Make/Unmake

Play at the Centre of Culture Change

Anna Beresin

MAKE/UNMAKE

Make/Unmake

Play at the Centre of Culture Change

Anna Beresin

https://www.openbookpublishers.com

©2026 Anna Beresin

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0). This license allows you to share, copy, distribute and transmit the text; to adapt the text for non-commercial purposes of the text providing attribution is made to the authors (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work). Attribution should include the following information:

Anna Beresin, *Make/Unmake: Play at the Centre of Culture Change.* Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2026, https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0511

Further details about CC BY-NC licenses are available at
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/

All images in this book, including the cover photo, are by the author and share the same licence.

All external links were active at the time of publication unless otherwise stated and have been archived via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine at https://archive.org/web

Digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at
https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0511#resources

The audiobook read by the author is available at https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0511

Information about any revised edition of this work will be provided at
https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP. 0511

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80511-801-5
ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80511-802-2
ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80511-803-9
ISBN HTML: 978-1-80511-805-3
ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 978-1-80511-804-6
ISBN Audiobook: 978-1-80511-897-8

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0511

Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

For Neilo

Table of Contents

Introduction: To Make and Unmake in the Land of Steel 3

PART I: PLAY AT THE CENTRE 19

1. Loose Parts: The Pitsmoor Adventure Playground 21

2. Loose Arts: The GLUE Collective 49

3. Sneaky Play: The Maker{Futures} Mobile Maker Space 73

Interlude 101

PART II: PROGRAMS AS SITES OF CULTURE CHANGE 103

4. Modelling Inclusion in the Makerspace 105

5. Talking about Colonialism in the GLUE Garden 119

6. ‘100 Languages Spoken Here’: The Playground as Sanctuary 133

Conclusion: Play at the Centre of Culture Change 157

Bibliography 167

List of Figures 177

Acknowledgements 181

Index 183

Works by the Author

Beresin, Anna, *Recess Battles: Playing, Fighting, and Storytelling* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), https://doi.org/10.14325/mississippi/9781604737394.001.0001

Beresin, Anna, *The Art of Play: Recess and the Practice of Invention* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2014), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvrf88kv

Beresin, Anna, *The Character of Play* (Washington, DC: Council for Spiritual and Ethical Education, 2019).

Beresin, Anna, and Julia Bishop, eds, *Play in a COVID Frame: Everyday Pandemic Creativity in a Time of Isolation* (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2023), https://doi.org/10.11647/obp.0326

Herrmann, Brigitta, Manfred Fischbeck, Elia Sinaico, and Anna Beresin, *Group Motion in Practice* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Press, 2018).

Patte, Michael, Fraser Brown, and Anna Beresin, eds, *Brian Sutton-Smith, Playful Scholar: A Centennial Celebration* (Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books, 2024).

I'm the Queen.

You're dead.
I ate you all up.

No, you didn't.

Yes, I did.

You're a ghost.

Well, okay.

(Day 1, Playground, Sheffield)

Introduction: To Make and Unmake in the Land of Steel

It is 2024, the 40th anniversary of the Steel Miners' Strike, and this English industrial region is struggling with its identity as a centre of production, long after its own major role in the Industrial Revolution. I have met people who work with children whose fathers worked in the mines and whose grandfathers came from other countries to serve in England's wars. I have met people who would never live anywhere else, personal ambassadors to the Midlands of England, and people who wished they could leave but could not afford to do so, or who shared that there is nowhere to return to as everyone in their home country whom they have loved has also left. Nowhere have I felt more welcomed. 'You're from the States? The United States? Really?'

When you step off the train from London to Sheffield, after two hours of whizzing past factories, shopping malls, and suburban homes that increase and decrease in size depending on the neighborhood, seeing flocks of sheep dotting the hillside like cotton balls on children's primary school art and you peek at the Peak District and its moors, one arrives in Sheffield, greeted by a cascading waterfall of steel. Except that it is an illusion, as the steel is not cascading, just the water over a smooth steel wall with rounded edges. Shaking off the journey, I walked with my very flexible husband through the modest train station, its competing coffee chains, the mini drug store and mini-er mini mart selling premade sandwiches with sweet pickle and onion, past the gourmet bread stand that seemed never to be open. We did enjoy its just-out-of-the-oven bread four months later on our way back home on the long train to

©2026 Anna Beresin, CC BY-NC 4.0 https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0511.00

London to the Tube to the plane. The name of the bread bakery in this city of steel? The Forge.

The sense of history is physicalized here. Sometimes, the train itself would be halted as the bulldozer doing the work of gentrification had discovered another un-exploded bomb leftover from World War II. Within Sheffield one sees the conflicting narratives of progress everywhere, old mining pits attempting to sustain new migrant neighborhoods. Old steel factories remade into fancy condos. George Orwell wrote in 1937 that this area was so polluted during the early factory days that one could not see one's hand in front of one's face.[1] That extreme pollution is gone, but the town feels familiar in its modern grittiness. The historic area boasts restaurants that compete with London, but there is a wild west ghost town feeling in the centre of the city. John Ruskin's presence from the 1800s is still here, his earnest agenda of celebrating access-to-art-and-nature-for-all often called upon in this self-proclaimed 'Maker City'. His lineage through William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement underscores a tension between the romanticized handwork of crafts and the factories with their steel.

Sheffield was once called the Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire, and portraits of union leaders grace the exteriors of some of the old factories. It is not far from its more popular cousin York, with its Duke and nightlife, or from musical Manchester with the surreal moorland of the Peaks, England's first national park floating somehow in between. It is said that this region is the home of the real Robin Hood, with Loxley right outside of Sheffield to the northwest and Sherwood Forest to the southeast. At my first event at the University of Sheffield where I was based, a grad student informed me that she lived not far from the real grave of Little John. I am here for Sheffield, but also to visit Birmingham, another city of steel with its enormous metallic bull welded from steel parts that welcomes you to its own city by rail, moving as if by magic.

I came to study makerspaces and adventure playgrounds, children's maker cultures of home-grown playthings. In part, Sheffield was on my map as my recent writing partner Julia Bishop was stationed at the University of Sheffield. We had just completed our edited volume *Play in a Covid Frame: Everyday Pandemic Creativity in a Time of Isolation*,[2] and I was eager to learn more from her and her colleagues in the university's unique program in Education, Culture, and Childhood. So, my very

flexible husband and I rented a flat near the university, not far from the half a dozen play programs that I had set out to study.

The department's shared priority is respecting children's culture, peer life, or childlore, noting that children's culture study as a field recognizes children as creative beings capable of contributing to and critiquing their own cultural practices. Psychologists have recognized cultural context as relevant in play study,[3] but anthropologists, historians, and folklorists of childhood have intentionally highlighted local cultural variations within recognizable patterns.[4] Anthropologists have tended to focus on child culture in terms of child rearing[5] while some folklorists have focused on stuff made for children, its tales, lullabies, or playthings crafted for children's use.[6] Here, as with my other books, the focus is on the intersections of adult culture and children's own peer culture, with this book concentrating on the material world of children's play—the tangible yet intangible culture of childhood in a region known for making.

Cultural study is made of group activity, although individuals may be the focus as culture bearers. The analysis typically focuses on the building blocks of culture, the motif, recognizable in its variations in style, movement, sound, shape, and color. Note that the plural of the word 'motif' is usually 'motifs', but here we see them as 'motives', too, the psychological drivers that sometimes serve as movers of complex, often conflicting actions. The both/and aspect of the opposites at play were discussed in psychological terms back in 1883 when William Wells Newell wrote of 'the inventiveness of children and the conservatism of children' and when Sigmund Freud addressed the seriousness of jokes in 1905.[7] I am interested in the process of play, how play shuttles between these opposites in the making and unmaking, the vibrancy in the micro-changes in motifs that can sometimes be invisible to the naked eye.

I had heard about adventure playgrounds, also known as junk playgrounds, and how popular they are in Europe, how there are over 100 in the United Kingdom, yet only one handful of them in all of the US.[8] Born out of the rubble of World War II at Emdrup in Copenhagen, they were imported to England by Lady Allen of Hurtwood in the mid-1940s.[9] There have been many recent articles in the English press about their decline, even though they are fiercely loved by the communities they support and by the children who visit them, children who often

go there by themselves individually or in groups at very young ages.[10] Unlike regular municipal playgrounds, adventure playgrounds are staffed with trained playworkers and have a tradition of incorporating loose parts and risky play. I had only visited one adventure playground in the United States, the one on Governor's Island between Manhattan and Brooklyn, not far from where I grew up.[11] Although no adventure playground was there when I was a child, I recently was able to visit and look in at the playground from the decorated fence. Other than playworkers, no grownups are allowed on site.[12] Like the original adventure playground in Emdrup, the one on Governor's Island encourages children to build large structures themselves, a playground tradition still utilized in many European adventure playgrounds, like this one in Amsterdam. Wooden pallets remain the material of choice in many places.

Fig. 1 Jeugdland Amsterdam, Adventure Playground. Photo by the author, spring 2024.

I am also interested in makerspaces, having crafted one by accident with my own college students in a community partnership program in

Philadelphia we called NEUARTS, Neighborhood Engagement at the University of the Arts. We would bring raw materials by foot, train, or bus to local afterschool programs near the university and present the materials for open-ended play. These were children in an area where there was little outdoor play opportunity, as the neighborhood was considered either too violent or the ground too polluted. I also was interested in coming to Sheffield as I had heard there was an outstanding maker program there affiliated with its university. According to my neighbours who attend the local elementary and middle school in Philadelphia, such programs are rare in our city, and there is no makerspace at our local school.[13] What could I learn about making and loose parts in well-respected programs? How is play, and in this case playing with materials, a window into creativity and social life?

The subject here is culture change, rather than social change, although the terms are often interchangeable. Culture change can be small or large, but it has its own style depending on its time and place. As sociologists Amitai Etzioni and Eva Etzioni-Halevy write, 'Social change, it is now held, may originate in any social area, bringing about changes in other areas, which in turn make for further adaptations in the initial sphere of change'.[14] Interestingly, they add, 'The beginning of social change is to a large degree a response to the presence of some degree of social disorganization', and we might note that places of play are often considered some of the most disorganized of social spaces.[15] They ask in their classic on social change: 'How is change guided, directed, formed? ... What role do "the people" play, and what role might they acquire, in controlling the forces that shape their lives?'[16] The study of power may be sociological, but 'how' questions are cultural.

Anthropologists and folklorists have used terms like hybridity, syncretism, bricolage, and creolization to talk about culture change,[17] and these scholars have often been drawn to border geographies where different cultures mix. In both disciplines, edges and doorways are often associated with both increased cultural creativity and increased social tension.[18] The programs that follow are all on the edges of areas: industrial edges, cemetery edges, edges of school time, edges of recreational spaces. All are in places of heightened social tension.[19]

For our purposes, we can think of culture change as the adoption of something different, or even the attempt at the trying on of something

new.[20] These small changes are often only visible over time as large-scale changes, but small shifts can matter. These things can begin with smallest bits of social life, with imitation, with the hybridity of different miniature ideas coming together, or with sneaky attempts at trying on something new that may be considered unacceptable in that place and time. We know that change, particularly if it is gentle, is synonymous with growth, with the fundamentals of being alive.

I am not attempting to write about all culture change, and I acknowledge that play is not the only way that change occurs. You can play with a loose tooth, as a six-year-old might, or someone might knock your tooth out, or it might happen by accident, say by biting into a banana. Play is one of nature's tools for change, and after examining the interview transcripts and the short research film that I made, and the dozens of photos flipped, and the sharing of that media with stakeholders in different contexts, it became clearer. This was a story about making and unmaking, a process of culture change.

Why might this matter? In the recent *State of the World's Children 2024: The Future of Childhood in a Changing World*, UNICEF listed 'three major forces that will impact children's lives by 2025 and beyond': demographic change, the climate crisis, and breakthrough technology.[21] All three intersect in the stories that follow. In one playground alone, over 100 languages are spoken, and yet all of the children there speak play. Many of the children there are migrants, some very recently, and playground staff have had to cancel play programs in the centre of the city out of concern for migrant safety. All of the programs discussed in these pages utilize upcycled or recycled materials, conscious as communities are about material waste and the environmental challenges associated with things, noting that the global environmental crisis is partially a result of over-building and over-making. What is unclear is UNICEF's third major force, how children will utilize and be affected by changing technology. It raises questions about the complex relationship between work and play, and between work, migration, and the environment.

In Sheffield alone there is a playground with a program called Future Makers and a makerspace with a program called Maker{Futures}, and yet try as educators might to predict what children might need in the future, the content of the future is unknowable.

We do know that children in fishing villages tend to play with miniature tools for fishing, while children in farming areas often craft makeshift farms in untilled dirt.[22] Children in our WEIRD ('Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich, Democratic') populations often play with toy computers or toy cell phones, micro versions of the ones adults use in their jobs, or with the real technology modified by child friendly apps.[23] What does it mean to make things in a region of making as our own adult tools are themselves shifting?[24]

We also know that humans are not the only 'makers', although for many years the humanities were enamoured with the idea of *homo faber*, or 'Man the Maker', a title once thought unique.[25] Chimpanzees have since demonstrated their varied tool use, although for years it was thought this was not possible.[26] I have seen gorillas use toys and orangutans craft shelter.[27] British magpies are nest artists and seem to have an aesthetic to their builds. Neither are we humans unique in our attachment to play, although play studies have been grounded in the work *Homo Ludens*, or 'Man the Player'.[28] Any pet owner can attest to the playfulness of dogs with their deep bow signaling, or cats with their playful pounces. I have seen young humpback whales luxuriate with playful, relaxed signaling by slapping their fins near whale watching boats. Gordon Burghardt and Robert Fagen have both carefully assembled example after example of animals at play from octopuses to lizards.[29] We are not the only players or makers on this planet, not the only ones who fabricate objects for playful use, yet we all must be doing so for evolutionary reasons, even if the specifics remain vague and the utility uncertain.[30]

As evolutionary psychologist David Bjorklund wisely points out:

> Effective tool use in humans is nearly inevitable, but it is not based on an innate 'tool use' adaptation unique to our species. Rather, infants have biases to manipulate objects, with the purpose of both seeing what objects can do (exploration) and what they can do with the objects (play).[31]

Very little attention has been paid to taking children seriously as playful makers. Yes, there are many books on how to make things with children, or crafts for children, but little documentation on what the children actually do. Like much of our education system, research on childhood tends to be product rather than process oriented. Yet, there

are notable exceptions. The literature on makerspaces[32] and adventure playgrounds[33] leads us here, yet there is very little writing that looks at both kinds of spaces as a sort of making continuum.[34] Both can be said to be based on the 'Theory of Loose Parts' put forward by Simon Nicholson in 1971, that 'in any environment both the degree of inventiveness and creativity and the possibility of discovery are directly proportional to the number and kinds of variables in it'.[35] There are programs that do 'unbuilding', yet merely taking things apart does not necessarily lead to innovation or a satisfying play experience.[36] There is exploration, and then there is play.

Makerspaces and other hands-on laboratories for design thinking have been mainly studied for their science and technology training potential.[37] Such STEM programs now often include the arts, turning STEM into STEAM, but in my own experience, the play element is often quite restricted. Typically, the word 'play' only emerges in the makerspace literature when it is associated with nurseries or young preschool aged children, or as they are known in the United Kingdom, the early years.[38] Adventure playgrounds are usually described as places for open-ended play, typically addressed in a social psychological frame.[39] The focus here is beyond the STEM/STEAM utilitarianism of job training specifics. Even programs that teach coding are beginning to realize that this too will no longer be an essential skill in the near future. The grandfather of developmental cognitive psychology Jean Piaget himself was interested in the utility of 'errors' in logical thinking and the significance of imbalances, of disequilibrium.[40] Here, I am curious about children going off script or doing things differently for the sake of play, with its outside-the-box thinking, its inversion, its hybridity, its core exaggeration.

All games can be seen as a process of order and disorder within a more rigid frame,[41] and the kinetic zones of dance spaces and playgrounds have their own types of doing/undoing with their climbing and sliding, twisting and turning, adding and subtracting.[42] What of object play? If play is always dynamic, what can be learned about going forward from this point in time as children wrestle with objects of culture? Who decides what is unmade? This is particularly urgent as not only is there an increasing lack of play opportunity in many children's lives,[43] but the literature on play advocacy consistently focuses on the socioemotional or

physical aspects of play. Culture—whether in movement style,[44] words sung,[45] or objects made—typically remains an undervalued framework for play's many essential offerings.

The methods here are twofold: to document through photography and videography children in the process of playful creation in a carefully selected array of play programs, and to speak with as many willing adult stakeholders as possible in these program communities. These conversations utilized a form of photo elicitation, with the images serving as a common reference point for the adults in that particular community. Part I: Play at the Centre presents play in the Pitsmoor Adventure Playground, the GLUE Collective's Glue Garden, and the Maker{Futures} Mobile Makerspace. In each of these settings we look at examples of small-scale culture change as it unfolded in the children's creations. We revisit each of these programs in reverse order in Part II: Programs as Sites of Culture Change.

It is intentional that these conversations with key staff form the core of the book. Each group commented on their own program, and each group was also invited to comment on the other two programs in round robin style.[46] In a cheeky act of play, I have taken the liberty of rearranging some of our conversations here, although all of the words were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The adults may have known of each other and certainly knew of each other's programs, but these conversations within programs and across programs as such did not exist, with rare exceptions. They are conversations made, unmade, and made again, with the participants' permission. In this way, their ideas are curated, highlighting their differences and their intersections. Like all ethnographers, the words of the people are treated as an authentic source, and all conversations are considered co-constructions. Each speaker has given their permission for their words to be shared in this manner. It is the tradition of ethnography or folklore study to give the verbatim words of living people the same prominence as revered texts, the same respect.

The media served to spark the storytelling, and the data is the commentary. Some interviews were done on site, some on Zoom while I remained in the United Kingdom from interviewees' homes and from cars, often squeezed in between their other jobs. An unexpected pandemic gift is our ability to continue fieldwork via Zoom across the ocean, long

after the official research time is over. The conversations themselves are in their second year and have morphed into continued friendships. The research also looped between these programs and several others: the Quarry Adventure Playground in nearby Knottingley, the Big Swing Adventure Playground in Bradford, and the Highfield Adventure Playground of Sheffield, in addition to MASSK, Manor After School and Kids Klubs. I was also able to tour the University of Sheffield's iForge engineering maker lab, the first student-led makerspace in the United Kingdom.

Unlike many ethnographies of children's folklore, there are no interviews with children here, although many scenes of play involving children are described. One reason is that gaining permission to engage directly with children, particularly as an outsider is increasingly difficult, and two, I recognize that sometimes, for children, talk is overrated. As the dancer Isadora Duncan famously has said, 'If I could say it, I wouldn't have to dance it'. My own art students consistently hated having to write artist statements, noting that their paintings and songs and dances were for them, complex commentaries that shared enough of what they wished to share. Julia Sexton, Pitsmoor Board Member and lecturer of Childhood Studies at Sheffield Hallam University concurs:

> And when you do talk to children about their play, it is a very adult thing to do. Children don't talk to each other about that. It's almost like it bursts the bubble, doesn't it? It takes it away.

The approach of this book honors the nonverbal ways that children communicate as our collective primal language. We move, touch, and present things to each other, and this can be particularly useful in communities where dozens of languages are spoken at the same time.

I hope my own views are sufficiently reined in so that the people in these communities are recognized as the local experts here, as is the practice in the anthropological tradition.[47] What follows is a set of discussions, a gathering of perspectives on the 'social life of things'.[48] I was trained by a psychologist of play, an urban folklorist, and a visual anthropologist, and so these lenses also steer the narrative in conjunction with the local experts. As is the microethnographic practice, the video shared with the adult constituents is not a documentary. It is focused, only slightly edited, and there is no sound. It is intentional that there is no sound.

In order to do sound properly, you have to have the children mic'd up, and it felt less invasive and more respectful to keep the sound off. These are places where there are a lot of emotion-filled sounds, and many children speaking different languages in difficult situations, so protecting their identities without sound was a serious way to keep them safe. To visually mask the children's identities, I worked with filmmaker Hadrian Cawthorne at the University of Sheffield to conceal faces with a variety of techniques. Most images are of children's objects and some images are of children's backs. Some shots were intentionally made fuzzy and faded out. And then I experimented with having some still photos of things that the children made and then placed them on the children's faces as digital masks.[49] In this way, the richness of the expressive play was not erased as well. Note, in this book, all of the adults are named, even though the children remain nameless. This was the choice of the program staff who rightly wanted to own their contributions, to get credit for their ideas, their history in their communities. As I said to Steve Pool, Pitsmoor Adventure Playground's large structure designer and playground board member, no one could erase or hide your contributions to this place. These are interesting tensions about identity, protection, masking, and unmasking that are worth playing with in future discussions about methods that oscillate between the humanities and the social sciences.

