate. SIDEBAR from me: So many new ideas to ponder and consider! And this continued when Natalie Medina-Minton, USA, introduced the new-to-me idea of *Child Standpoint Theory* and asked, rhetorically, if children are an oppressed group. She then listed how they are. Her comments echoed some of Wall's earlier points: marginalization, powerlessness, over dependency on adults, no autonomy and not being heard or informed on matters which directly concern them - including being more actively involved in how they participate in play and playwork research.
- 12) I was reminded yet again of the importance of verbiage! CCCs and "schools" and other "academic institutions" have different expectations placed on them simply because of how we refer to them. The name (language) can frame perceptions. Institution = producing (vs playing) Hannae Warming's comment struck a chord: children are seen as part of the economy therefore viewed as producers instead of playful children. As did John Wall's: we measure childhood against adulthood.
- 13) Ada Wong, Hong Kong, shared that playwork training has assisted adults in changing their mindsets towards APGs. The training has led to increased risk acceptance, increase in trusting children's abilities, a decrease in play being following adult agendas and goals, increase in self reflection, in being able to step back and facilitate and an increase in child empowerment.
- 14) A reminder that *doing nothing* is different than *not doing anything* and that the PAUSE before jumping in might provide just enough time for the grown up to ask themselves, do I really need to get involved here? This was reiterated when Polly Howard, Australia, asked, does the kid really need us right now? Or does our adult ego need to feel useful?
- 15) I realized that when I say *facilitating*, some playworkers might say *containing* the play
- 16) Tracey Martin-Millward, UK, asked whether or not adult/child dialogue adds/detracts from the child centeredness of a Forest School (FS) and commented on some of the institutional barriers to truly being child centered.
- 17) Some interesting facts and figures from her research and her session: A) that (once again!) **choice** seems to be paramount to a child centered space but adults don't trust children enough to give them 100% choice, B) children were given more agency after they "did a little job" (this reinforces the work *then* play/task *then* reward dynamic) and C) of the three categories of questions adults ask children (open, closed and rhetorical) during her observations, 83% were closed, 13% rhetorical and 4% open. NERD ALERT: these percentages make me think we need to podcast about this!!!!
- 18) Mari Korpela, Finland, shared findings of her research with children in international schools in Finland. She quipped, no one asks the kids how they feel about their expat status. Her

results show that the children do not necessarily “pine for the old” but instead show an appreciation of the here and now.

- 19) Aireen Grace Andral, Australia, provided deeper insight to children’s leisure time; including paying more attention to how they use urban spaces and the importance of children as co-creators in these spaces.
- 20) Katriina Heljakka, Finland, unfortunately had internet issues so a conference liaison uploaded and shared her presentation slides which gave an overview of Hobby Horsing, a recreational activity which began in Finland and received international notice with the release of the 2017 film, *Hobby Horse Revolution* (you can watch trailer on YouTube)
- 21) And after 12 hours of presentations Johnathan McCloud, USA, wrapped up the day with an overview as to how PARS might restore a child led play. Yes, the standards and accountability movement pushed play right out of schools, but now that “pockets of time” for play are coming back in, what’s a teacher to do? Many are saying, “Well shoot - now what?” SIDEBAR from me: this taps into my 1) can’t give back what you didn’t get position and 2) “go play!” but what do you want me to do? syndrome.
- 22) The PARS framework might assist in getting play into schools or at least into recess as it teaches playworkers (and teachers!) how to stand back, allow for places for child-led play, teaches them how to read play cues and understand the play cycle, to understand why behavior problems go down, and so many other things! In his bio he asks, how do we compensate children for the presence of adults in their time and space? My answer, back off. And I forget the context of this but I think it can apply to so many things; in the margin of my notepaper I wrote, IS IT RESPECT? OR TRUST!!
- 23) And finally - and this is probably a session in its own right, the idea of emic/etic came up and it was totally new to me. Quoted from the wikipedia: The "emic" approach is an insider's perspective, which looks at the beliefs, values, and practices of a particular culture from the perspective of the people who live within that culture. This approach aims to understand the cultural meaning and significance of a particular behavior or practice, as it is understood by the people who engage in it. The "etic" approach, on the other hand, is an outsider's perspective, which looks at a culture from the perspective of an outside observer or researcher. This approach tends to focus on the observable behaviors and practices of a culture, and aims to understand them in terms of their functional or evolutionary significance. The etic approach often involves the use of standardized measures and frameworks to compare different cultures and may involve the use of concepts and theories from other disciplines, such as psychology or sociology.

That’s enough for today!

Go play!
Respectfully submitted,
Lisa Murphy, M.Ed.

Speakers and Abstracts: <https://commonthreads.org.uk/index.php/pars-conference-2023/>