I have given the images and transcripts of each program to each program. Some of the still photos may end up in their educational documents, and none include children's faces. The playground research film made of the Pitsmoor Adventure Playground was given to Steve Pool, as he also wears the hat of playground documentarian and resident filmmaker. The film is now in his hands and officially owned by the Pitsmoor playground community. If Pitsmoor would like, they can post it or project it on the building; they can do whatever they wish with it. One board member felt it might be useful for staff training.

There was no stealing from the rich to give to the poor here, but the creativity of these programs that hold space for childhood are exclusively in under-resourced communities. The funding comes from the whims of the government sponsored lottery, from grants, from donations, and from corporations. Many people volunteer, connected to a sense of place and/or a sense of purpose. Most people who work in these programs come

from the local town, if not from the region. Some are parents, some have advanced degrees, and some have not had much formal schooling.

Some readers of this book might be more interested in what makes for a successful play program and might wish to begin with Part II. There you will find oral histories highlighting the challenges the three programs faced as they wrestled with larger societal obstacles. Part I offers scenes directly observed in each program and weaves in a brief guide to play theory. Some may be only interested in makerspaces or adventure playgrounds. Cheat, and start with the index. Some may be more interested in the ethnographic video material, or the use of children's objects to mask their identities, so Chapter 1 might the place to start. You might be really curious to follow the trail of books in the endnotes. There is always more to read about play, and I have referenced many of my favourites for the reader to find, hopefully without distracting with too many citations.

Geologist Ruth Allen writes in her recent book, *Weathering:*

> Uplands areas that are still uplifting, such as the Peak District, are doing so precisely because of the erosion that is constantly unburdening the land of their material. In short, stuff must be lost for everything to keep rising.[50]

Nature's unmaking often frightens us, with its mess, its disorder, its suggestiveness of our own decay. Many find adventure playgrounds 'dirty', makerspaces 'chaotic'. As anthropologist Mary Douglas noted, dirt is itself 'matter out of place', not a thing, but a cultural category.[51] The good dirt of the garden becomes bad dirt on the kitchen floor. When we grownups put aside playtime, or playgrounds, or play materials as somehow being unnecessary, it suggests that childhood itself is out of place, as if tools for thinking do not belong in young hands.

As my mentor Brian Sutton-Smith wrote, perhaps at play, we see 'the useless made useful'.[52] He often spoke of the adaptiveness of play is in its potentiation. Yet all play is not utilitarian, and even if it might be, we may not see its potential tapped for a long, long time. Play offers oblique skills while satisfying a host of other, often simultaneous needs: emotional release, social connection, physical movement, and cultural commentary, and if we are lucky, joy.[53]

There is so much evidence that play in its exaggeration, its negotiation,

develops the potential ability to switch strategies, to adopt and to adapt, to rise in the face of erosion.[54] If only we could show how. In that spirit, I invite you to take apart this book.

Notes

1 George Orwell (1937). Orwell wrote, 'It seemed a world from which vegetation had been banished; nothing existed except smoke, shale, ice, mud, ashes, and foul water. But even Wigan is beautiful compared with Sheffield' (1937, 7).

2 To read for free, visit https://www.openbookpublishers.com/books/10.11647/obp.0326

3 The early psychologists most famously associated with the study of play and context include Erik Erikson (1950), Lev Vygotsky (1978), and Uri Bronfenbrenner (1970; 1979).

4 See the works of Brian Sutton-Smith (1972; 1981a; 1981b; 1986; 1997), and Iona and Peter Opie (1959; 1969) and Philippe Ariès (1962).

5 See David Lancy (2008) and Helen Schwartzman (2001).

6 For more on toy history, see Gary Cross (1997) and Seth Giddings (2024). For the Opies' own work on folklore for children see Iona Opie and Peter Opie (1963) and Opie, Alderson, and Opie (1989).

7 See William Wells Newell (1883) for the games and Sigmund Freud (1905) for the jokes. Of course, the idea of play as paradox is significantly older, a key concept in Zen philosophy. For an interesting essay on the tensions between conservation and creation in folklore, see Barre Toelken (1996).

8 For more on European adventure playgrounds, see the extensive work of Fraser Brown (2007; 2008) and with Bob Hughes (2018). For American adventure play, see Morgan Leichter-Saxby and Suzanna Law (2015).

9 For a history of adventure playgrounds and the rise of interest in loose parts, see Ozlem Cankaya, Jamie Leach, and Kadriye Akdemir (2024). See also Marjorie Gill Allen (aka Lady Allen of Hurtwood) (1971).

10 Fraser Brown (2007); Adrian Voce in Fraser Brown and Chris Taylor (2008), 23; Joseph Frost (2010); Tony Chilton (in Fraser Brown and Bob Hughes 2018), 167); Fraser Brown and Mike Wragg (2020). For more on the numbers of adventure playgrounds in the UK, see Play England's report by Lesli Godfrey (2022).

11 See https://www.play-ground.nyc/the-yard

12 Parents are required to join younger children in the preschool play area, but no parents are allowed in the main adventure playground. There were many adults staring longingly from the decorated fence, mainly hidden from view.

13 For examples of the connection between access to play resources and social injustice see Anna Beresin (2023).

14 Amitai Etzion and Eva Etzioni-Halevy (1964), 7.

15 Ibid. (1964), 423.

16 Ibid. (1964), 489.

17 See Deborah Kapchan and Pauline Turner Strong (1999) on hybridity and related terms, specifically Claude Lévi-Strauss on bricolage (1962) and linguist John McWhorter on creolization in language (2008). Note that Lévi-Strauss used the racist term 'savage' in this work reflecting the colonial racism entangled in early anthropology.

18 Arnold Van Gennep (1909); Victor Turner (1974).

19 For more about the increasing speed of mixing in the twenty-first century, see Jackie Marsh and Julia Bishop (2014).

20 See Patrick Bateson and Paul Martin (2013) for more on the social distinctions between creativity and innovation.

21 UNICEF (2024), https://www.unicef.org/reports/state-of-worlds-children/2024

22 David Lancy (2024). Perhaps also see my review of it in the *International Journal of Play* (Beresin, 2024). See also the classic by Helen Schwartzman (1978).

23 For examples of media play, see Rebekah Willet, Chris Richards, Jackie Marsh, Andrew Burn, and Julia C. Bishop (2013). For the WEIRD concept, see Joseph Henrich (2020).

24 The nickname of the football club *Sheffield United* is *The Blades*, playing with Sheffield's industrial history as a manufacturing centre for steel things that cut. Sheffield has two teams – *Sheffield United* (founded 1889) and also *Sheffield Wednesday* aka *The Owls* (founded 1868). There is also much local discussion that football itself originated in Sheffield (see 'Sheffield gave Soccer to the World. Now It Wants Credit', *New York Times*, February 14, 2024). Even in the adult world of sport, symbols of play and the means of production are intertwined.

25 See Henri Bergson (1934).

26 For details of chimps on tool use, see Jane Goodall (1971) and it is worth also seeing K. Brandon Barker and Daniel J. Povinelli (2021).

27 Anna Beresin (2019).

28 Johan Huizinga (1949). Huizinga's book may be considered the classic on play and culture. It is still cited with frequency. For a critique of the racism that can be found in the book and other early anthropological texts, see Anna Beresin (2021).

29 See Gordon Burghardt (2005) and Robert Fagen (1981). Burghardt's book is available for free download through MIT Press. See also Burghardt and Elisabetta Palagi (2023).

30 For more on possible evolutionary function of play, see Sutton-Smith (1997) and also Melvin Konner (2010).

31 David Bjorklund (2016), 9.

32 See these works about makerspaces: Edward P. Clapp, S. Lynneth Solis, Carolyn Kar Ning Ho, and Katherine Laguzza (2020); Edward P. Clapp, Jessica Ross, Jennifer O. Ryan, and Shari Tishman (2017); Dale Leorke and Danielle Wyatt (2022).

33 Here are additional works on adventure playgrounds: Penny Wilson (2024); Stuart Lester and Wendy Russell (2008); and Dave Potter (1997).

34 English academics have written about both types of spaces, but from a literacies angle, with play in service to literacy. See Kate Pahl and Jennifer Rowsell et al. (2020).

35 Simon Nicholson (1971), 30. See more in Adrian Voce in Fraser Brown and Chris Taylor, (2008), 44. For a history of the design of playful things like blocks and playgrounds see Alexandra Lange (2018).

36 Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown (2011)

37 Eli Tucker-Raymond and Brian Gravel (2019); Michael Tan (2022). For a solid guide to makerspace assessment see Alison Buxton, Louise Kay, and Beth Nutbrown (2022)

38 Karen Wohlwend, Anna Keune, and Kylie Peppler (2016), A. Blum-Ross, K. Kumpulainen, and J. Marsh (2020).

39 Morgan Leichter-Saxby and Suzanna Law (2015); Fraser Brown and Bob Hughes (2018).

40 Jean Piaget (1962; 1968).

41 Brian Sutton-Smith (1972); Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2003).

42 Yours truly (2010; 2014), and with Brigitta Hermann, Manfred Fischbeck, and Elia Sinaico (2018).

43 See the 2025 report by Play England, https://www.playengland.org.uk/newsblog/the-play-commissions-interim-report-a-watershed-moment-for-play-policy

44 Anna Beresin (2019).

45 Anna Beresin (2010).

46 Dana H. Davidson, David Y.H. Wu and Joseph Tobin pioneered this method in their book and films (1989). For more on video and photo elicitation see Anna Beresin (2010).

47 Clifford Geertz (1973).

48 Arjun Appadurai (1986).

49 I experimented with the masking of children's faces with their own paintings in my previous book, *The Art of Play* (2014).

50 Ruth Allen (2024, 9).

51 Mary Douglas (1966).

52 Brian Sutton-Smith (1975).

53 Mikhail Bakhtin (1981); Brian Sutton-Smith (2017); see Anna Beresin and Julia Bishop (2023).

54 See Brian Sutton-Smith (1997); Melvin Konner (2010); and also Anthony Pellegrini and Peter K. Smith (2005); Gordon Burghardt and Elisabetta Palagi (2023).

PART I
PLAY AT THE CENTRE

1. Loose Parts: The Pitsmoor Adventure Playground

My ten-year-old self seems to know the way to the adventure playground.

Crossing the wide street Burngreave, I look carefully right to left and left to right, as cars still seem to be on the wrong side of the road, and I pass the halal market and go around the recessed church guarding the corner, turning to follow the small curving street following my feet, as my phone says that I have arrived, but clearly my eyes have not found what I am looking for. I am ten, although my hair is silver grey, shoulder length, and somewhat unruly for a sixty-three-year-old. And then I see it: a handmade acrylic sign with the key word in caps: P-L-A-Y. Around the fence and up the hill is the Pitsmoor Adventure Playground. More lettering further up the hill is in large cut out type in the style of the Hollywood sign. Decorated with children's paint marks it simply says, UTOPIA.

Fig. 2 Utopia, Pitsmoor Adventure Playground, Sheffield. Photo by the author, spring 2024.

©2026 Anna Beresin, CC BY-NC 4.0
https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0511.01

Zaqer Mused, one of the daily playworkers, greets me at the fence, welcoming me immediately. The staff are surprised that I had not written first. I explained that I wanted to see this famous place and introduce myself in person. The formal application to observe will come soon after. He points out the zip wire, the multi-person slide in its enormity, the tractor swing and pirate ship, the sandpits and multi-game area. There is a space for under-fives that looks like a preschool play yard with its mini plastic slide and trikes, but there are loose parts scattered everywhere, and a mud kitchen and open woodlands up the grassy hill. There is evidence of a fire pit at the centre. To my eye, the playground looks like a sleeping giantess: the painted cement building on my left its face, the woodlands behind it with its branches, its long giantess hair, the zip line spine at the back curving into the long slide. Fire pit belly not far from the mud kitchen. Knee and ankle jointed swings point feet towards the concrete ball area, a relaxed giantess with her hills to roll down.

Fig. 3 Slide and Zip Line, Pitsmoor Adventure Playground, Sheffield. Photo by the author, spring 2024.

The three other playworkers were inspecting each area for safety, a daily routine check. A family with a seven-, five-, and two-year-old are the first to come through the gate, the two-year-old in a thick footie pajama and rubber boots galumphing on the edge between the grass and the railroad tie on our undulating giantess. Waddling up the steep hill alone, she seems content with herself. She then holds on to the rope suspended from the long zip line, sits on her seven-year-old brother's lap, and he falls onto the sand and she keep sliding, sliding, and eventually is chased down and scooped up by Dad. The five-year-old goes down the baby slide by herself watching me. I make a 'Woo' sound, limiting my conversations with children and parents to noises, to not make myself an American spectacle. She raises one eyebrow and then goes on up to the intimidating big kid slide, climbs the ladder and slides down rapidly with a satisfied impish smile. We both have arrived.

Himself a young father, Zaq talks intensely with me about the challenges of parents either lingering or taking up space in this children's oasis, or hovering and telling the children what to do. He exudes patience and notes that sixty percent of the time here, the children come alone. The brochure at the site states:

> Children aged from 8-13 are free to come and go at our playground.
> Children aged 6 and 7 may attend unsupervised if accompanied by a child aged 8 or over.
> Children under 6 must be supervised by a responsible adult at all times.[1]

Such policies reflect the 'Three Frees' of adventure playground philosophy: free of charge, free to choose, and free to come and go.[2] Or it sometimes morphs into the '3 F's' of fun, freedom, and flexibility.[3] Zaq is a trained playworker, someone who speaks play and lets the children be in charge as they should be in a place like this. Reversal of power seems to be the first custom.

So, what is an adventure playground?

Zaq offers:

> Just being able to bring out little bits of equipment and just watching magic happen in front of you. You know what I mean? And it's just like, you don't get this in other settings. And I've

> been in other settings. And I think adventure playgrounds are so, so special. The whole approach of it, and kids just being able to kind of dictate and lead what they want to do, without judgment, without anyone saying anything to 'em. I'm always battling with parents, you know. I say 'Just leave them alone'. I tell them to leave them alone and stop interfering with what they're trying to do. Because they're having the time of their lives, or creating magic, or having fun with their friends, and you're trying to stop it in some kind of way that's not necessary. The adulteration. And some of them just don't get it. They don't get it.
>
> Even like, my dad back in the day would always say, you know, 'What do you do? You haven't got a proper job'. And I know he'd only do it to wind me up for a while, because he was a steelworker, and he was all like, being hands on things like metal and steel and blah blah. But I said to him like, 'We are important. The staff are important. The children are off playing, but we are important, also'. The other families make it as well. The mums that chip in and help out. The volunteers as well. Everyone's got a role to play. But essentially the main thing is the children and just watching them develop and grow. Watching the confidence, their confidence get better. Doing things that they were probably a little afraid to do before, for whatever, a simple thing like going down the slide, or whatever else. Yeah, they are all the components of what makes an adventure playground.

It has been interesting talking to different people there about their working definition, noting that there is not a 'correct' one, or a specific one that I am after.

Pitsmoor Adventure Playground board member Julia Sexton trains adventure playground staff and acknowledges the complexity of an adventure playground's definition:

> Ah, that's a debate in itself, Anna. So, for me, I'm viewing it as a staffed adventure playground, and that's an interesting thing that came up, yesterday, because so many people were talking about an 'adventure playground' in the city centre in the Pound Park. So that's a fixed structure playground. So, for me, a staffed adventure playground will be a space for children to freely come and go over a certain age. So usually it's between six and eight (years

> old), that they will be able to freely engage in what activities, not activities, opportunities in play that they want. There will be resources available for them to do it that way, and it should be free of charge. And usually, they are areas of sanctuary that will be protected by a fence, but that's debated, and the staff will be there to facilitate play following the playwork principles.[4]

Patrick Meleady, former Pitsmoor Adventure Playground Manager and board member has been with the playground since its inception:

> I think it's the elemental stuff for me: the water, the fire, the air. The freedom to choose. The iconic structures like your zip wire. Your slides. So, it's a mixture of a whole range of things. Your loose parts waiting. Combining and putting things together. And a space where children can take turns, they can have leadership skills, they can work as part of a team, and I think if you run a good adventure playground one of the outcomes is that you create a cohesive community.
>
> See the adventure playground, I like the idea of it being a place where you can build; the children can make things. You can plant things and learn all about the environment, about the world around them. And the upcycling of materials is really useful. We got a throwaway society, and I think that's not very good at all.
>
> And one of the beautiful things of a good quality adventure playground is that the children police it themselves. There's very limited involvement from the playworkers.

Yanina Koszalinski, former youth worker and Pitsmoor Adventure Playground Board Chair offers her thoughts:

> It was that ethos in the old days of an adventure playground being junk playgrounds, using materials you found around like we did. Me dad had a pile of sand, and well, we used to run up and down the compost heap, and so we'd play with the sand, you know. We just played with that natural environment. So, I brought that into that, and that's what adventure playgrounds are for me.
>
> You can suggest things. You can have a theme. You can introduce new things to kids that they might not have even known you

> could do, but, it's their choice whether they want to do it or not. Sometimes kids' curiosity brings them over to what you're doing. Sometimes, they're, 'Oh right'. And they walk off. Or they join in, or they make their own suggestions. I like that approach. When people say to us, 'Oh, you do activities'. No! We don't. But we do, do lots of different things. It's giving children that play environment and having things in that environment, and introducing new things into it, and seeing how they react to it.
>
> The big structures, for me, you don't need the big structures to have an adventure playground. But they grew out of self-build[5] and they did serve a purpose. Some of the old places in Sheffield, where they built a tower, that was massive. You wouldn't get that on any adventure playground now.

In talking with Yanina and Pitsmoor Playwork Manager Sarah Truman, they mention that the loose parts aspect of the playground had to be paused during the pandemic, as it took forever to wipe things down, but there is a tradition of moveable pieces that has remained. Sarah shared that soon after the pandemic, 'One little boy was collecting everything in his sight 'cause he was moving house. He got every single loose part ever on a trolley and took off'.

Yanina adds: You know the structure in the sandpit?

Anna It's gone now.

Yanina It's gone.

Sarah Everything changes.

Playwork

The staff are trained in child development, and have taken certificate or degree programs in playwork, in order to facilitate this kind of play program. The skill of playwork is not to be taken lightly. Many spoke of having grown up in rich outdoor play environments or having worked in 'play schemes', play programmes for children after school or during school holidays. Often hired because of specific skills in sports or crafts, the genius found in playwork is its patience and philosophy of noninterference. Yet, I noticed Zaq and his peers being alert to both

individuals' needs and to complex group dynamics.

On that first day, Zaq began to clean out a trash can with a hose and some soap, and a little boy came near him and was so excited to take over and clean out that can. Zaq reminisces:

> Oh yeah, it was when the boy came over with his Mum. His Mum actually came up to me and said it was exactly what he needed. And I just feel like, obviously I know the child, I know the family, and I could see he was kind of frustrated with what had just happened in the car. Something had happened in the car. And I thought I sensed he needed a distraction, wherein I know what he likes. I know what kind of things he's into, so I thought this would be right up his street, you know what I mean?
>
> A jet wash is pumping out loads of water, powerful you know. It's kind of an attractive piece of equipment for a seven-year-old, you know what I mean? His Mum saying that to me, it validated me asking him to come and do it. 'Cause it made me feel good thinking that I picked up on a cue and realized that he needed something, and when his Mum said it was exactly what he needed, it made me kinda feel good, you know what I mean? That's what I'm here for.

The slightly lonely boy was thrilled to take over the task, to play with the angles of the water, to enjoy the power of the pressure, to see how water moves things, to dump the soapy water. The bucket was already clean, so he was filling its emptiness, emptying its fullness. His dad then came up the hill to inspect the task, perhaps wanting to be helpful, but then the young boy moved up the hill to other things.

Play and playwork are made up of such complex yet simple moments. Zaq explains:

> We're there for the children, first and foremost, and whatever they need, whatever way they want to play, we help facilitate that, and that's what we're there for. We just want to make sure the children leave the playground in good spirits.

Dr. Suzanna Law of Pop-Up Adventure Play in nearby Manchester trains playworkers and discusses the principle of not touching children's creations at adventure playgrounds: 'You can come back (to play more), so we keep our promise not to touch what you've made. If it is taken

away, it is done by the children'. She clarifies that if something is not played with after a year, the staff can disassemble it after the children leave, to recycle the materials, or for risk assessment. It then often ends up in the fire pit, enjoyed as a source for cooking snacks.[6]

> When a child is at play, playworkers do not intervene. If needed, playworkers employ the lowest level of intervention so that the play can continue without disruption. What happens when a child asks you to participate in their play? What happens when a child sends a direct play cue? That is when the playworker instinct activates (following the child's lead, meeting their needs in play, and respecting the play frame). Playworkers draw upon extensive training and research from the field to make informed decisions about how to support the play process.[7]

Playworkers have been called 'people who make play'.[8] They make play happen, offering guidance perhaps, but not interfering. Playworkers from the most radical of all adventure playgrounds in Wales write, 'The practice of playwork aims in its simplest form to create the conditions for play to occur. . .and to make playing publicly acceptable, because it generates opportunities for children to be seen playing in the public realm'.[9] More than anything, the literature on adventure play speaks to the importance of risk as a developmental necessity and of the 'play ethos' or play spirit that marks the space.[10]

More camp counsellor than gym teacher, one will find grown-up playworker Julius Turner playing football with the children at the Pitsmoor Adventure Playground on a daily basis. Near to my age, Julius seems intuitively around nine. On his birthday, I wished him a Happy Ninth Birthday, much to his pleasure. His laughter can be heard three blocks away on Burngreave, often cheering on a child acting as a sports hero, or roaring 'Biscuits are ready!' and out of the oven. There is always food on hand in the cement shed, and on school holidays the healthy abundance often becomes the only meal for many of the children. While I was there, parents on site would often call to their youngest children to pause their play and eat more.

Sometimes the adult world intrudes on children's play, not out of protectiveness, but despite it. Patrick Meleady observes that 'for some families, they live in flats that don't even have gardens, so this is really

important for them. And the freedom to choose what they want to do is vital':

> The children experiment and explore. So, it's a good thing. It's their playground. There's been situations where people, parents have said, 'Oh, stop them from throwing water'. But, if you don't like it, it's not for you. It's their playground. We are just custodians of the space and trying to co-create it with them.

Fascinators and Provocations

In chatting with playworker Rosa Curtis, she used an interesting term that she attributed to Yanina Koszalinski. We were talking about loose parts, and she said that Yanina used the word, 'a fascinator'. When asked, Yanina reflected:

> Fascinators. I can't claim I came up with that term. It's from the children's Scrap Store in Bristol, their Play Pods.[11]
> It's that idea of introducing new things. Little things. You know the idea that's different--it might only last a session, but just throwing a bit of excitement into it. I got a load of little models of little cottages. And I think it was Julia, hid them, put them in different corners of the playground, and we kept an eye on them. Some moved. Some disappeared. Things like that. You just do it and leave it. And having those ideas of different materials, different things.
>
> I think, for me the idea of 'fascinators' comes back to when I was a kid, and there were old abandoned allotment sites around where we lived around this area. And there would be old hooks, and there'd be the odd gardening tool in it. We talked about it the other day. There'd be huge massive clumps of rhubarb growing, and we used to take a bag of sugar from home and cook the rhubarb. We didn't get sweets. We just used the rhubarb with added sugar. And we'd go in those allotments and we'd find things. You'd find a brush. You'd find odd things. And you'd create a den. Claim an area.

Julia Sexton adds:

> I’ve been always been really fascinated by how things provoke things in different people. So, you mentioned the landscape of Pitsmoor Adventure Playground, and you see it elsewhere, where there’s sort of rolling hills. And children are rolling down them. It almost calls to them. I like those ideas of Gibson’s about affordances[12] about how it affects our perception.
>
> And it will be different for each person, because it goes on their own past experiences, their own personality, how they will view it. So, for one child, they might’ve been told not to run down a hill, and they will be Goody Two Shoes and not roll down the hill. And another child will have been told not to, and that will make them do it. So, I like all those kinds of things. I’m fascinated by loose parts, about the possibilities of more possibilities and how it opens up.

Figs. 4A and 4B Imagine, Loose Parts, Pitsmoor Adventure Playground, Sheffield. Photo by the author, spring 2024.

‘That red disk cone thing has been used for lots of things’, she says.

> That originated from Hallam (University). . .So, I thought, well, I know where that could go (to the playground). And it's been a water container for water fights. I think it's had silver foil all over it; children made it into a UFO. You've seen children hide in it. I think originally, the design for it was for a sort of spinning, and I think it's an early year's product, kind of encouraging coordination. But you rarely see children using it like that. If playworkers put provocations there, sometimes children will use the spaces, and then they won't use them for quite some time. I found it really intriguing.

Sarah Truman notes the challenges of parents appreciating the process over product, that a child might be 'in their heads' in a fort or a den all day. Play itself can be invisible.

> I think that's what's quite hard to explain to the parents, that your child's having a wonderful time. There's lots of things going on there. But it might be that they won't come home with that picture, or that pebble painted.

Yanina continues the thread:

> You know the little slide we have in the under-fives area? Well, we got one that broke, and the slide bit was separated. And we placed it somewhere up the top (of the hill) against where we have the little wooden house type structures. And they placed it up there to slide down. But it was moveable, and it went all over the playground. They moved it to all different places. Sometimes it was just laid on the hill and they'd slide down it. Or against a piece of equipment, it moved around. . .

'It fell apart. It fell apart in the end', adds Sarah.

Yanina nods, 'It fell apart completely'.

The staff are always bringing recycled materials for the children to use—from art supplies, to raw materials for building, to used clothing. I had noticed three children were just marching around carrying a long plastic pipe that Zaq had introduced. It was almost eighteen feet long, and the

girls were hooked on to each other through the act of carrying. Zaq noted, 'It's just the size of it, with them being really tiny and this (pipe) being this massive piece of a thing to them. The size difference kind of makes it exciting'.

We saw that pipe being used as a limbo pole on the big slide, and the children would slide right under it, the pipe serving as a second parallel bar mirroring the one at the top of the slide itself. For many, the limbo pipe was a big shift in the ritual of how the slide was used, and children would swing off the first bar and slide under the pipe, exaggerating their height and then their flatness. Often a child would slide on top of a coat, or on one of the playground's large stuffed animals, in order to reduce friction. A five-foot-long soft alligator was much in demand for the wild slide ride. That alligator sometimes would end up in the pirate ship, Peter Pan style, or laid out on the ground for a child to get some rest on, a soft alligator nest. Soon after, the alligator, like the pipe, would be scooped up by yet another child, a kind of unspoken, tag team ritual.

Fig. 5 Alligator, Pitsmoor Adventure Playground, Sheffield. Photo by the author, spring 2024.

Zaq describes the movement path of a particular piece of popular equipment that highlighted a sense of culture change:

> Last summer, we had this massive draughts board (checker board), and the pieces had a whole in the middle. They got some rope and they tied it to that rotating spinner (also known as the Witch's Hat) and used them as seats. So, they'd sit on the seats and wind the thing up and let it spin. That was kind of cool, watching them kind of change that piece of equipment to how they wanted. It was a really popular actually; they made about four of them. That were the children, the children doing that themselves.

Those rope seats were then detached from the spinner by the children and brought to the remote area behind the cement building where the slender trees grow. Several tween girls have attached the ropes to the trees, creating a new space for quiet conversation. These swings often shifted from tree to tree, and this quiet area was in use every day that I visited. Sometimes the children experimented with dens and small tree houses there, building them up and taking them down. They said that next time they will make their buildings with a stronger design.

Figs. 6A and 6B Swing, and Tree with Swings, Pitsmoor Adventure Playground, Sheffield. Photo by the author, spring 2024.

Children would sometimes carry their younger siblings or cousins around, holding onto them, gently placing them on the spinning equipment, sliding with them on the big slide like familial loose parts. The equipment itself invited hybrid games, with children dancing TikTok moves at the top of the slide, or rolling down the hill in a giant game of Keep Away and Tag. As we will see, for children, combinatory thinking is physical. Is it any wonder that so many children cannot concentrate when stuck at a desk for seven hours a day?

Einstein himself wrote: 'Combinatory play seems to be the essential feature in productive thought'.[13] This is true for both the decorative warm quilt[14] and for the viral music remix, yet both are rarely celebrated at school. The Pulitzer Prize-winner Richard Powers in his 2024 tech novel *Playground* suggests: 'If you want to make something smarter, teach it to play'.[15] The staff at the Pitsmoor Adventure Playground might counter, 'or provide it with provocative materials and leave it alone'.

Scenes of Change

After gaining permission from the playground board, two university departments, and two university research review boards, nonparticipant observation officially began. Our agreement was that I could come to the playground several days a week, weather permitting, and when the staff thought it was the right time make a short research film. Parental permission forms were signed, along with a simpler one for each child to indicate whether they wanted to be filmed or not. Those children who gave assent and also had parental permission would wear a large sticker so I could see who had said yes to filming. In order to not make anyone feel badly for saying no, any child who did not have, or give permission, could also get the sticker on their way home if they wished.

Glenda Giblin, the kind volunteer who signs children in at the playground, was in charge of forms and stickers. A daily presence there for forty years, she chose the large red heart stickers and children could be seen running about the playground with big red hearts on their jumpers. Sometimes they literally played with their hearts on their

sleeves. The older children who wanted to participate, but who came alone, were intentionally blurred in the film if they came into view. The video was first shared with the Pitsmoor Board members and staff for their approval. The consensus was that the children's identities were sufficiently protected as I had promised.

Instead of sharing a video transcript here, what follows are three scenes from the research video, again with different stakeholders offering their commentary. Unlike the previous set of images, these photos are markers. Selected images demonstrate major shifts in position or posture, like new topics in speech. They are new orientations which in typical conversation analysis invites new participation or new subject matter.[16] Here the shifts are in response to novel interactions with people or objects coming into or out of the proximity of the playful focus. The Mud Kitchen with Wheels, The Glue and The Box, and The Platforms, all are scenes of combinatory play and the display of the practice of change.

Scene 1: The Mud Kitchen with Wheels

Mud kitchens? I shared with the staff that we do not really have many mud kitchens back in the US. We have sandboxes, where they might have a few pots and pans and buckets. There are some mud kitchens connected to early years programs back home and to forest schools. On the internet, 'mud kitchens' usually are listed as something fancy to be purchased as a kit.[17]

Zaq muses:

> It's a really popular piece of equipment, or whatever you want to call it. Kids really like getting their hands stuck into sand and textures and the imaginative kind of cooking, making your buns or cakes. We always have kids coming up to us and saying, 'Would you like a bun? Would you like a piece o' cake?' I think they get lost in it, get lost in it. Whatever is going on around is kind of not happening. They kind of like that slow—in tune with whatever is going on in front of them—in the kitchen; that's why I really like it.

> Yeah, it's kind of a dreamy state they're in. Everything around them is not really happening, and they're kind of in the kitchen, doing whatever. Even though it's fixed, and I'm not the biggest fan of fixed equipment, but I like that they can take the pan elsewhere on the playground. I'll see them create something in the mud kitchen and transfer it to another part, so I'm always finding pans and pots with flowers in them and stuff like that. So that's what I like as well, being able to move things around.

Dr. Steve Pool co-built the mud kitchen years ago, along with a castle that does not exist anymore. He has had his own hands on many of the structures, not only at the Pitsmoor Adventure Playground, but at the nearby, temporarily closed Highfield Adventure Playground. He explains how they obtained funding to build the mud kitchen in Pitsmoor.

> There was some funding to build a Covid memorial, and they suggested a bench. And they also wanted a mud kitchen, and where the mud kitchen was before it was very ad hoc. It was an old bath and it was really dangerous with all these sharp bits on it. So, we got a 1000 pounds, and we said that we'd build a Covid Memorial Mud Kitchen, which was quite nice because during Covid, we couldn't do anything. Cause you had to sterilize everything, you couldn't do the physical stuff with pots and pans. We had to do quite a lot of landscaping, because the other thing, we had to flatten out and dig out the profile. That was a big job.
>
> The mud kitchen spreads everywhere, doesn't it? The pirate ship, it's crazy, the mud kitchen up there. Up at the pirate ship, yeah. It goes everywhere.

Julia Sexton and I examine moving images of the Pitsmoor mud kitchen. She laughs as a child removes a wheel from a pan and sits on it, and then returns it to the pan for 'baking'.

Figs. 7A and 7B Wheel in Pan, Chef with Wheel, Pitsmoor Adventure Playground, Sheffield. Photo by the author, spring 2024.

> Ooh. I wasn't expecting that. I definitely wasn't expecting that. That was an interesting one. That's fantastic.
>
> I love the idea of a children's kind of culture—when you watch, observe children, and how play is a form of communication—and that makes me very annoyed when people trivialize it, 'Oh, well, they're just playing'. But you've not watched. You may have observed, but you've just not seen what other people are seeing.

Zaq and I watch the same scene with the child placing the wheel back in the cooking pot on top of other round shapes.

> Ha! Three-layer cake. Wedding cake.
> Yeah. And she looks really busy, really busy in there, which is what it's like in a kitchen really. When you're making food and whatever in a real kitchen, and you're picking a plate up and you need to get a spoon, or a whisk, or whatever else you need, and

> it is like that in a kitchen as well. It's just giving her so much joy. She's very thorough.

Patrick Meleady focuses not only on the physicality of making, but its sociality:

> Children love the texture and experimenting and cooking things for people. It gets the parents playing with the children as well. That's the beauty of it. They're very adaptable and versatile, aren't they, children.

I offer that one of the things that is so interesting is this crossover, this mixing of things that children combine in play that grownups would typically sort and keep separate. There was a boy who brought sand from another part of the playground and carried it in a little spoon all the way over to the other part of the playground, because for him, it was different sand. Zaq muses that perhaps the 'taste' of that particular sand was different.

Patrick adds:

> And some children have a particular scheme, they have a particular thing they like to do when they arrive on the site. Like you've said, they move sand from one part of the playground to the other, and then they've got a ritual or a routine that they follow.

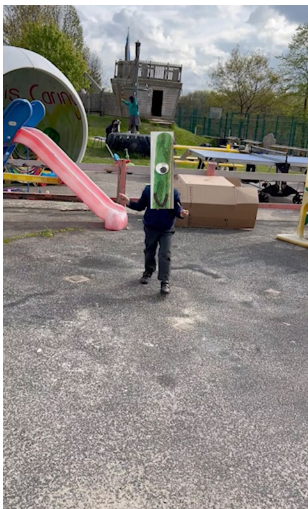
Note that the hybridity here is complex. We are not just looking at a mixing of kitchen materials, sand, and wheels, but the state of permission to mix such categorically different things, the permission to move things from one place to another. Julia Sexton and I discuss this crossing over of activities from one to another that is so rich in terms of creativity, which is so natural in an adventure playground, and so not part of what children can typically do at school:

> When I used to run an afterschool club, we had an inspector who came in. And she was really put out that there were paint brushes in the sand pit. 'That's not where they should be'. But have you seen what they're doing? Because the children had buried some little creatures and toys, and they were being archeologists. And she didn't get that at all. She just stopped on, 'No, paintbrushes shouldn't be there'.

Fig. 8 Three Chefs, Pitsmoor Adventure Playground, Sheffield. Photo by the author, spring 2024.

Scene 2: The Glue and The Box

The images shift to another complex scene of child-initiated combination and playworker provocation. We go to the outside crafts table with its glue and markers and googly eyes and popsicle sticks, or as they are called here, lolly sticks. About twenty feet away is a large collapsed cardboard box. A child carefully brings two lolly sticks dripping with glue over to the box. Zaq laughs.



Figs. 9A and 9B Lolly Sticks, A Way In, Pitsmoor Adventure Playground, Sheffield. Photo by the author, spring 2024.

Anna He told me he was 'fixing the box'. And in he goes. (The box falls on him.)

Zaq (He laughs some more.) Yeah, I think he's very into like the sensory things on the playground, 'cause he was in the sand pit the other day for literally like 45 minutes. So, I think he's like into things with his hands, touching things.

Anna I did ask him with gestures if he might show me the inside of the box, because he was spending so much time bringing the glue over, and I pictured the glue being everywhere. He nodded, and when I got there, you could barely see it. He was so careful. He wanted to put it gently on the seams—

Zaq Okay. Along the seam.

Anna In a very painterly way. And he was very proud of himself. And when he was all done, he turned to me and said, 'I fixed it!'

Zaq That's funny.

Anna Even though the box was exactly the same as it was when he first started. In his head, he fixed it.

Zaq You know in his head, it's been mended.

Julia Sexton notices the child's choreography:

> Oh, now the box is falling over. But that doesn't matter, because that's part of the experience, isn't it? And that's what he's fixing. And the transporting is really interesting, because he's not brought over the lolly sticks and the glue into it. It's like a kind of a journey that he's taking.

Anna Often grownups will eliminate that for efficiency's sake.

Julia Or bring it over to you. But that's a part of the movement and the embodiment aspect. I was thinking, 'He's lying down, isn't he?' Yes, and I love that head movement of how to get out. And a nice little run there. That was brilliant. Lifting it up. Walking backwards. 'Oh no. A bit of a problem'. You can see the cogs going in his brain.

And I really like that he's doing that, and there's someone else

at the table doing something completely different. And I like that about these open-ended resources. It's not like, 'We're all going to be doing this'. Look at that. And he is in the box.

Anna It's like the box is alive. (It is shaking.)

Julia I think it is. (She laughs.) I thought he'd come through it, but he's not. So, his movement is making the box move. It's him rocking it then. Ah, that's interesting and not immediately coming out, either, that's an extension of his play.

Playworker Rosa Curtis moved that box slightly and propped it up with two small chairs next to the short fence. The box now is upright and children can slide down a small slide right into the box. Our gluey popsicle boy is particularly excited by this move. The change here is not just the state of change of the box from broken to fixed, but the combination of craft with repair, repair with gross motor activity. The playworker never even spoke a word about the intervention; the box when unattended was simply propped up near the slide. Even when materials were presented at the table, the children knew that they can go inside the building to the drawers and shelves of materials and help themselves to whatever they find there. Craft is an extension of play here, not a stage on its way to a final product.

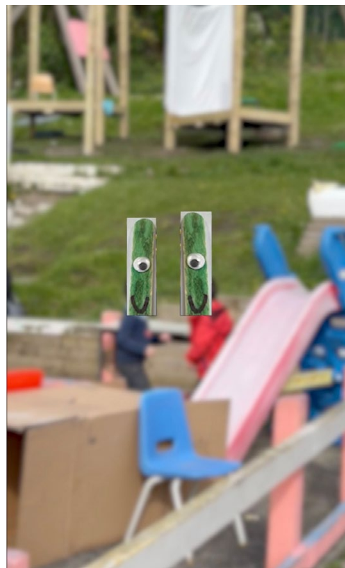


Fig. 10 Slide and Box for Two, Pitsmoor Adventure Playground, Sheffield. Photo by the author, spring 2024.

In this part of the same scene, a second boy climbs up the side of the small plastic slide that is poised to empty into the fixed box. The two boys have some kind of friendly exchange and the box-fixer climbs up the slide the 'wrong way'. He stands on top of the slide, slowly surveys the playground in a 360 degree turn like an upright meerkat, while the other child scampers up the rolling hill. There is no 'right way' to do anything here and no one intervenes. The box remained untouched by the staff when both children were drawn to something else.

I show the same images to Steve Pool who is also an artist, and he laughs and says 'You can't go wrong with a cardboard box. You can never know how kids will use a piece of equipment. I do think they are more adventurous in an adventure playground than they are in a normal playground'.

Scene 3: The Platforms

Steve describes his intention for adding some new platforms that are half built:

> So, the idea is to encourage young people to do self-build. It's really interesting because again, we (in the playwork field) have been talking about that for ages. I don't know if you noticed, at the Big Swing Adventure Playground (in nearby Bradford) they have a self-build area where the kids nail boards onto the (climbing) structure, and I was kind of thinking a bit like that. We had six volunteers coming in. They gave us 250 quid. I got a bit more money off somebody, and we got some wood donated, so we had enough wood.
>
> And I was just thinking, well let's create like a skeleton (structure) that the young people could be able to add to. And I also had an idea that when someone donated these garden sheds and I was chop, chopping them up, I was inspired by the artist Matti Clark.[18] I was thinking we could chop these garden sheds up and create this rearrangement of the garden sheds with young people. So, I was going to cut those pieces up, and we were going to do a little sort of building club with the kids, but as soon as we started, they, the adults were quite reluctant, and I think it was because I

said that some kids would get some splinters.

Everything else is safe, so you've got this thing (the platform) that looks similar that's not as safe. So, it's not particularly dangerous, but actually it is a bit more dangerous than anything else, and if four kids jump on it and start rocking it, it will fall to bits. So how will the kids differentiate that from something else? So, I've triangulated it now, so it's really rigid. You can't shake it. It won't wobble. It's got no finger traps in it. But they're not screwing anything into it. They're not doing a builder's club. But what they are doing is tying stuff to it, decorating it, changing it round.

Figs. 11A and 11B Partial Platform, Changed Platform, Pitsmoor Adventure Playground, Sheffield. Photo by the author, spring 2024.

> When it gets hot, I designed it so they could put tarps on it; they go on and on about shade. That could all be a nice shaded area. I was thinking if you make something that is quite solid, kid's will be able to nail on to it. You don't have to hold two things at once. You're not building out of nothing. And also, kind of thinking, this is for six to eight months. It's not for ten years. What can we do for six to eight months to sort of fill the space a bit?
>
> I think anything new is quite good.

Playwork Manager Sarah speaks of the evolution of the platforms:

> We decided as a team, as it's been quite a little while since we've done hands-on properly with the tools, (that) the children will just be allowed to take anything they wanted out to decorate (the platforms). Because it looks half-finished, it's perfect.[19]
>
> So, the children decided that they wanted a colorful base, so some of them did like tiny bits of material, sort of squares, all carefully glued on the bottom. The other one had a more lavish base. They decorated up the sides with real plants and pretend bits. They took glue, tape, everything out. It had a hammock on it at one point fastened on, and they claimed all of it, outside in. So, there was movement. There was their own little space, their own dens. They were quite possessive over which was their's and who could come in it. That was awesome to watch, 'cause it was transformed. It looked beautiful. They had such fun, and honestly, the sense of achievement they had at the end (of the day) was just extraordinary.

Steve continues:

> It keeps, like I said, getting stuff tied to it and decorated, but the next step would be, I imagined it would be, getting stuff screwed to it, and it would get moved around and it would get changed. It would have walls and holes to climb through and things. None of that has happened yet, but every time I go, something different has happened to it. So, it is sort of working.
>
> I'm drawn to the idea of the makeshift and I really like the historic

> (adventure) playgrounds. All of us sculptors from the ’80s were all sort of Heideggerian, we liked Heidegger. We like the notion of things that are ‘ready to hand’ in the world, the thing and the object, and the function and simplicity of things that evolve that aren’t designed.
>
> I think you can have equipment, there’s great equipment you can buy, and it does afford massive play potential for young people, but it’s a bunch of adults telling kids how to use it.

Julia wonders about the future of the platforms, and I marvel that they were designed for months of play use, rather than years of play use as is typical in a traditional American playground.

> I want to see how children are going to use it and what things are going to start gathering around there. It’s like an open stage. I’m looking here and thinking, ‘Oh, what things are already gathered there? What’s underneath it?’ So, I really like the open and in between spaces that it offers.

I shared that I happened to be there on the first day that the platforms were up, and that the children were just standing on them like baby goats on elevated hills. They were just standing, looking all around, and then they would hop off. They did not do anything to them initially. Gradually, there’s been some den-like building going on with fabric and stuff being tied on. I mention to Julia that Steve was interested in encouraging actual nailing and sawing, but that might take longer.

She concurs:

> I think it will. But I like him having that vision for it. Years ago, Pitsmoor did have a lot more tool use, free tool use, and that sort of changed over time. It changes with the children and what they’re interested in. I’ve had people come in, interested in that in particular, to encourage children, but try not to be, ‘Oh, we’re going to make a thing this week, and you’re going to learn these skills’. Often, it can be that. Obviously, you need children to be aware of the health and safety aspects, and if they want to make something, yeah, that’s great. But, I like spaces that are possibilities for more possibilities.

Sarah gently shakes her head:

> I think it can be quite of a daunting thing, for people who're not used to this. It's almost like, 'That much freedom? Really? Really? We can make a mess? We don't have to stop playing and tidy? We haven't got to ask an adult? We haven't got to measure how many sequins we use?' And it was so many instances of this from the children and the parents, what they'd experienced.
>
> Sometimes parents say 'Where's the activity?' I just point to all the materials. Don't they see?

The materials invited the action in all of these scenarios while the playworkers protected the children's right to make and to unmake things. The children near the mud kitchen and the cardboard box have created mini-mixtures of craft/movement/structure, and these hybrid forms were then enjoyed by more than just the 'baker of the cake' or the 'fixer' of the box. The official wooden platforms changed daily, and some young people built their own platforms in those same trees as the swings. These temporary structures were then taken down by the children and redesigned for future use. Bits of culture change are not new to the ethos or community spirit of adventure playgrounds, but they reflect a re-commitment to novelty and to the generative quality of physical movement with material play.

Julius the playworker gently circulates the grounds chanting in a singsong style, 'All right guys, time to go home. Time to go home. Time to go home'. The two girls on the nearby tire swing slow their rhythmic pumping, a third girl resting between them, lower legs dangling off the tire with profound relaxation, their headscarves and long dresses flutter to a stillness. The balls in the concrete area bounce until they don't over the array of scooters and plastic pipes, and the tweens in the woods step off of their deconstructed platforms. The mud kitchen service is done. The alligator rests. The gluey slide stops shaking. The giantess sighs, and the place fills with emptiness until tomorrow.

Notes

1 Pitsmoor Adventure Playground Booklet. See also www.pitsmooradventure.org

2 See Fraser Brown (2014).

3 See Maxine Delorme (2018), 179. 'The Three Frees' is attributed to Perry Else and the 'Three F's' can be found in Fraser Brown (2014). See Perry (2012) also Adrian Voce (2015).

4 For more on the Playwork Principles, see Fraser Brown and Chris Taylor (2008).

5 Self-build refers to children crafting playground structures to play on, often out of wood. The double meaning of building the self is part of the philosophy here.

6 Suzanna Law, personal communication. Note, there are other training groups in addition to Pop Up Adventure Play, the Playwork Foundation, and Meynell Games which runs one of the most playful conferences I have ever had the pleasure of attending. There are organizations like OPAL, Outdoor Play and Learning that brings playwork to primary schools, and official safety inspectors like the APIA, Adventure Playground Inspectors Association and advocacy groups like Play England. All stand behind Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) that children have a 'right to rest, leisure, play, and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts'. The US has yet to ratify the UNCRC, yet another indication of a lack of understanding about play's importance in my home country.

7 Michael Patte et al. (2018), 67. Note that 'playwork' in Europe is not same thing as the US company *Playworks*. The latter directs children's activities in high quality but adult-centric school yard programs.

8 Mike Wragg and Sion Edwards (2024), 222.

9 D. Bullough, C. Pugh, and B. Tawil (2018), 125.

10 Tony Chilton (2018), 173.

11 Play Pods at the Children's Scrapstore in Bristol, https://www.playpods.co.uk/

12 James J. Gibson (1979) on affordances.

13 Albert Einstein (1945), 25.

14 See Nora Bateson's poetic essay, *Combining* (2023).

15 Richard Powers (2024), 59.

16 For more on posture shifting in conversation analysis see the works of Adam Kendon (1990, 2004), Frederick Erickson (2011), and also Jurgen Streeck (2009).

17 Julia Sexton warned, 'I don't think a mud kitchen should be so immaculate... am a bit worried about it as a commodity that you buy in, with "Everything you need for a mud kitchen"'. Note, in a booklet by Jan White and Liz Edwards (2018) they advocate for the power of mud kitchens. Local lore claims that the idea originated in Sheffield itself.

18 For more on Matti Clark see https://www.uva.co.uk/about.

19 For a lasting image of the half built, see the recent movie *Wonka*. In one of the last scenes, we enter Willy Wonka's office with its half-built desk, half-sided chair. Everything fun seems partially made.

2. Loose Arts: The GLUE Collective

From Sheffield to London and then London to Eastbourne, I arrive in this sleepy seaside town in the South of England and am greeted by a murmuration of starlings at the edge of the English Channel. The birds flock forward while appearing to move backward, inverting their shape like a moving Escher print. In Eastbourne, Meynell Walter runs his annual conference on playwork for those who work with children and young people. A monocled bookseller with his ever-present smile and yellow derby, Meynell has invited me to give a keynote in Eastbourne.[1] I have offered to share images of my research and call it 'The Joy of Play, The Pain of Play', allowing me to introduce the idea of dialudics, a term created by my mentor, Brian Sutton-Smith.

Dialudics is Sutton-Smith's hybrid word for a fitting hybrid subject, a mix of dialogue or dialectic and the Latin word for play, the 'ludic'.[2] The essence of the idea is that play serves as a container for conflicting, often simultaneous ideas—joy and fear, imitation and critique, miniature hugeness. I am eager to learn from my playful English colleagues, to have some informal time with the staff from the Pitsmoor Adventure Playground who are in attendance, and to possibly meet one of the presenting teams, a group of artists called the GLUE Collective.

I have seen the GLUE Collective's work online and understand that GLUE stands for Growing and Learning in Urban Environments.[3] They have set up a makerspace of sorts here in a conference classroom. A mass of yarn is on the floor, like seaweed. There are sticks for wrapping, odd bits of wire and buttons and doodads. I join their workshop and find my hands drawn to the multicolored yarns and without planning, I begin to sort through them, wrapping the longer bits into small balls for others to use. The repetition of the action soothes. I am not ready to make something of this material; the unmaking of the tangle calls to me first.

©2026 Anna Beresin, CC BY-NC 4.0 https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0511.02

I am reminded of when I sat next to a seven-year-old girl several years ago in Philadelphia, as her peers glued together bits of yarn and sequins and various baubles. She just wanted to comb through the sequins, hunting through them for a jewel perhaps, feeling their coolness and gently placing them on her small fingers and mine as individual stones for our 'engagement rings'. Back in the room with the GLUE Collective, my hands seek the varying softness of the yarns before me, my eyes savoring the deliciousness of the colors. I immediately start planning to visit their GLUE Garden in Birmingham and learn about their SPARK program: Spaces for Play, Art, Rest and Kinship. Individually and collectively, they exude a sense of calm focus, an extended family of working artists/activists.

In their workshop, they share images of their pop-up adventure play in Birmingham, a working-class postindustrial town to the southwest of Sheffield, and they speak of the joys and challenges of working with under-resourced communities and the particular obstacles facing under-resourced communities of color. After wrapping a stick that looks like it just was picked from some forest in our chosen yarn, we were invited to place our wool-covered wood into the center of the circle, a Children's Fire[4], even though there were no children present and no actual fire burning. We were here to talk about play and justice. When my turn came, I found myself offering the stick for the children we see and for those we do not see, and the eyes of the GLUE Collective speaker locked with mine.

Fig. 12 Children's Fire, The Glue Garden, Birmingham. Photo by the author, spring 2024.

Three months later, I joined them in Birmingham.

Loose P(Arts)

The GLUE Garden in Birmingham has a sign welcoming people to its events and is officially about to be open in the summer on Saturday afternoons, yet there is a child sized hole in the fence. Apparently, children come here all the time. But on this day, two of the artists of the GLUE Collective, Simbi Folarin and Faith Pearson, along with a handful of known children join adults who are also artists and activists. We sat under a small tent in their garden, sharing stories while the children played.

The little ones hop over the vegetables on to the tire swing in the back, the slightly older ones cheering on the shyer, younger ones. Simbi and Faith pull out the bags of 'loose arts', half-made, partially decorated, ambiguous objects. Some of the wooden ones we sit on. Floppy rubber discs with tiny ink lines and balls are turned into various things by the young people—ring toss, frisbee, stackable plates, objects to hang on other objects. The GLUE Collective calls these bits 'loose arts' as they are partially decorated, made fancy in their plainness, incomplete objects made with care. I cannot help but think about their dialudic essence and the dialudic aspects of their key words: glue and loose. Unlike Sutton-Smith's idea of the playful object as containing opposites—the scary/comforting, the huge/miniature, the ring with its essential hole, here 'glue' also references the togetherness of kinship and the looseness of the end product, or perhaps the gluey-looseness of urban living itself.

The GLUE Collective seems to function like a mobile adventure playground. Both programs use open ended design, the partially built. Both celebrate the alchemy of free materiality, personnel who model possibilities, and the freedom to engage or disengage at will. Here however, the staff are all artists, makers who enjoy fabricating inviting spaces, as well as pieces to play with, or on, or not at all. The making here is also intergenerational by design. Often it is a parallel process, children making in one area with materials morphing into toys, while their parents weave, paint, and repair.

Fig. 13 The Swing, The Glue Garden, Birmingham. Photo by the author, spring 2024.

At their SPARK event at a Festival called 'Growing Up Green', their online invitation reads:

> Children and adults of all ages and abilities can create, play and enjoy art. SPARK is populated with a range of 'loose arts' and tactile artwork made by the collective. 'Loose arts' are designed from a range of natural and up-cycled materials that offer an invitation to be moved around, combined, stacked, dismantled and put back together in multiple ways, they come with no instructions creating a sense of wonder and encouraging imagination.
>
> As a collective of artists we value the quality of the play and creative process over the product and the installation changes in shape, colour and form depending on the contribution from participants on the day. This session welcomes children with additional needs.

In the garden, two of the children wander over to the shed, and with paint brushes, they 'paint' the wall with water, just water, and then they saunter over to the mud kitchen with its pots and pans. Thirsty? They

'eat the rain' that has started to come down, or drink it as it runs off of the small tent overhead. The children follow each other in the garden, touching things, sitting on things, swinging on things. The ones who are new imitate the ones who have been here before, learning the loose, local culture of possibilities.

A month after I returned to the US, Simbi and Faith and I had long conversations over Zoom where I shared images from the days in Birmingham and Eastbourne. I asked: How did this wonderful thing called the GLUE Collective happen?

Faith smiles and says, 'The short answer is magic!' After a round of assent, she says:

> For me, it was first of all meeting Simbi. I had already met her and worked with her, but she gave me shelter in an artist studio, and I met Chantelle, one of the GLUE Collective, and she was doing her own business. And I had the space to make my own art work, and then in walked Jemima. And then she lost her job, just like me, and it was just like, 'What can we do?'

Simbi responds:

> We were kind of incubating this organization: Fluid, Space, Arts. Then the conversation had already started about kinds of recycling and reusing materials. My business partner at the time loved nothing more than a catalogue and buying stuff, didn't she? Enjoying the catalogue and lots of resources. Whereas Faith was always coming in with stuff that she kind of skip-dived and kind of took out of schools, skips, and rubbish piles and things like that. So, it was said a number of times, that the only thing we should be buying is glue—
>
> (They laugh.)
>
> —to stick things together. Because we had lots and lots of stuff. So, Faith and Jemima were having conversations. They were working more closely together, and I was doing my master's degree, and then I saw a piece, an email that came through, and it said that it's for a bit of funding that would fund an idea.
>
> On the premise of that conversation, ten years later, that was actually 2014, we're still in residence at the GLUE Garden. And

> that was kind of getting us to think about what is GLUE? What is the sticking together? What is it that we do? And that's when we came up with the acronym, wasn't it? Growing and Learning in Urban Environments.

Faith nods, and continues as if a baton had been passed between them:

> And the piece of land that we took on, it just felt great. We got rid of some of the debris and tried to do a growing, learning space there, but everything we did on it became quite clearly impossible it seemed, didn't it, Simbi? Every time we went, there was another hole poked in the poly tunnel or the hose pipe turned into a rope swing. So, it turned out, that it wasn't physically growing crops that we were going to do. It was more like growing people and skills and things.
>
> In turned out that this piece of land, the GLUE Garden, had history. It was always a piece of scrap land, and kids have played on it for generations like that. That's what we found out by talking to local people, isn't it?

Fig. 14 The Green Glue Garden, Birmingham. Photo by the author, spring 2024.

Faith and Simbi talk of shared making and unmaking as both a material necessity and as a philosophy of craft. They speak of events as art installations, even though the main activity is typically child's play. Faith reflects, 'It's still the concept of the whole installation that we'll add new things in, take things out that don't work. Put new things in that we're trying out, just to keep it fresh'. Their emphasis is consistently spatial, and they make room for the children's additions to their garden while they make spaces for the children to play.

They craft hoop tunnels, yurts, boxes, circles, dens that invite the building of more dens, offering these womblike spaces for rest and adventure. Spaciousness in the literal sense means unoccupied land, and these spaces are materialized invitations to enter into a spatial dialogue, to occupy the land together. Faith describes some tied-together willow that can expand to carve out another space:

Fig. 15 Willow Wall, The Glue Garden, Birmingham. Photo by the author, spring 2024.

Faith It was like to create a space within a space. So, it goes round, like the sides of the yurt, you know what I mean? Like a circle, but it's a protective kind of space.

Simbi A kind of container for people or persons.

Faith To protect a little space.

Simbi A little play space, an inner play space.

There are subtle differences between the loose parts that one finds on an adventure playground, and loose *arts*, something rather unique to the GLUE Collective. In the GLUE Garden and in their mobile SPARK program, they often prototype or decorate their installation pieces ahead of time, but always the materials are partially constructed, not going far from a simple outline with some aspect of it teasing a response through texture, color, or shape. Faith explains:

> They're still loose parts, but they've been decorated. They were all off-cuts of pieces of pallet, and Simbi put it to me, she went, 'Is the pallet talking to you?' Like the wood speaking to me?

Simbi imitates Faith's voice: 'They need to be gold'. (Faith paints everything gold.) 'I need patterns'. (They laugh.)

Fig. 16 Loose Arts, The Glue Garden, Birmingham. Photo by the author, spring 2024.

Faith tilts her head:

> Well, what if they do talk to you? Because I'd been making stuff like planters, furniture and stuff out of pallets, and there was all these little off-cuts, and I was like, 'Well, that looks like a little creature with legs'. Then I thought, I'll just paint them and draw some eyes and teeth like that on them, and cover them with patterns. But they're still released into the wild like loose parts. But then, I had the idea, because loose parts are

quite cumbersome, aren't they? They're quite unwieldy, hard to pack up at the end. So, I thought, if they could all nestle down, you know like a nest of tables?
They could all like pack down into like this little family.

Simbi Like Russian dolls, isn't it?

Faith At the end of the day, they could all nestle down together. So, they've been everything from, you know loose parts, they've been everything from
musical instruments
to seats
to ramps
to whatever you can think of.
Put mud in them. That's the idea.

Fig. 17 Rubbery Stuff, The Glue Garden, Birmingham. Photo by the author, spring 2024.

There is this is roll of, I don't even know what it is. But it's a roll of this rubbery stuff that just feels so, so nice to me, but so slippery, like a snail's been sliding all over it 'cause it's big, black, silvery looking. There's a song by a band called *Half Man Half Biscuit* when we were growing up—

Simbi Half Man Half Biscuit!

Faith ‘Writing on the Sole of my Slipper with a Biro’.
(With gusto she sings: ‘Writing on the sole of my slipper with a biro.’)

I am unsure if she means ‘soul’ or ‘sole’, and have no idea what a biro might be. I ask, ‘Pardon my American English, but what is a biro?’ and Simbi explains that it is a type of pen. I picture one with gel, writing ever so smoothly on that slippery surface.

Faith describes the evolution of that slippery piece:

> It’s the nicest feeling, Anna, to ‘Write on the Sole of Your Slipper with a Biro’. But when I started writing, drawing on them, they all became like fungus, or portals, or they’re like stepping stones, and whatever you want to do with them. And then, they’ve become little frog spawn things, the bits in the middle. Other people were drawing on them, so I was telling people, ‘Oh, you’ve got to have a go on these’. (She laughs.) Think of all the things they were doing.

Anna It became like horse shoes.

Faith Yeah, that’s it. Brilliant.

Fig. 18 Ring Toss, The Glue Garden, Birmingham. Photo by the author, spring 2024.

> We can leave the mallet out, we can leave the string, the mud, but it just requires you to come into the space. The children will come into the space, and because we've given them that kind of experience, they'll know that these materials are there and the possibilities, to stretch the possibilities. All you need to do is observe, keep bringing in a new thing like some rope, or a cardboard box, and that will extend the learning.

Negotiating Destruction

Destruction was a sign that the local children had announced their presence, that this space was desirable for play, and that there was also a sense that in this area, there was not much to play with. Or perhaps it was simply a statement of territory. It was initially a mess of debris and knotweed, and the Collective organized some days to haul some of that away. The children would come and play in the new garden, celebrating the new materials, and then they would also come back and destroy things. Faith was curious about the destruction:

> They always look like deer or rabbits caught in the headlights when you see them. So they go, 'What are you doing here?' We actually had that kind of Wild West shootout moment when we were coming into the space to drop something off. And then, we were coming round the corner like at top speed, and we all stopped in our tracks, and they went, 'Who are you? What are you doing here?' And we went (in a high voice) 'Who are you? And what are you doing here?' (They laugh.) A kind of comedy moment.
>
> And then we just sort of talked. But they're all like lovely when you meet them, really lovely and chatty, but we very rarely see them. But they let you in to little secrets like, after they've been talking to you for a while, how they get in through the hole in the fence, and who climbs on top of the roof. It was never them; it was always their smaller brothers. They kind of pass through as a short cut if we're open.
>
> Why have they smashed all the racking we've bought? Cause they were playing. They were playing, weren't they? (She chuckles.)

> Why are there chairs on the shed roof? Why are they kicking holes in it? Play. We suddenly had a real challenge, like we're going against the grain here. We're all playworkers, and what we've actually inherited is an unofficial adventure playground, isn't it?

They explain that they, the adults, were not the ones who made the tire swing and added it to the garden. The local children had put it up and had the tire swing dangling from a tree. It just appeared one day, suggesting that the space still gave the children permission to play and create, to make sense of things in their own way.

> I think it's what Faith said, that children have always played there.

I ask if they thought that this particular age group was also responsible for destroying some of the crops in the vegetable patch. Their answer was most unusual, and Faith and Simbi went back and forth like commentators:

Faith I think they're just swishing. You can tell what they're doing. In fact, if you got a stick, you swish, don't you?

Simbi And unfortunately, we had a beautiful Mullein (a short-lived perennial) that was coming up, and it was all perfect to swish in 'cause it was about to flower, so it was getting quite tall. And then, we saw it again, and it had taken a bit of a swishing, for lack of a better word.

Faith I've been documenting every time we go in, I take photos of what they've done, and you can see the whole play process. It starts off quite creative, and then you see the destruction at the end. So, they have their own process. Like the last time we went in, they had sweets, you know the little plastic wrapper cone that had sweets in it, but it's been emptied. And they've kind of filled it full of dried grass, polystyrene stuff, and little bits of gravel, like they're trying to make another version of the sweeties. And I took a photo of that.
So, we're going to keep talking to them, and maybe print some of these out, and put them up somewhere. I think they'll recognize us. (It is as if we are saying) 'I've seen you. We know you're playing, and it's important'.

Simbi We are hoping to engage those children over the next few weeks, so when the school holidays start on the 22nd of July, anything that we do over the summer those children will feel they can be a part of it as well.

Faith acknowledges that in discovering the children's unmaking they would find something else they had made:

> Every time we came, there'd be another thing with a hole in it, or smashed on the floor. The poly tunnel completely lost its cover, but we kept the structure and put a huge tarpaulin over it sometimes, so it's a real sheltered space. And it was all decorated at some point. Or we hang things, like Chantelle's hoops and things, so we tie things to it that are premade. Or, we've weaved in and out of it; artists come and just weave the whole lot up. Then, we took it down at the end. So, we just try different things on it. It's still a playful space, but our young people that come, you know, when we're not there, they set up a whole little house in there, haven't they, with a table, and chairs, hoover and a mattress—

Simbi —that they've scavenged from around the area (and she gestures in a circle). We don't know how they get these things inside, but they do.

Faith Because sometimes they are destroyed through the play process, but what we try to do is work with young people, who are there when we're not there, and increase the things that we can leave out. We can build together with the hope that it will be there when we come back the next time, because we're visitors on their space, if you know what I mean.

I think of how this is a most worthwhile philosophy of living together on this planet.

D.W. Winnicott, author of the classic *Playing and Reality* writes of the significance of destruction as embedded in the creative process, that the cycle of making and unmaking contains not just the object, but whole relationships and their boundaries. Resilience itself comes from the surviving of the destruction of the beloved object, or the survival of the

destruction of the relationship underneath it when anger is expressed.[5] Winnicott notes: 'There is no anger in the destruction of the object to which I am referring, though there could be said to be joy at the object's survival. . .The object can now be used'.[6] What can it be used for we might ask? It can be used for play, he writes, and with it 'a world of shared reality'.[7] By destroying parts of the garden, the children test the nature of the relationship with the GLUE Collective. Will they be punished? Will the playful artists come back?

We know artists have always played with destruction, as painter Frank Auerbach wrote, 'The more courageous I am in destroying partial success, the more likely it is that I will get something alive and true'.[8] My choreographer friend Manfred Fischbeck once said to me, 'You can have art without play, but I just wouldn't expect it to be very good'.[9] The question remains—who has permission to destroy what things in whose spaces?

In other discussions with other programs, playground staff have shared that there were times when their play materials were burnt down, sometimes even by the staff themselves. Clearly, sometimes destruction can be an act of violence or defiance, but Simbi and Faith are convinced that here it was more experiential, as sticks are also used just for 'swishing'. Their garden was merely in the children's pathway and the children had their own agenda. To me, 'swishing' is akin to playfighting.[10] In playfighting among humans and other animals, players return to play again after the moment of friction passes. Not so with real aggression, where those involved tend to separate in order to de-escalate tensions. If the relationship ends, or de-escalation is not possible, people, particularly young ones, can shut down.

As we sit around a small fire in the GLUE Garden, the youngsters around us listen with one ear and try to capture the fire's smoke in different containers. The GLUE Collective often centres their activities around an actual fire, and fire with its destructive creativity fuels their planning cycle. As Simbi has said, 'Endings always mean beginnings'. In the summer when their garden and programming are at their height, it is a time of fire, followed by the embers of the fall leading to a new cycle of gathering kindling. They joke that ember time is from Sept-ember through Dec-ember, and they relish the wordplay of kin in kindling. Creative programs need prototyping and reflection, a time for gathering

before the spring spark, and they routinely call for arts funding to support not just program delivery, but the generative prototyping phases as well.

Potential Energy

At Simbi's urging, Faith talks about one of the SPARK pop-ups and tells the 'string story':

> We were unpacking but quietly, so I was just untying knots of a structure and dropping them on the floor. So, I had a handful of string pieces and got a little pile of string pieces on the floor, and this young person just kept walking past, looking at me, walking past, and again, looking at the string on the floor. And so, without a word, I just went like that to him (gesturing with open palm). He took a piece of string and ran off. And I thought, 'What is he doing?' I suddenly thought, 'Oh, he's doing something important'.
>
> So, I kind of went over there, without interrupting him. His dad is sitting on one of these (wooden pieces) on his mobile phone like he's taking no notice. This young person's sitting like your classic child with his head on his knees doing something with this string. And then ages afterwards, he came up to me and kind of held his hand out, showed me this thing he'd made with the string. No words. And I said, 'Can I take a photo of it?' And he just nodded like that. So, I took a photo, and he had a big smile on and ran off.
>
> But this piece of string, now, when we came to unpack at the garden, these two young people—who were like the ones who'd swished the heads off the plants and climbed on the roof, and could fall off and break their arms—stood there and with a piece of string each made a little dolly. I says, 'Oh, hello', and we were talking, and they were a bit shocked cause (they thought) I'd caught them like doing something they shouldn't. 'Well, that's really creative. What are you making?' 'Oh, we're a bit stuck cause we need another piece about "this" long'. And I went, 'Really? I can do that'. (She laughs.) So, I just give them this big pile of string.

> That really all just happened. And there's been other things as well, as though they're reading your mind, you're reading their mind. And then you go and drop a few resources next to them and it lights up their faces, as it was just what they needed. I think that you need to be aware of all of the things that surround you, 'cause everything's got potential when you're outside. But when you're inside, everything's got its fixed purpose.

When Programs Are Rigid

More of a concern than the swishy destruction in the garden, the GLUE Collective spoke of the friction and territoriality between the artists and educators in schools. When they were working with three primary schools to craft spaces for making in fledgling school gardens, Faith felt that the schools were speaking a different kind of educational language. Though they all shared an interest in making things with children and valuing the outdoors, there were obstacles to getting the school staff out into the nature area beside the school. There was a teacherly aversion to 'mess'.

Simbi offers:

> It was really difficult, the adaptation and the embeddedness of it, that we knew that after we had gone (from a school), the project was ended. There was no embedding that into the culture of how they were doing things in school. We were the ones that took the children outside, and the teachers were like, 'Oh the children have loved it. The children have loved it'. We know the children have loved it, but are you going to continue taking them outside? No.

> We knew where it would end. We knew it would end when we stopped going in, and to access the outdoor spaces they needed a cultural shift within school for the teachers to see the outdoor space as a learning space. And we worked a lot with the children, and again, we were working with one year group. With one group, all year, the children were really excited, really engaged, but they were moving up the following year. So, everything was just going to dissipate, and it was quite challenging. 'The kids had a wonderful time, but we haven't got time'.

Simbi remarks that most programs with interesting materials at school tend to have adults saying 'Do it this way'.

> It's like having a pre-kit, or a LEGO thing that's already kind of set, and it's like, 'Follow the pattern, follow the pattern'. And obviously the children do get a lot out of doing those things as well. But, if they would just allow it, having a chance to follow their own instincts.

If the GLUE Collective had to choose between fancy materials or spaciousness, it is clear which one they would choose. Faith and Simbi recall programs with really limited resources but still found the space for complex, artful play.

Faith reminisces:

> Years ago, when I used to work in other settings, before the GLUE Collective, I remember doing some (play program) thing in the summer holidays. I was, 'Right, well I haven't got any activity for you to do today. Sorry. I just got a lot of fabric, but you can use the tables and the chairs and stuff, if you want'.
>
> And they (the children) made this huge thing from the whole hall and just crawled underneath. And they said, 'It's a bit hard to crawl on this floor'. So, I said, 'We can either go outside and take all this off, or what about finding something else to make it soft?' They added all these cardboard boxes to the floor to make it softer, and then they started making peep holes, and trap doors, and it was brilliant. Like the best thing ever.
>
> I've had grown-ups saying, 'Oh I remember you. Remember that ice cream van that we made?' 'Oh, and do you remember that haunted house we made in the whole hall?'

Simbi The haunted house. That was a classic one. That was a classic, the haunted house.

Faith They left it up for the fundraising event. It went all up the stairs and went down again. And they were charging people like 50 p to go around it!

We discuss the complexity of doing this kind of play work with after school clubs. There is pressure to 'prove' that play has value through metrics, through a rubric, often spurred on by the project's funders. Often it is easier for the staff to stick to more passive types of activity, or to offer no novelty in the program for simplicity's sake. The pressure on the adults to account for time is often blamed. Simbi reflects:

> Where I am now is in the office of an afterschool club for a special school. I haven't been on site for a month, and I was there yesterday, and it was just really disappointing.
>
> It was disappointing. There were four adults working with complex needs children, although not that complex, but it felt like a very static play space, and I understand, it's the end of the day, they know what the children like. So, the same resources come out. It's predictable. It looks nice, but the children have been doing this for the last two years, maybe. Or they've been doing it all week, and it's Thursday. And some of the children, because their parents are working, they would have been at the session Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. Same menu. So, it just felt really stale to me, looking at it. And I was uninspired by it. So, afterschool clubs again, it becomes mundane, and it becomes repetitive. So, I'm thinking about how do we have that conversation, or that reflection space for the staff, about their need to clean up in a certain amount of time?

Faith 'Paid 'til half past five'.

Simbi 'Paid 'til half five'. Get paid, get the parents, and it's a challenge of being in a school building. So, parents were due to pick the children up at five o'clock. And then a few of the staff noticed that they were taking the children with their coats on to the reception area at ten to five. 'Where are you going? Why are you taking them now?' 'Oh, well, these children are fine; they'll just be sitting'. And I said 'Where's the other children?' 'Oh, we'll not take all of them'. 'Well, no. Why aren't they all staying in the play space until parents actually arrive? Why are you taking them out of the play space to sit in a school reception area?' So, it's a faster transition for you.

We discuss the idea of 'play proficiency' currently circulating among programs that work with children. Simbi raises her eyebrows:

> Well, I spoke to a colleague. It sounds like, 'play proficiency' sounds really great. Oh, that's the conversation around the local authority. Like I said, 'What does that mean? What does that involve?' If it involves just mapping the current play spaces, and a play space is a static playground or green space, they can say 'We've got this many green spaces, and we've got this many playgrounds', but the mapping thus far doesn't include how the spaces are used and by whom. Are they safe spaces for children? Are children ages five to fifteen using those spaces? Are they with or without adults? Are they renowned hotspots for drug use? It can be on a map as a green space, but it doesn't mean that children are using it.
>
> So, it might be useful, but I was at a meeting around public health, and in public health, their role is to map and to look at health outcomes, mental health for children and people living in the city. So, okay, 'play'. I'm just saying, I've read all the public health documents, not read them all, but I do scan the things that come past, and I'm scanning for the word 'play'. I'm scanning for it. I'm looking for it, and I don't see it in any of your health documents. It's just that the word 'play' is not there. But the word 'obesity' is, 'mental health', all these other words, whereas we already know the evidence is already out about children needing access to play.
>
> That's part of our role to just be reminding each other as much as possible, if children could play more, if adults could play more, to value play more, it's a building block for well-being that we all need.

They were clearly upset about the pervasive lack of play opportunities in the area. Faith continues:

> I was just thinking, it was on my mind this morning, and I was almost in tears, because I thought this is burning me up, trying to say something. And I do this afterschool club on a scrap of land outside a community building. The area needs

play more than most areas. People have forgotten how to play, basically. It's been documented that some parents don't play with their children. Well then, I says, 'They need more play then'. They don't need 'activities 'where everything looks the same. We need to be doing, 'Let's come and play'. Well, we've got all these evaluations. And I said, 'Well, can I put forward some play training with the people I'm going to be working with over the summer?' Number one, it got cancelled, moved to the next week. Number two, the flyers come out with all the 'activities' that we're doing with Faith.

I'm like, 'No, no, no, I'm doing "play"'. It's as simple as sand, chalk, mud, dens, paint.

Simbi Playing with Faith.

Faith And I thought, 'Nooo. Can we start our journey please? Can we start our journey and rewind and do it again?' Because this is really important to me, and I feel like I am talking a completely different language right now. In the outside afterschool club, what's happening is the young people are coming without their parents, who haven't played, who just need a space to play. And we're getting a few passing by with little, tiny children, nursery children who do know how to play, and they're all talking about intergenerational. So, we've got little people playing in the sand and in the water and the paint and everything, and the bigger, younger people, about ten, eleven, who don't know how to play, who are just kind of hanging out on their way home from school.

Simbi They're too cool to play.

Faith And then I put the dominos out and the skittles (bowling), and then off they go! They haven't lost it. They did have it when they were little.

Simbi They need to be reminded. It's about remembering, isn't it?

Faith And then, all of a sudden, this parent jumped up on a bench and called, 'Can I have a go?' (They both now laugh.)

From Curiosity to Play

Simbi emphasizes the importance of children engaging freely with the materials:

> For me, the curiosity of the child, if they come into contact with new materials, or something's new in the environment, at a very basic level they're trying to figure out what it does. So, they'll build on that. For them to kind of have ownership over it, they need a start. So, if they've got lots of materials, they don't need anyone to be prescriptive about it. They need to start exploring it and kind of figure it out, building on their own curiosity. And different children will do that in different ways.

Multi-disciplinary scholars Perry Zurn and Dani Basset recently published *Curious Minds: The Power of Connection* and clearly state that 'curiosity is *spatial* through and through'.[11] They emphasized the word *spatial* in italics and ask 'What is that reaching, stretching and leaping', and what are the 'kinesthetics of curiosity?'[12] The work of the Glue Collective suggests that with permission, or with defiance, the 'kinesthetics of curiosity' can become play.

Enzo Mari, an artist dedicated to playful design whose work was recently honored at the Design Museum in London said that 'he would give every one-year-old the Nobel prize', because they want to touch everything, invent everything.[13] When I shared this in the Glue Garden, Faith had a faraway look in her eye as she brings us back to play.

> I think we all want to be in that world. And that is where we connect to everything. And children inhabit that world and they slip between fantasy and reality, and there's no difference between the two.
>
> We reckon we were our true selves when we were seven. That was when we were our true, true selves. And when we look back at photos when we were eight or seven, that was when we were doing our deepest (art)work.[14]

I try to picture Faith and Simbi at age eight or seven, and I smile thinking that if we had met when I was that age we would have immediately

become friends. At eight or seven I was very much like I am now—making bad poetry, singing silly songs, and drawing when I have the chance. At that age, it did not matter if these things were any good; they were just there because of the urge to write, to make music, to draw. All children sing, dance, draw and build, and eventually, most of us stop, or our energies are channeled into just one of the arts if we are lucky. Cultural frames open and close doors, and although curiosity is spatial, so is violence.

Brian Sutton-Smith considered play to be one of the three greats for addressing life's deep mysteries, play, along with religion and art, each one a container for paradox. (He might say science is a close fourth, although it was often too humorless.[15] See the endnotes for organizations and journals that make the study of play their priority, all influenced by his thinking.[16]) As he would say, play is dialudic and rich with opposites both emotional and cultural—the tiny hero, the frightened giant. The running to and from home base. The game of tag, with its 'It' and 'Not It' fluidly switching.

Neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp and psychologist Lucy Biven highlight the social core of play versus the 'seeking' behavior of curiosity, that they emerge from different parts of the brain and both are necessary for survival.[17] They write:

> The play urge is robust and fragile. It is fragile because a great number of environmental manipulations can reduce play—including all events that evoke negative emotional states such as anger, fear, pain, and separation distress'.[18]

The Glue Collective guards the fragile ones, and the play in the Glue Garden is as dialudic as they come:

> The loose arts were made solidly for impermanence, for re-design and re-use.
>
> The space is both crafted and left open to change for all who come, whether officially or unofficially.
>
> The planting done by children is also 'not planting', as toys get planted, too.

The painting is also 'not painting', as it was sometimes done just with

water, and it disappeared almost immediately. Secret messages could be hidden as if written in invisible ink.

The cooking in the mud kitchen is both cooking and 'not cooking'. It is often inedible and a parody of the delicious.

The 'swishing' is itself destruction and not destruction.

Fig. 19 Mud Kitchen, The Glue Garden, Birmingham. Photo by the author, spring 2024.

After sharing a meal and romping in the GLUE Garden, the children rest by our feet, we grownups sitting on the ground. The youngest gently approaches me with a high pitched, repeated request to 'Wiggle, wiggle, wiggle' together. As we wiggle and rock from side to side, the oldest one quiets himself in the materials closet in the open shed, gazing thoughtfully at the objects that he has not used that day, like a container for words not yet spoken. The younger ones slowly rouse themselves and meet him there, a murmuration of children, slowly touching things and negotiating with the objects for next time.

Notes

1 See the National Playwork Conference if you are interested in joining him, www.meynellgames.org

2 Brian Sutton-Smith (2017), 68. For more on dialudics, see Anna Beresin (2023), 441-445, or my chapter in Patte, Brown, and Beresin (2024), 35-43.

3 See www.gluecollective.co.uk

4 See www.embercombe.org/founding-principles

5 D.W. Winnicott (1971), 90.

6 Ibid. (1971), 93.

7 Ibid. (1971), 94.

8 The quote is dated 2015 and seen on the wall of an exhibit at the Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum in Glasgow in 2024. Thank you to the museum staff who shared that the quote was found in a letter from the artist about his painting *Morning Crescent* when it was acquired from the estate of Lucien Freud, Sigmund Freud's grandson.

9 Anna Beresin (2014), 164.

10 See Anna Beresin (2010).

11 Perry Zurn and Dani Basset (2022), 149.

12 Ibid. (2022), 92.

13 See https://designmuseum.org/exhibitions/enzo-mari

14 For a lovely short animated film made by the GLUE Collective about our time together, or to learn more about their loose arts playwork, visit their website: https://www.gluecollective.co.uk

15 Sutton-Smith (1997).

16 Academic organizations that study play include: The Association for the Study of Play and its *International Journal of Play*, plus the *American Journal of Play*, and *Play and Culture Studies*. There is also the *Children's Folklore Review*, a publication of the American Folklore Society, and the International Toy Research Association. All of these can be directly traced to the efforts of Brian Sutton-Smith.

17 Jaak Panksepp and Lucy Biven (2012), 2.

18 Ibid. (2012), 355.

3. Sneaky Play: The Maker{Futures} Mobile Maker Space

> This is a Makerspace; it is not a classroom. I'm not going to put you into groups. This is where you determine your own learning. You choose. . .You can go to as many things or as few things as you want, but I want you to keep going with something. . .you keep trying.
>
> Staff Introduction to the Maker{Futures} Mobile Maker Space

It is British Science Week, and the children are asked if they know why they are here in this large multi-purpose beige room in a Sheffield elementary school, a room filled with materials and stations and buzz. Some groups nod and mention science, others look puzzled but curious. They are invited to explain what STEM stands for: the S a subject they study in school, the T an activity they do that sometimes involves design, the E a job, and the M another basic school subject. STEM has become STEAM, they are told, and activities that focus on science, tech, and engineering and math can also include art. Things need to be artful so they are more appealing, more likely to be used, the grown-ups say, and the children nod. A few children bounce excitedly in their seats, and they smile when I bounce with them. The staff team is introduced: a lead teacher, an engineer, a design technology teacher who loves to make things, and an artist, all highly skilled and ready to build. I am volunteering with Maker{Futures} as a way to both observe and be helpful at the invitation of its director.

©2026 Anna Beresin, CC BY-NC 4.0 https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0511.03

The children were introduced to the 'Maker Cycle', a simplified engineering or design loop with its terms 'Look. Think. Make. Test'. The staff emphasize that this is something that encourages trying, and trying again. If something did not fly, to observe it, think, make it differently, and test it in repeated sequence. This aligned making with science, with design, with utility. An inspirational video showed what engineers can do, with exciting fast paced music, race cars, space walks, and medical cures. The overall motif was materiality and the power of things to change lives in the future. The children move excitedly, but without running, to the activity station that they find most interesting. There are seventeen stations laid out in the large multi-purpose room. In three days' time, we will have been in two elementary schools and will have provided playful challenges for 750 children, mostly from under-resourced communities.

The stations are modified depending on theme or age, and after each session the team sorts, recycles, re-piles, and restocks, readying the array for the next age grouping. Will this group need materials pre-cut, or will they be able to do it themselves? Will they have the fine motor skills for some of the robotics? Will they understand the simple Play Dough circuits or LEGO stop motion animation? The assumption is that children can mostly manage, and they were considered able to do complex things for themselves, even in the early years.

Maker{Futures} offers a range of choices from the one-time visit, to the co-development of maker pedagogy, to the special status of becoming one of their official maker schools.[1] I shared the images and elicited stories about the program through its objects with the Program Director Dr. Alison Buxton, its co-founder Emeritus Professor Jackie Marsh, along with several of the attending staff, Liz Janson, Sarah McGoldrick, and Dr. Louise Kay. The program has a maker van that somehow fits all of the materials for several hundred children in one day. I found out that it takes forever to load and appreciated the fitness of its multigenerational staff. Their muscles must have muscles.

Figs. 20A and 20B Full Room, Sample Materials, Maker{Futures} Mobile Makerspace. Photo by the author, spring 2024.

The Flight of Loose Parts

Some children run over to my own station, the 'Jet a Pet to the Vet', where I am supposed to facilitate gentle landings for the stuffed animals and

small plastic toys who fly through the air via a Lucite tube connected to a leaf blower. Without a parachute or hot air balloon type basket, the animals are launched, often hit the ceiling, and plop to the floor. The group glee erupts and the children are giddy with the flying cow, monkey, and chicken. Some get to work taping plastic or paper bags to the animals to soften their landings. Others try crafting wings or attaching feathers. One child names his feathered flyer, 'Super Chicken', and every few minutes different children cry 'Su-per Chick-en!'

Some stay at this station for the entire class period; others try it once and move along. Each child roars with the delight of flight, some literally jumping up and down, others clapping hands. The custodial staff across the room are particularly appreciative of the physicality and excitement of this station. Some teachers are more cautious, concerned with keeping the sound down, while others busy themselves taking photos of the children's creations, their flights, and the group glee.

Fig. 21 Super Chicken, Maker{Futures}, Mobile Makespace. Photo by the author, spring 2024.

Co-founder Jackie Marsh volunteers for the program she started years ago with Alison Buxton:

> Yes, it's such a fantastic thing, this Jet a Pet to the Vet. It's one of the Alison Buxton inventions. She invented the air pocket thing. Children were learning much about aerodynamics through that, what will weigh it down, what would make their projectile go faster through the air tunnel. But there was also, as you said, that element of play, that element of playfulness. It was such a good one for developing both their critical design skills and also their social play skills.
>
> There was one nursery where every time one went through the air tunnel, they just all screamed, the little group of them. And this group screaming became a playful part of that whole activity. It was great fun.

At the Jet a Pet to the Vet station, my job as volunteer is to replenish the raw materials at the table, to make sure there is tape, paper, paper clips, glue, feathers and doodads, and bits of plastic bags. The staff had introduced me as a 'Veterinarian from America', and I played along. One boy asks me for another 'cawp' and it takes me a few minutes to realize that was Yorkshire for 'cup'. 'Miss, you're from America? Have you been to KFC? Chick Fil-A? Wendy's? My uncle lives near a Dunkin' Donuts'. 'Do you say "football" or "soccer"?' 'Who's your team?' 'Miss, I went to Harvard'. I marvel at the reach of branding.

Several children take pleasure sneaking the raw materials into the jet tube: just feathers, just paper clips, just bits of plastic bag, or just the mini animals. Super Chicken has many solo flights, sans equipment. Many children are puzzled why some of the smaller harder plastic animals would not fly without some additional mass. There was a gentle discouragement of simple material play.

Fig. 22A and 22B Duck in a Cup, Plastic Bag, Maker{Futures}, Mobile Makespace. Photo by the author, spring 2024.

Jackie Marsh reflects:

> Isn't that about the fact that they were curious about what would happen once those materials went into the air tube? I think that was about experimentation. They were curious—what would happen if? Would the plastic flatten out or would it scrunch up? That's about them being innovative. For some, it might just be a tactile thing. Some of the younger children might like the feel of a particular material, and so that's what attracts them.

We discuss one of my favorite moments when a boy catapulted his airplane at a nearby airplane station, and then asked to launch his airplane into the Jet a Pet tube. He was so excited that it really, really flew. I shared with lead teacher Liz Jansen that I am interested in these moments when children choose to go across stations:

> I agree, I agree, that's what I absolutely love, and I'll give you a nice little example of that. One of the schools that we went to in the early days, we got foam construction, and children they made a pirate ship out of foam. It was really, really lovely. They'd hammered in golf tees to attach bits and pieces, and it

was this pirate ship. And then they said to me, we need to get it moving. And then they went to the Wobblebot station, with the motors and making the cups move, and then they got four cups attached with motors, put their pirate ship on top of it, and then it was the pirate ship that was moving across the floor. And it was brilliant.

You know we have a reverse engineering station sometimes, which can be a little bit destructive, where they take components out of old tech, such as old decommissioned tech as from an old computer. And there's been times where children have managed to take out a fan and, using the electronics, get it moving again.

Fig. 23 Launcher, Maker{Futures}, Mobile Makespace. Photo by the author, spring 2024.

We discuss the tension about having an 'agenda' for the curriculum, to make something that was designed for a purpose, versus experimenting with the tactile nature of the raw materials. Jackie pauses,

> I would think that in any good school, that kind of thing would be acknowledged, encouraged even, and celebrated, but I think we are in a situation where teachers are so constrained by national curriculum and the restrictions that they have that they close down those opportunities for children. But hopefully what the Maker{Futures} workshops provide teachers is opportunities to see that children are able to play, learn, and experiment, that they develop all of those different kind of autonomous, collaborative skills that they can apply then to the most standard, national kind of curriculum.
>
> I know that Alison in her work with the Maker Schools is developing a whole cohort of teachers who are thinking very positively in that way. So, I would hope that in the schools where Alison is working, that kind of experimentation and play would just be a whole part of the approach to the maker workshops. And we certainly felt in the MakEY project (the original research program that came before Maker{Futures}) where there were settings in schools, and museums, and libraries in which the MakEY project was kind of a Trojan Horse for going in and for expanding thinking around a whole host of areas.

The children were puzzled by the fact that the heavier smaller toys made of plastic did not fly, but the softer, rounder toys did. They would put a little plastic animal in by itself, and again it wouldn't fly. Well, how do we make it fly? Oh, they said, 'It's too heavy; it won't fly'. And I countered, 'Well, I was able to fly here from America in a very heavy plane and that flew. So, how could this fly?' And they figured it out and made vessels and parachutes. One child brought over a little cork guy that he made from the Wobblebot station and wanted to see if his guy could fly. First his cork puppet had wavy, coiled pipe cleaner hair. It worked for the Wobblebot station, but here, the hair flew off, a flying toupee in the Jet a Pet tube. And then he ran back and put clay on its head, and the clay 'hair' stuck. He was very excited.

Fig. 24 Cork Guy, Maker {Futures}, Mobile Makespace. Photo by the author, spring 2024.

Liz addresses the hybridity in the room:

> Yeah, that cross pollination, I like that, taking one thing from one area and 'What would it be like?' And 'Could I add wings?' And 'Could I do this?' 'With a battery it could be flying and be lit up. . .'

Figs. 25A and 25B Bear in a Cup, Covered Bear, Maker {Futures}, Mobile Makespace. Photo by the author, spring 2024.

One of the things that impresses me is the amount of patience that the young people have, and that for the most part, they were really fine about taking turns on their own. Sometimes you would see two different children's hands coming into the air jet at the same time. They were trying to launch a small ship together and it really flew, or they would sail their small animals at the same time. They would clap and shriek, 'Let me do it again!' and try to do it faster, and faster, and faster. You could see them wondering what other things could fly. Liz adds:

> I think for me, what's the most powerful thing is that not giving up. I've actually witnessed one child in particular that really sticks in my mind, and he was new to the school. He was a migrant child with very little English. He had his own teaching assistant, and we did a maker workshop with the school. And I was on the Jet a Pet to the Vet station. This one little boy, he spent ages trying to perfect his parachute, and he would have a go. And it wouldn't work, and I just watched him just try over, and over, and over again.
>
> And I realized, you know, that actually, you wouldn't have gotten that in a classroom. You wouldn't have gotten that kind of tenacity and resilience and having a go in maths or literacy. So, I do think there are opportunities for children to develop those skills through making. And I don't think that's always valued by our education system.

Figs. 26A and 26B Clips, Feathered Flyer, Maker{Futures}, Mobile Makespace. Photo by the author, spring 2024.

The Robots

There are several stations with different kinds of robotic tech for the children to try. In the centre of the room, framed by four upside-down benches like a square boxing ring are three types of small round robots and their corresponding iPads. The children are told the simple code that turns them on and then invited to figure out how to make the robots move. The staff physically demonstrate that the children need to stay outside the ring and remind them that the culture of the room is to find something to do if it is already busy. The children sneak into the ring anyway.

On the side of the room one can find Indi, a little fast car that moves on a green square. What does it do on a purple square? The children have to figure it out. Former technology teacher and chief woodworker Sarah McGoldrick was in charge of all things robotic here:

> This is fantastic for collaboration and team work. This is up there with the den building play in terms of teamwork, the Indi car. They love to figure it out. Like, purple is spinning it round. 'Let's get it back to the beginning!' There's lots of collaboration involved.

Anna It's more like a game.

Sarah It is. It is. That's exactly a game. That's why they enjoy it so much.

Sneakiness takes a new turn with Ozobot, a small moving robot the size of a walnut that crawls like a ladybug with an R2D2 helmet. This tiny robot follows any dark mark made with a magic marker, and the children seem to enjoy the combination of mark making and robotic movement. There are small colourful round stickers that one may put on the drawn line, and the children are invited to figure out for themselves what each colourful sticker allows Ozobot to do. I asked Liz and Sarah about the Ozobot table where the children have challenged the robot by drawing all over the paper with the thick black marking.

Figs. 27A and 27B Ozobot, and Ozobot Tools, Maker {Futures}, Mobile Makespace. Photo by the author, spring 2024.

Liz Yes, this looks like they've been left with the pen. The problem that we have with all activities is that, if you haven't got enough supervision, it is hard to get the teaching that you want. So, I often ask the teachers themselves to help. This is a case of nobody's on the table, so they're having a go at drawing, which is fine in itself as a form of self-expression, but won't make those Ozobots move very well.

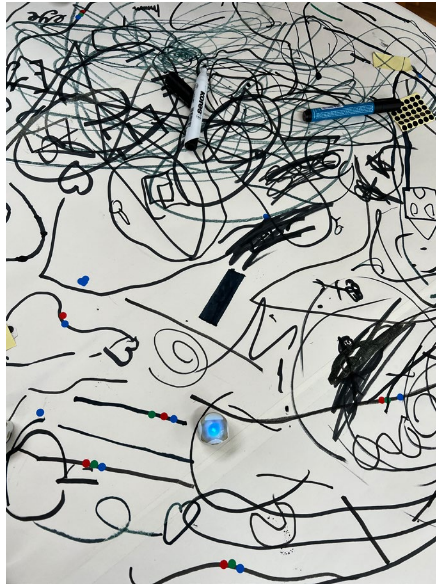


Fig. 28 Drawings for Ozobots, Maker{Futures}, Mobile Makespace. Photo by the author, spring 2024.

We talk about how some of the children seem to be just drawing so that the Ozobot might follow the black lines, and then some of them just clearly wanted to scribble. I asked if they had seen that much. Liz nods:

> Yeah. I have, actually. I think sometimes they're trying to test the robot out, but yeah, it's about having an opportunity isn't it, to use big, big movements on the paper?

Sarah offers:

> The Ozobots. The thing that annoys me, I think it's a fantastic activity, and the children understand it, and they understand it so much that the robots don't live up to what they should be doing to some extent. So, the children are disappointed that the robots aren't doing what they thought they were going to do. They will follow the (drawn) lines, they'll absolutely follow the lines. But when it comes to the tricks, they can be temperamental. So, I think there's a bit of a buzz, isn't there, about the robots? 'Ooh the robots, the robots!' Then the technology doesn't live up to what it says it's going to do.

> This happens every time. These crazy scribbles. And it's like a work of art. I don't know if the children actually tried to put the robot on that upside down house (in the drawing). That would be interesting to know, wouldn't it? Or whether they just drew a house because they wanted to draw a house?

The staff seem wistful about the utility of the robots. Alison calls them 'fun', but not essential:

> I feel the robots, particularly, is a way for us to introduce some of the edu-tech to schools, almost a bit of a 'try before you buy', because they're so expensive for schools to buy. I really think they are a high-risk element for schools to spend their budget on. I think it's great for them to see how all their children interact with all the various different things. We have a phenomenon here in the UK where pretty much every school board bought a set of Bee Bots, probably 10 years ago now, and they used those in the early years. And then they don't; it's like we've ticked that off (an imaginary list). They're not really part of a bigger program of things.
>
> I really like the tech that has got an awful lot of capabilities at different levels, so I think there is a kind of a place for some of these robots to understand that basic coding. They're fun, but not essential. I think there's an awful lot of weight to some of these things, and maybe buy something like a Microbit with all these different components, and they're much more like loose parts for robotics, rather than the kind of ready-made set.

Sarah adds:

> I just think that the robots are a bit of a showoff thing. With my teacher-head on, there's not much learning going on, in my opinion. If it were me, I'd be getting rid of the robots, those particular robots. I think they're just being controlled by remote control. But once again, on the app, we're just literally scratching the surface. There's loads of different ways to control these robots, which isn't a remote control. In terms of just being able to manage the activity, it has to be that kind of remote control. But, I think they sometimes cause more trouble than what it's worth. There are issues with the iPads,

> and the batteries aren't very good. And they aren't much for our maker skills, really. So, if it's not really working, they'll just leave the iPads. They do communicate quite well during this activity, the sharing part. When we do this with the younger children, the sharing part is a barrier. It is a difficult part of it.
>
> Once again, we are scratching the surface.

There appears to be a tension that the children wanted to get their bodies in with the larger robots, and yet they were not allowed near them. Liz explains:

> Oh, it's expensive tech. We've had children stand on things. We've had iPads broken before. So, it's just having a few rules and guidelines. We don't give them many, do we? We tell them to go off and play and explore. Just a couple of rules and guidelines to keep our equipment safe and for their own safety as well.
> But they generally abide by the rules. And I always get the comment back from teachers that they were amazed at the behaviour of their children, that some children who are normally perceived to be really quite challenging behaved beautifully and followed the rules. And I wonder is that just because they are allowed to choose? And they are not pushed into something that doesn't interest them?
>
> You know when you're speaking to the children, you're always under this perception that they'll straight away head for the robots. It's not always the case. And there's been schools that we've been to where nobody's been bothered about the robots. They've wanted to go do cardboard or something more simple in many ways. So, I find it very interesting to see how children choose and what their choices are.

Jackie Marsh reflects on the shift in school culture between doing things on the floor and doing things at a table. I asked, 'At what age, developmentally, does the floor become less significant for children?'

> Well, if it was up to them?
> I think there are some children who would prefer to work on the floor their whole school life. Certainly, my grandson would.

> For some children, all of their school lives, I think. The way we incorporate our body in our learning is so important, isn't it? For some children it is more important for them than it is for others. Children should be given the opportunity to work on the floor, play on the floor, move from floor to desk. Move from inside to outside in a much more fluid way, but the way school is set up, that's just impossible, isn't it? That kind of environment where children have those kinds of choices would be so important in an ideal world.

Cardboard

The cardboard station has, of course, cardboard and its requisite set of gentle cutting and fastening tools at the table, but it also has LED lights with instructions for adding light to one's creations. One girl made a cardboard house and wants a nightlight for her cardboard robot. Another made a cardboard Roblox. A third, cardboard Bubble Tea. There are fewer 'rules' with the cardboard and so there appears to be a greater variety of things made. I asked for stories about what they have seen the children make with this material. Liz focuses on the simplicity of the tools used and the sense of improvisation:

> We went to the Arbourthorne Cardboard Carnival last year. All the children had made different things for Cardboard Carnival, and the games that they made were amazing. And there was this one little boy, this is where I really saw the power of maker education, one little boy he was about nine years old, had made this basketball game where he'd got some lollipop sticks with an elastic band. And you could fire them like sort of a trebuchet type thing, and he had a little box type thing, like an egg box, with a little ball in it. And you could flip it at the back, and you could fire the ball into a basketball (hoop) which was made up of a cup attached to a cardboard background.
>
> And I kept playing it over and over and over again until I broke it, accidentally. And I was horrified because the Carnival was starting in about ten minutes. And my immediate instinct, my years of teaching, was to expect tears and think, 'How can I help him? How can I sort this?' And this boy said to me, 'Don't worry, it needed

stress testing'. (We laugh.) 'Now I know how to make it better'.

Liz explains that the making process offers the children the opportunity to strengthen not just their spirit in the face of failure, but their fine motor skills. We discuss how this has become a topic of concern among early years educators. She adds that there is a sense of playful gusto for invention that comes with choice.

> I taught in a very diverse school in an inner-city area, and they were coming in not being able to pick up cutlery, and also taught in independent schools where parents who were time-poor but cash-rich. Sometimes it's easier to feed your child yourself, or it's easier to give them finger foods. So, children weren't necessarily having the skills of buttoning up themselves, putting their shoes on. And pencil grip, you know to have the right pencil grasp, it's a real problem. And not even having the strength within your arm, because if you use a fist grip (on a pencil) like that to scribble with, you've got your whole arm going behind it. So, with a child that's been corrected into a tripod grip (three fingers around a pencil), and their writing is spidery, and they haven't got pressure and that seems uncomfortable, they'll go back to the tried-and-true fisted way of using their fist.
>
> So, all of these skills, even with the cardboard fold-roller that you hold like a knife, and even the sawing technique, it's all strengthening. And even using a roller it's strengthening the wrist. Using this thing, the nuts-and-bolts thing, it's strengthening. It's getting all your hand and finger muscles ready for other skills like writing. So, I have a theory that if you actually took longer doing these things like I did when I first started teaching, rather than pushing hand writing so young, that you would have a much more effective finger hand grasp, pencil grasp, by making sure that children have got the right muscle movement, the fine motor control, the gross motor control, the strength ready—before you put pen to paper.
>
> That's cardboard in its basic form and that would have involved using a cardboard saw, cardboard tools, and working out sizes for the arms and the legs, using the cardboard screw driver and coming up with their own little make for that robot, or teddy bear,

> or whatever it is. And I kind of like that, because you're learning to use the saw in the right motion, learning the righty-tighty-lefty-loosie of a screwdriver, but it's non-prescriptive. It's not 'We're all making this'. It's using it as you like. And it's a lovely material to use, this cardboard.

Dens/Forts and Surprises

A shadow theater with a light blackens out a tent large enough for two or three children to make shadow puppetry possible. It also has an iPad available for recording puppet shows. A nearby set for den construction with its interlocking pieces by Tinyland Creative Forts offers several children two large fabrics ready for potential fort play. An additional low weaving table with burlap and yarn invites gentle open-ended decoration. There were often three to four children there, self-soothing in the busy room. Sometimes a child sits underneath the weaving table, poking the large needle up from the bottom, a small den of their own making.

Fig. 29 Top of Hessian Table, Maker {Futures}, Mobile Makespace. Photo by the author, spring 2024.

Sarah mentions that the forts or dens can emerge from the kits with different approaches, and that children continue to surprise her:

> You know they (the dens) often fall over and you have to start all over again? Or someone breaks it by accident and they're all running round to make sure it all stays together? I saw a wonderful thing in a school once. So, we give them pegs to attach the cover to make a roof, or whatever they want to use it for. And for some reason, these children didn't use the pegs, and they undid the rod and the ball. They put the cloth over the ball and put the rod in so it held the cloth. And I had not seen that before, and it was a wonderful way of solving a problem that they had.
>
> And I came to a realization, this is just my opinion and my thinking, out of all of the schools that we've been to, that one was the most chaotic of days. And the behaviour management definitely wasn't the strictest or the most informing of schools that we've been to. And when we're in those schools, I see more WOW moments, like that part of the den building, and the branching out with the activities. Just pushing the boundaries more. Not asking, 'Can they go? Are they allowed to go to another activity?' They'll just do it.
>
> I've got a bit of a theory going on that, if the children are quite conforming and follow instructions very well, that they don't necessarily do great when it comes to being a Maker School. . . I think the behaviour management could be (negatively) linked to creativity in some kind of way.

Liz adds:

> When I was at one school, I was observing reception (kindergarten) children use this set (for den building). And it was brilliant. There was a child who was nonverbal, and through nonverbal communication he was guiding a group how to make this den. It was unbelievable. There were children, and he didn't say a word, didn't speak word, and this wasn't because he didn't speak a word of English. He didn't utter a word. But there were children putting the rods intro the balls at an angle that wouldn't have

> allowed the correct formation of the building that he was aiming for. So, for example, it was going off to a tangent so you couldn't connect it to another. He was sort of touching them and gesturing 'No', showing them how to put it in, at say a 90-degree angle or a 45-degree angle, to create a structure that would work. I found that really interesting. And what I do find interesting with this is that it is often the younger children who are better at it.

There is a Nuts-and-Bolts chair that looks like something from IKEA that is purposely only partly built and without any instructions, other than the box image of the chair completed. BRIO tools nearby offer practice tapping and screwing. Snap circuits suggest the possibility of a flying saucer. There were light weight wooden airplanes to copy, build, and launch. These are all areas of exploration. The children, if they are sneaky enough, attempt to make them into areas of play, toupees and all.

Liz continues:

> We went into one school which was for children with additional needs. It was this Trustworthy Autonomous Systems Project supporting young children with disabilities and creating something that they thought would be useful in the future world for people with disabilities. One group that I worked with, they were girls, made a cardboard decision maker that had a micro bit and a server attached to it. By coding it, they could press buttons, and they got a little arrow, and they could ask it a question, and it had 'yes-no-maybe'. So, we were just using it for school—'Do you like maths?' 'No'. 'Do you like art?' 'Yes'. 'Do you like PE?' 'Maybe'.
>
> But one of the children, one of the young people said to me, 'This would be brilliant for So-and-So's dad who can't speak, and Such and Such in our class who can't speak'. So that coding the microbit linked with cardboard and a couple of LEDs for lights, because everything looks better with lights, and this cross pollination of different activities, I find really exciting. Children knowing about all the skills, maybe not having them, but they naturally think, 'Oh, I wonder if this could be done', and being brave enough to think, 'Maybe I don't know how it could be done, but I do know it's a possibility'.

Steven Johnson, author of *Wonderland: How Play Made the Modern World*, makes the case that great innovations in the world of work have often grown out of play itself:

> Bone flutes, coffee, pepper, the Panorama, calico, Babbage's dancer, dice games, the Bon Marché—beneath all the surface differences between these objects, one common characteristic unites them all: they were *surprising* when they first appeared. (Italics in the original.)[2]

Making as Thinking

Alison trained in building surveying and worked in an architectural studio before going into construction and engineering education:

> The engineering mindset and skills came from my childhood of tinkering and playing with tools and scrap materials. My dad was an engineer and I had plenty of freedom to engineer and make things myself. It was, and still is, the culture within my family.

She describes the design cycle in a sculptural way, often moving her hands in a circle to describe the motion of thought:

> I was brought up aware of engineering design processes, and other design cycles and things. So, the cyclical iterative approach to learning, I was very familiar with. The engineering ones that they tend to pull out for events and things like this tend to be a bit more complicated. I was very taken by a very simplified version that a museum had done in San Francisco where I think they only had three processes in theirs, but they had simplified it for a very early audience. I thought this was really effective as well. I knew that the iterative approach, as opposed to a linear approach to learning is vital within this model.
>
> It was just a matter of thinking of how simple can we make this? What are the core areas about it? It's just 'Look. Think. Make. Test.' Because there's actually so many different ways to interpret this. And even by looking—looking at what's there—looking at what's not there—looking at what you've already done—there

> are so many different ways to look and look closely at things.

It seems to me that Maker{Futures} has hit upon something very profound in education, that for so many children, the making is integral to the thinking process. Liz shares that a boy ran up to her recently and said, 'You were here a year ago and we did airplanes, and I've been waiting all year to do it again'. And so, he's been thinking about his design for his new airplane for that entire year, waiting for the material to think about it again. So much of school assumes that the thinking has to happen in a set amount of time, in a set particular topic. Children are constantly thinking about the things that interest them, just like we do.

Alison explains:

> I say to teachers that this maker cycle within an hour-long project might happen thirty times. The whole cycle, happening over and over and over, just as you join two materials together at the start of your project, you've already done one loop. (She gestures again in circles.) And as you've joined the materials, you've done another loop. It is all embedded.
>
> And what we are trying to get them out of is what they currently do, which is: they give a brief, they ask the children to plan as if they're experts, and they've never done this before, to create a plan, and then make them follow the plan in something they're not expert in. And then they just have this little bit of evaluation at the end, whether it was good or bad or whatever. In most cases, it has not turned out brilliantly because they were not experts in the first place.
>
> I always tell them to imagine a cook writing a cookbook, without ever making anything. (She laughs.) You know, it doesn't work like that. (She gestures circling again.) You know they're constantly trying, tasting, and making it better til they're happy with it. Then, they commit it to paper. So, we should be doing the same. There's nothing wrong with capturing it, but you need to do that capturing at the right time, not at the beginning before you know anything about it.

Fig. 30 Two in a Tube, Maker {Futures}, Mobile Makespace. Photo by the author, spring 2024.

We discuss that there was a real manipulative hunger, material hunger in their hands, which I have seen in other places and other programs, where children just wanted to touch things and move things around. I suggest that it is related to this idea that we have oversold the verbal. For a lot of these children this physical moving around is the moving around of ideas. Alison has a particularly nuanced view of the relationship between making and writing, between objects and words:

> I think the verbal can come, but it wants to come as a response to the moving, and this being able to use their whole bodies is in order to make, to show, and to feel things. And so, it's the way we do things. (Her hands circle again.) It's the way round. You can talk all about your understanding of the materials and the problems you have, and how you overcame those, and how you would perhaps instruct someone else to do it differently next time. You can talk about those really clearly when you've lived that experience, and it's your experience to tell. It's very hard, you know, the way we expect children to write about that, when they don't have any experience of it. And they're losing their ability to

> imagine what that might be.
>
> In the early days, it was 'They're going to need these bags to make a parachute, these bits of string, and they need to be cut to this length'. And they started putting out set bits of materials and things. I said, 'What you're really doing is shoehorning children down a path with a particular route. What we really want is for them to be able to explore lots of possibilities and come to those things on their own.' It's not a parachute building activity. It's more about the questions we ask: 'What's happening next, and what happens when you do that?' (She gestures in a circle.) It really shows that moving through that cycle lots and lots of times. The fact is that it's really open, there is no right or wrong answer, and it can be anything they want it to be.

Liz shakes her head in wonderment:

> There was a really lovely story of a little boy who was working with his teaching assistant, and they were using a green screen, and they couldn't figure out why the puppets wouldn't show up on the video when they using the green screen. And the little boy actually realized it was because the puppet was green. So, he actually solved the problem, and he went and got a different coloured puppet. And then, they could see it. And I thought that was just so—a four-year-old! I have so much respect for young children.

Time

There is still tension between the process and the product, and this pressure appears to be directly related to the sanctioned use of time. Liz explains:

> You've got like 15-20 minutes, and we want to kind of show the children that they can make something within that time, and ideally get them through the (circular) design process a few times. And at the same time, know that we've got to show the teachers that this isn't just a free-for-all with everything being thrown in, but actually there is a purpose and method. There's that

tool element, and there's the element of trying to get something produced, something beyond the simple having a go. It's a fine balancing act, really, in a very short amount of time.

It's all very fast paced. You know, we give the children the opportunity to stay as long or as little as they want to. You will often find that some children will flit from one activity to another, and some children want to explore it deeper, however in such a short amount of time, you know, there's not great depth. We've done some longer workshops. We did one actually called 'DOTS' that was a longer workshop that was 'Dreams of Times and Space'. It was a brilliant conceptualization of Dr. Angela Colvert. And that was great because the children, in thinking of the activity that you were in, the Jet a Pet, that was used as an activity in one class to launch a dream into space. So that became a Dream Launcher Machine.

For that, they had much longer, so they were able to explore air, and this, and that, and the other, before they got making their prototype and used the maker cycle. But I supposed when we go in the schools, we kind of like to give a quick taster, and at the same time being mindful, I guess, that we want teachers to see the benefit of what we do, very quickly. And if a child's only going to be there for 15 minutes, we've got to show it quickly, how their thinking can be.

So, I think there's probably a little bit of a difference between a longer activity and one of those days where we are quickly introducing things, quickly trying to get this idea of a maker cycle, of going through numerous iterations until you get something that works or achieves what they wanted to achieve in a very short amount of time. So, I think, probably, one of the purposes of what we do is not only to engage the children, and to have the children have lots of fun, but probably get lots of schools wanting to go down the route of incorporating maker pedagogies into what they do, with the aim of being able to extend what we do in a nutshell, into maybe a six-week activity, and do it in greater depth. So, it's a bit fast paced, but fun. The children love it. I think the feedback

> from the staff and the children has been very positive.

The Trojan Horse

Liz acknowledges the challenge of getting educators to understand the significance of play:

> Not everybody gets it. Not everybody gets play. There are so many people who think that if it's not formal, they're not learning.

Alison makes a case for the importance of iterative play over material specificity:

> They might only ever take on cardboard and still be a really great maker school, but I think what's more important about the maker school program is that it is, along with the practical skills, more heavily focused on what we call 'our maker spirit'. So, if you only ever do something out of cardboard you can still develop your resilience, a really strong maker spirit, without ever having to delve into any of the other skills. So, it's really there as a framework to then allow schools to build it how they want to build it.
>
> And then the final thing, we have a method that we use for when they are actually transferring these things into teaching; it's very different from this crazy one-hour taster session. It's generally linked into project work or subject things. Or they might be doing, say rain forests is their topic in their reading, and we think about what skill might you like to focus on this term. It might be like a digital literacy skill, or it might be cardboard or something. We look at weaving those things together.

I am struck by Alison's use of the 'maker spirit' and Jackie's image of the Trojan Horse,[3] that the adults sneak science in under the guise of play, but perhaps they also sneak play in under the guise of science education. When Liz speaks of people 'not getting it', she is talking about adults, not children. The children sneak objects from one station to another—the puppets from the shadow theater emerge in the Jet a Pet, along with the cork Wobblebot, the balsa wood airplane from the airplane station—

and the bits of machinery added to make the boats more complicated, all of these toys adding to the curriculum unmade. Raw materials are snuck into the tube of air, not as an attempt to simply defy instructions or impatience with building, although these may be a part of it, but as ways to sneak understanding of materiality. As staff member Louise Kay notes, 'I'm interested in that kind of making that kind of subverts some of the expectations that are placed on our children'. The children are into that, too.

Super Chicken is about more than just flight. Super Chicken is funny. And Super Chicken is funny to a whole crowd of children who marvel at its flight and its ability to bonk itself on the ceiling. The children loved to then cradle the bird, to take care of it together, and find another way for it to land safely. Play is larger than invention,[4] wiser than school.[5] Play holds multiple scripts simultaneously and helps the children think sculpturally, offering exaggeration as their own thing with feathers.

Notes

1 See https://makerfutures.sites.sheffield.ac.uk/about

2 Steven Johnson (2016), 282. See also psychologist Jerome Bruner on the power of surprise (1962).

3 Seymour Papert also referred to the Trojan Horse in his discourse of makerspaces. See Papert (2020), 96.

4 See Jean Piaget's essay on the future of education *To Understand Is to Invent* (1973). For play's long history in psychology in helping those who have experienced trauma, see Anna Beresin and Julia Bishop (2023).

5 See David Lancy (2024).

Fig. 31 ‘Changed Priority Ahead’, Street Sign, Sheffield, spring 2024.

Interlude

What we have seen so far in the playground, the art garden, and the makerspace is that play is enhanced by the stimulation of novel objects, by the surprises of nature, and by the mere presence of other people. If toys are stand-ins for social life,[1] and novel objects substitute for the variety to be found in nature, the stretchiness of play is a form of collective creativity, even when we play by ourselves.

For Brian Sutton-Smith, play's power is in its being a tool for a potential future:

> The argument so far is that play variability is analogous to adaptive variability; that play potential is analogous to neural potential; that play's psychological characteristics of unrealistic optimism, egocentricity, and reactivity are analogous to the normal behavior of the very young; and finally that play's engineered predicaments model the struggle for survival.[2]

Whether called 'maker spirit', 'play ethos', or craft, these programs of maker/unmaker culture are not just about individual invention or self-expression. These three outstanding programs have demonstrated that play is there not just for its entertainment value or for the development of an individual child's ideas. Play is not just for our individual survival.

Notes

1 Brian Sutton-Smith on toys (1986).

2 Brian Sutton-Smith (1997), 229. For those interested in the debate between Sutton-Smith and Piaget about the essence of play and imitation, see 'Piaget on Play: A Critique' (1966).

PART II
PROGRAMS AS SITES OF CULTURE CHANGE

4. Modelling Inclusion in the Makerspace

Both Jackie Marsh and Alison Buxton of Maker{Futures} spoke of their coming to playful maker education directly in response to the invisibility of women in the field. I find myself picturing the late 1940s when my mother was in the first class of girls accepted to New York City's all-boys, science-magnet high school, and I am brought back to the mid-1970s when girls like myself were first allowed into the all-boys woodshop in my middle school. I chose wood over home economics, something ironic considering how many things in our home are made out of wood, and I was able to attend the same science-magnet high school as my mother. There are fewer institutional barriers now, but internalized obstacles remain. Jackie and Alison felt that in order to attract more young women and girls to science and technology, to well-paying jobs, one needed to introduce STEAM into the early years, the preschool programs. In the mid-2010s, doing makerspaces in the early years was almost unheard of.

The first iteration was called MakEY, Makerspaces in the Early Years: Enhancing Digital Literacy and Creativity. Whereas MakEY was a research project specifically, Alison and Jackie together developed Maker{Futures} as a legacy programme not bound by a single research grant, but as an opportunity to build meaningful partnerships with educators and schools to help them develop their own makerspaces and maker education provision. Both women seem to have limitless energy and clearly enjoy working with children alongside their carefully crafted Maker{Futures} team.

©2026 Anna Beresin, CC BY-NC 4.0
https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0511.04

The Under-Represented in STEAM Programs

Jackie rewinds time to the beginning of the project:

> How it came about, really, was that I went on a trip to Berlin with a colleague of mine, and as part of that trip we went to a makerspace in Berlin. That was around 2015, I think. It was the first makerspace that I'd seen, and I was naively shocked that it was full of 17-to-30-year-old white men, basically. There were a couple of women there, but not many. A couple of Black people there, but not many. So, I was shocked at the lack of diversity and I remember thinking, 'This has got to start in the early years'. If we're going to get young people interested in tinkering and making, then it really has got to start in the early years.
>
> It was a bit of a shift for me really, to be honest. My work to that date had been around digital literacy. So, it was a bit of a shift. And I remember in the project proposal I had focused really on digital literacy skills, and mentioned STEM, but it wasn't writ large. But as the project progressed, it really seemed to me that what we were talking about was STEM integrated into the arts, so that became STEAM, and digital literacies interfaced with those. And so, the project just really broadened.
>
> The project was in seven countries in Europe, and we also worked with partners in Canada, Australia, America and South America. I think what was very rich about the project was that it consisted of exchanges, and staff were exchanged amongst the countries, amongst the projects. So, each project was set up to really look at 3- to 8-year-olds. The way it was framed for the EU was that it was about furthering innovation, children's digital literacy, and their creative design skills, fitting in with all of those nation states' aims around competitiveness and growth in those areas. So, we had that very, very broad societal aim, but we also wanted to focus it very much at institutional settings, whether that was educational settings—nurseries and schools—or libraries, or museums, or community settings.

Alison and I discuss Jackie's initial catalyst—that she encountered makerspaces that were mostly male, mostly white male.[1] It became her priority to get young girls exposed to science and engineering. Alison keeps nodding her head:

> My experience comes from the same angle as Jackie's. Before coming to the university, I spent 20 years—I started off volunteering—but then set up my own organization. I did a lot of construction, and engineering, and STEM outreach, and engagement—particularly with underrepresented groups—but particularly girls, women and girls.
>
> In that time, I had seen the same conversations, the same approaches. Not much changed in all that time. I could see lots of funding being pumped in, but there's a real model of STEM education or STEM engagement, which, I mean for a long time focused on secondary (education). I fought, and fought, and fought to get stuff younger, and younger, and younger. There were certain things over the years that had helped, and there was more of a shift into primary, but Jackie really pushed things forward when starting with early years, and that is exactly what it needed.
>
> But even still, whether you're doing a bridge building activity or car racing, whatever the intervention was, it was very instruction based, and it might focus on introducing some new STEM based skills, but what it didn't really do was address the, like I say, the maker spirit. And I was really interested in this because I would speak to engineering employers, people like Rolls Royce. I used to do a lot of work with the Royal Airforce, and they were saying, 'We get the graduates. That's not a problem. We get the graduates, the engineering graduates, and now yes, there's a few more girls in there'.
>
> They said, 'What we can't do, what's much harder to find, are graduates that also have the out-of-the-box thinking, who know how to approach problems and tinker, and they can really think things through, and they can communicate. That's the bit. You know, we have lots of graduates, but we only have a very small

> proportion of those who have got that real spark'. And that really got me thinking about, what is it about that? I suppose that's how my engineering brain works. I might not be making things out of machines, or components, or electrical things, that's more of a kind of hobby, I suppose, but I am interested in how things work and how things can work better. That's really how this started to evolve and come about. I was really interested in what makes that out-of-the-box thinking, and where does it already exist?

Alison steers the team to reach a broad audience, to create opportunities that legitimize tinkering and play:

> We really enjoy doing public events, too, public events in the park. It tends to be families. That's really nice to have the intergenerational learning opportunities as well, because I don't think there's a whole lot of difference. I don't change much, whether I'm doing a workshop with six-year-olds, or head teachers, or parents, or students. It's pretty much the same stuff that we do. Everybody likes to be hands- on and making.

Jackie acknowledges the importance of not just the diversity of potential students, but of having a range of professionals involved:

> We involved makerspace professionals who'd had some education training, but not much. They weren't qualified teachers. We had those people working with preschool and primary school teachers, librarians, and museum educators. It was a very rich cornucopia, I would say, of professional expertise across that range. That to me was one of the greatest successes about that project, the depth of professional exchange that you could get when you were all looking at things very closely.
>
> For library staff, and museum staff, some of them had undertaken work in makerspaces with older children, but certainly not with 3-8s. So, we were co-creating knowledge with them as well. Each of the seven countries had different projects in this area, and then we just came together with regular meetings to exchange knowledge and develop knowledge in the field. We created a literature review, a number of papers, a book.[2]

We were able to demonstrate that young children engaging in makerspaces developed a whole range of skills and knowledge. Yes, they developed digital skills and knowledge which had been my initial focus, but we also found that they developed a wider range. As you know, there's that maker mindset- curious and innovative, resilient, collaborative, and so on. They developed that range of skills and knowledge also.

I didn't want to leave it there, really. I could see that we'd only just started. As part of the overall project, there was this American project in the Bay area led by Alicia Blum-Ross and Sonia Livingstone, looking at the same age range. And there was one museum in particular, the Bay Area Discovery Museum, and they had a maker van, and they also designed programs for young children, from babies to secondary school children. And I actually went over and visited and was just really amazed at what they did.

So, they had this van and they went out to Sausalito and all these surrounding areas. They had programs in community centres and so on. And it was so innovative, and I just thought, 'Gosh. It would be really good to have something like this in Sheffield, in the South Yorkshire area'.

Maker Boxes/Maker Van/Maker Schools

It was 2019, and then Covid happened.

Yes, so Covid happened. So planning was quite challenging then. Following the MakEY project, we also had, alongside the school projects, the Maker Boxes Project. I don't know if you know the concept of story boxes? Very simple, early years concept. You have a box with a story, a picture book, or it can be a reference book, and little puppets and games that get the family to engage. And so, I thought, 'Right. We can adapt that for STEAM'. And so, we carefully chose books that had a STEAM element to it, or could have, and developed the boxes with all of these resources. So, it was great, it was like a snowball effect, as the early years teachers

> who had been in the MakEY project then shared their expertise in the Maker Boxes Project.
>
> We brought the leader of the Bay Area Museum who developed this van, and to that workshop we invited all of the relevant stake holders in Sheffield that we thought should be a part of that conversation in developing this mobile makerspace. So, we invited people from the museum sector, people from the library sector, people from the makerspace sector. We did have a number of makerspaces in Sheffield, so those makers came. We had early years teachers, and also Alison Buxton was one of the delegates. I invited Alison because she had years of experience running an organization called STEAMWORKS, and she had many, many years of experience working with schools and broader community groups to develop their STEAM education through making. But she hadn't particularly focused on early years. So, she was making such fantastic contributions to that meeting; she really stood out to me as an outstanding practitioner in the field. And I just thought, 'Woah, I'd love to have Alison involved in this'.
>
> Site Gallery was an independent art gallery in Sheffield, and they'd had this van for many, many years. I think they'd won it in a lottery or something. It had been gifted to them in some way, but they didn't use it that often. They didn't really have the staffing, or the capacity. It's only a small art gallery, and the funding for the arts, as you know, the funding for the arts under the Tories had just been decimated. So, they were really keen to have this collaboration with us. There were lots of positive aspects of that collaboration that we could value. And then we were able to advertise a post for the director of the Maker{Futures}. Well, we didn't call it Maker{Futures} at that point, and Alison applied, and we were delighted to appoint Alison. And things took off from there.

Alison adds:

> But these things don't run themselves for free. So, at the moment, within Sheffield, the university puts in funding in order to support our salaries and so forth. And we also have secured

some funding through charitable donations and through Project WORTH where we are able to allocate funding. And we run a bursary scheme for schools in the UK. So, when we have pots of money we allocate. So, schools can apply, and it helps to cover the cost of their training and things like that. So, we've kind of put up a financial model, but we're trying to keep it free for schools where we can.

And we hope we would be able to do something similar overseas as well, but I think it depends. I mean ultimately, we will look probably for a big sponsor that can help us to roll out the program, because all of the countries that we are looking to roll out the program in initially fall into that Global South, developing countries. So, it would be really helpful, it would be really good, if we could have a large-scale sponsor, or more, to really help that along.

One of our biggest pieces of feedback that we hear time and time again is that staff have experienced or met children within their settings like for the first time, even though perhaps they've been there for quite some time. They've seen a very different side to them, particularly children who struggle to engage in the more traditional methods of learning. They suddenly see them come alive and have an outlet and have lots of skills in spatial reasoning. Or they might see them collaborate or communicate in a very different way than they have previously. So, it gives us an opportunity to showcase those children, their skills, in a different way. And that leads to questions by teachers and sometimes senior leadership who've been involved in the day, too. How can we do more of this?

And that's when we made the Maker School Program which is much more focused around staff and school development, to be able to embed those learning approaches across the school as a much more strategic program. Schools are long lasting. They're in it for the long haul. We should be, too.

So then, for me, it was very obvious to have Maker{Futures} be made up of lots of small moving parts that will come and go, but

> the overarching bit that people need to hold on to—the name, the vision—can be long term. And so that's what I really had in my head when we set Maker{Futures} up. Let's get a name so we can be flexible, have different strands, decide what we need to be as we go along. But we can have some overarching branding and the website, and we can start to build up an identity with those trusting relationships, and build a *product*, I suppose, that we can be.

It is striking that their program has morphed from a feminist agenda to one that addresses inequity in resources related to social class, ageism and ableism. There is an overall respect for what children, all children, are capable of doing. Maker{Futures} Program Officer Liz Jansen explains:

> Over the past year, we've been much busier with the schools. I'm hopefully moving out to working with libraries, moving to other areas of engaging families and working with different communities. It's been much more multi-cultural, and with migrant communities, and working with children with special needs.
>
> So, when we first started, the schools we recruited were I think in the top 5-7 percent on the deprivation index. So those were the schools that we targeted. Generally, we have gone to the schools where there are high needs, particularly when it's come to funding. Other schools have paid for the project themselves to have us in. But the Flying Futures, the original maker schools, they've all come from high needs areas. Soon, I'll be (traveling) with Dr. Louise Kay in Australia doing teacher training in a wide range of schools. She's the academic. I'm the jazz hands.

Jackie points out the necessity of the documentation of their success, a mix of art and science:

> In Barnsley (a socio-economically challenged area) where we rolled out the Maker Boxes, we had 30 nurseries involved. The local authority paid for that project because they wanted it as part of their Continuing Professional Development program. And the

teachers developed a baseline assessment of the children before the project and after implementing the Maker Boxes. They went back and assessed the children's learning across a range of areas. They were particularly interested in language and literacy, and we used the (original) Maker Space Learning Framework in that project, and that quite clearly showed they really had developed their critical and creative thinking skills in quite interesting ways. And we had a lot of rich and detailed observations of children.

Through the MakEY project, that 30-month project, we did develop a range of activities and approaches that we found to be beneficial and suitable for that age range, and that allowed us to align our makerspaces' aims and goals to classroom topics—fitting in with England's curriculum. We did have some robotics, perhaps much more limited than we have now. We had some cardboard construction, but it was quite limited. We had a lot of the electronic stuff, with Playdough and setting up lights, sensor kits, and that kind of thing. . .the elements, the cardboard, the construction became much more nuanced around the kinds of things children could construct using a range of tools.

Crossing Over to the Digital

There was an intentional linking of digital literacy education to the literacy associated with words:

So, the children in these (initial) areas were all children who were struggling in areas of language and literacy, so that was really our focus. So, we did introduce this makerspace assessment learning framework which was broader, but it wasn't specifically focused on digital elements.

We did one project in a school where the children started by making theatres, puppet theatres. This is all based on the Moomin stories, because that's what the school wanted. And so, we had a puppet theatre come in and did wonderful stories about the Moomins, and then the children made their own puppet theatre. And there was electronics learning in that. They learned about

lights and lit their little puppet theatre up, and then they created puppets for their theatres based on the little Moomin characters. And so first of all, they did them in clay, and then we 3D printed them. So, they became these plastic resins. We took them into virtual reality, and they were able to create virtual stories with these resin figures.

They learned so much about materials through this. When they were doing an animated film as well, the 'eyes' kept falling off the clay puppets, but they said, 'But they don't (fall off) when we got the 3D puppet resin ones'. They were quite robust. You know that learning about materials is so important, isn't it?

So often, they are passive recipients of technology when they go on to the internet and play these more passive games. And we wanted them to see what happened when children had the opportunity to be creators in the digital world. And so, we found that using these virtual reality tools, and using the 3D printers to create characters, they took their imagination and playfulness in the storylines that they created through offline play, they took it into their online play.

They were developing the skills they needed to think: how to make a digital animation using the iPad, and read something critically, and creatively navigate the interface, and developing the skills to be able to use the touch screen interface really well, understanding what happened through space and place when you have a 3D dimension.

They used a program where you can create art, so you get some kind of tool, and with your body movements you can create images and pictures inside the virtual world. And so, it was interesting to us to see how children took their playfulness and the mark making that they had done through the story making using the analogue tools, they took that into the digital world.
Yeah, that was a fantastic project.

Changing School Culture

We speak of how the idea of maker education seems both very progressive and also very old, stretching back to nineteenth-century John Dewey,[3] to eighteenth-century Friedrich Froebel,[4] to seventeenth-century John Locke,[5] a philosophy that is also swimming against the tide of schooling as a place of paper pushing and coding. In the US, when I was growing up, there used to be a lot of handwork and building that was part of the elementary school curriculum, and then it was removed to make way for testing and homework related subjects. That was then pushed down to the preschool years where manipulatives and raw materials were taken out of many classrooms. This very hands-on approach to thinking, which makes so much sense to anyone who has spent any time with an actual child, I wondered if the schools appeared hungry for it, or are they ambivalent? Alison's enthusiasm mirrors her answer, but she shares that there are exceptions:

> They're *hungry* for it. But there is one cohort of children, or it's in that same cohort (of adults) who are running the school, or are teachers within the school, that the people seem to struggle a little bit. They really are the ones who absolutely thrive in the current school system. So, the very high achieving, mostly girls, like sitting neatly in rows, writing beautiful handwriting, like they are very, very good at what they do in the current schooling system where they are told when to write. They are told how to write. They are told when to start. They are told when to stop. They are told how many words to write. They are told where to put full stop and every bit of punctuation and things like that, and they can absolutely do that. Our program takes away those instructions and asks them to start thinking for themselves.
>
> I once had a teacher who wanted to share a significant moment—that's one of our ways we talk about what's going on in schools when they try these approaches—and she said her highest achievers, four girls who sit together at a table, this is in year two I think, they'd got this open-ended task. She said they almost collectively started *to wail*. They were so uncertain about what they had to do, how they were going to manage it; they really

> struggled. Because all of them, they had very little resilience around when suddenly things were uncertain. This was a creative project about an egg box monster or something. It was really fun, but they really struggled, initially. She found that really interesting.
>
> This was the first time in their three years of schooling that they came across something that they couldn't do, and they weren't the best at. So that was very interesting. And you can see those same four girls as teachers in schools, and even senior leaders and head teachers. They're the ones that really struggle with it because they get good reports. They get good exam results. They have quiet classrooms, and the children do as they're told. In the current system, why rock the boat? They are the cohort that have the most resistance to it. I would argue that they are the ones that need it most.

Although at first glance it looks like Maker{Futures} is an experience for the children, it is really about liberating the teachers. Louise Kay describes one particular cohort of educators:

> Even though the participants were all early years (teachers), there was still that fear of not knowing the right answer, even when you're working with three- and four-year-olds. And what the teachers actually reported when they were interviewed was that they started to understand that sometimes, well, what they were doing during making was co-constructing that knowledge with the children. And often the children would come up with the solution to the problem, and I think that was a revelation to the teachers that they didn't always need to have the right answer. They didn't have 'to be good at science' or tech, that this was just about having a go and solving the problems together.
>
> I think for me, getting it through to the teachers that it's not about the end product; that's not what's important. Coming from an early years' background, it was always process, not product, but we still fell into the trap of, you know, sometimes we'd have every single Xmas card that would look exactly the same. You know they'd all be hung up, and then I think for teachers, it is about

> what a 'good one' looks like. And it's about emulating that one, that 'good one'. It's not even a contested term, it's just 'This is what a good one looks like'. And children do try and copy that, and obviously there's a sense of frustration when it doesn't look like a 'good one'. So, I think this is a really useful way of getting the teachers and children to think about an actual process, of having a go, making something then trying to make it better.
>
> I do imagine that, especially the further up school you go, the autonomy that children have towards the end of primary school is almost zero. They can't literally pick a pencil up without being told what to do directly, which is just a tragedy as far as I'm concerned. You know, having children leave nursery being really independent, and by the time they get to Year 6, just being so reliant on the instruction and someone else telling them what they need to do, and that's the system, unfortunately.

Alison also acknowledges the damage done by the disappearance of play:

> We can see from Jackie's work, that very young children have got bags of curiosity and creative confidence, so all that we need is really there. There's a huge issue. In my own experience from my own children and being in classrooms—you can see it in the early years—that by Year 5 (fifth grade), the 10-year-olds, it's *gone*. Or it's gone in the most part. Where it's not gone is where children have got really good avenues outside of school to tinker and play with things.

Maker{Futures} highlights the necessity of having key administrators on board in order to make space for play in the curriculum. Louise has observed this in action:

> The school signs up to the Maker{Futures} program, and that's when it becomes embedded; the aim is for it to become embedded into the curriculum. But that requires senior leadership. You need the most senior leadership. You do get the lone teacher that heroically tries to implement, but it's always more difficult when you try and do it on your own.

Jackie muses:

> And I think it just takes time for teachers to see that actually they can meet the curriculum goals through this open and playful approach. They don't have to be dichotomous; those aims don't have to be dichotomous. That takes time. It takes a lot of trust, doesn't it? And you can only build that over the long term.

In the 2022/23 academic year Maker{Futures} ran 96 school workshops which reached over 4,000 children and more than 300 school staff. It is worth noting that three quarters of England's primary school teaching staff are women. Through this cohort Maker{Futures} has brought playful materials to children from a range of underserved communities, people often considered too inexperienced, or too young, for real tinkering with real tools.

Notes

1 For more on makerspaces and gender see Kylie Peppler, Anna Keune, and Naomi Thompson (2020).

2 See Alicia Blum-Ross, Kristiina Kumpulainen, and Jackie Marsh (2020).

3 John Dewey (1938).

4 Friedrich Froebel and Miriam Mathis (2024).

5 John Locke (1693). See also Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762).

5. Talking about Colonialism in the GLUE Garden

Back in the GLUE Garden, five adults are sharing an impassioned conversation: Simbi Folarin, Faith Pearson, myself, and Jermaine Buchanan and Mariyha Buchanan. The GLUE Collective has invited us to participate in a discussion of the book *Hospicing Modernity: Facing Humanity's Wrongs and the Implications for Social Activism* by Vanessa Machado de Oliveira. Jermaine and Mariyha are from a nonprofit that works with youth in Birmingham called Jam Zone. There is palpable joy in our being together, eating, laughing, and reading, even as we discuss serious subjects: racism, trauma, inequality, and the power of art, play, and rest.

Vanessa Machado de Oliveira's book addresses the intersectionality of our environmental crisis, racism, and colonialism and offers gentle ways of facilitating discussions and of checking in with one's own internalized prejudices. Yet it is a compassionate book, part memoire of Indigenous thinking and feeling, part anti-colonial guidebook. The premise is that modernity is so ill, our time on this planet is dying. Modernity needs the care of hospice, perhaps midwifery, a gentle liminality before some way else might be imagined.

The book is beloved by these artists as it elevates sensing—not just words, but sensing—in order to co-imagine a different way forward. We are asked not to fix, but to unravel, to question 'hegemonic practices, ethnocentric projections, ahistorical thinking, depoliticalized orientations, self-serving motivations, uncomplicated solutions, and paternalistic investments'.[1] Simbi had urged me to read the book when we first met in Eastbourne, and I had brought my copy with me to Birmingham. One of the chapters is called 'Surrendering Arrogance', and I am humbled that they have invited me to this complex discussion,

©2026 Anna Beresin, CC BY-NC 4.0 https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0511.05

an outsider in many ways.

Simbi shares that by providing opportunities for play—particularly for stressed-out parents of young children—that it can open up spaces for difficult dialogue for the adults. As the children are working out their concerns through play, the adults can experience a parallel process. The adults here are also in no rush to leave as they, too, find rest and companionship. The children continue to frolic around us and the adult talk turns serious. Simbi begins with a systemic view of global changes needed and invites us to wrestle with our own complicity:

> All of the systems that we currently operate within that keep us warm, fed, watered, they're all failing and they're not sustainable. The idea is that we can't escape; there's no escape from that. But how do we hold ourselves accountable? If you look at a planetary system, civilizations come and go. An unsustainable system, and it is unsustainable, it will collapse under its own weight. And what do we do with knowing that?

As we wrestle with the premise that this world that we are handing over to children is both unfixable and requires fixing, I think of this garden as a green makerspace and of Machado de Oliveira's book as a finely crafted tool. There is a tension here about conflicting aspects of time: the children's time of growing, the planet's time of viability, the time needed to make effective change. I am reminded of Jungian psychologist James Hillman, how he kept a rock on his desk, preferably one with layers, to remind him of a much longer temporality.[2] His idea is to find comfort in erosion, that somehow the crises of the day seem less unsettling when one looks at a piece of sedimentary rock. The conversation steers to rest and the tenderness of slower time. Mariyha and Jermaine's youngest child crawls onto his lap and coos, 'Share, Daddy', and Jermaine replies, 'Yes, share with Daddy'. The older children rummage through the mud kitchen and the adults rummage through the book.

Rest

Simbi addresses the intersection of rest and play, that in the tempo of our world, adults are conditioned to stop playing. She says, 'To play you have to have rest. There has to be a letting go, and that's risky as well.

There's that fear of other people's expectations'. Jermaine of Jam Zone responds:

> I think it's hard to slow that tempo down in a world of social media, where information is in bits of ten seconds, and if it's not given in 10 seconds, I'm not interested, and then it's on to the next thing. And that's obviously dangerous. And we're seeing the effects on children's attention spans. . . I think what you're saying is spot on. And I'm guilty of it. Everything has got to be go-go-go-go.
>
> I need to read everything, everything. There's no time to think, to digest it, understand it, and act upon whatever it is I'm reading or listening to. But there is that thing—if I don't get this information down today, somebody else is going to get this information, and they're going to (get it before me). I feel like, especially in Birmingham, it's very much like crabs in a bucket, and everyone's trying to get out.

Mariyha, his wife and work partner, joins in:

> That goes back to decolonizing your hopes and dreams.
> Stop. Where are you going? And why are you going there? Because if you don't know why, why you are working—got to get 4 stars, got to get more money, more money, more money—if you don't know why, then you're just another cog in the system that they've created. And I will say this with my last breath, that I think that every single person is here for a purpose. In getting to 'the top' whatever that is, we lose our actual purpose, our actual power, which is sometimes just literally being still and connecting with who we are, and where we are.
>
> I used to daydream a lot when I went to school—and you'd get, from such a young age, you'd get punished for daydreaming. You're punished for taking a kind of mental break.

Faith pauses for a moment, and the conversation tumbles forward:

> Yeah, the world is rubbish, so what do we do? We try and escape. Try and block it out. We do that scrolling thing. We work harder

> to ignore the things. It's all tricks within tricks to get to the actual truth to work out what it is that you need to do, or who you are. You really have to look inside and have a rest. You really, really do. And if the answers aren't there quick. . .

Jermaine pauses for a moment:

> But if you can understand the difference between wellness and rest, obviously you don't want to rest all the time, but recovery is a lot different than rest. And we always assume that rest means 'I've got to be in complete silence, no noise, no jobs to do', nothing like that, which is true to a point, but your recovery, it could be you going for a walk. You could be literally sitting in the garden and just having conversation and chatting, and that can revitalize you as well. We lose sight of how we can reenergize ourselves, because we just think rest has to be phones off, doors shut, kids aren't here. I'm at home. I don't need to cook. All these things. I can't rest 'til I've done all these things. And how long is it going to take you to tick off all of them boxes to be in this state of rest? 5 minutes to yourself might be all the recovery that you need.
>
> Everything starts with breath. So just centring yourself. It's a superpower, that's what we tell our kids. Everyone's got a superpower they can do right now to slow themselves down. To regulate themselves. What is it? What is it? What is it? 'Take a deep breath for four seconds'.

Faith perks up, 'Have you noticed? It's like a sneeze? When you did that, I did it. It's contagious! Laughing's contagious. Breathing's contagious'.

> I've got this contradiction, like nature's great. We all like nature. But when you're growing things, time is important. When you harvest, when you sow, things can't wait. You've got to do those things at that time, but when you're doing things like that in the community with groups of people, it changes. When the most important thing is that person's got out of bed, got on the bus, roused themselves to get to the place and their conversation, and their cup of tea is the thing. But you are in the garden and the garden's going 'Hello. Hello. Do this today'. There's the contradiction again, isn't it?

Mariyha gently offers a counterargument, 'I don't think it is a contradiction. Flow is just doing things at the right time and still being active'. I add, 'And you need people to do it with you. You can't do it by yourself'.

Big Questions

Simbi steers us into depth:

> A few weeks ago, we did an event, and we were asked to consider climate change, race and climate justice. Like, big questions, an hour and a half workshop. So, it was me and Jemima, so we just said, 'Well, we have to use the sticks'. (They laugh.) What we've observed is that, I don't know if it's an innate need to (and she gestures in rotating circles), if our hands are busy doing something (like wrapping the sticks with wool), because we have a busy mind, if we get the hands busy doing something, the mind is more able to settle and think of questions because we were doing something. And that worked really well.
>
> And again, the invitation, you didn't have to verbalize and share, but just consider your response. Yeah, just consider your response and wrap your stick, and it was really powerful, and people did want to share. But the process of wrapping the stick and the colours they were using, and with all the God-amazing stories coming out, and sharing with some of the big questions, and one of them was, 'How does art help neighbourhoods face hard things that we aren't necessarily ready to face yet?' How does art help us to do that?

I mention that it seems to me that there is a parallel here to what children are doing intuitively—you get materials, you touch them, you move things around, and you make things. And you do not know why you are doing it, and it does not matter why you are doing it. You are just doing it because it is aesthetically pleasing. And that gives the child and the adult permission to go deep sometimes, into almost a dream state where people can make or say things that are really profound for them. And sometimes that comes out in construction, and sometimes that comes out in destruction. There's so much pressure in our culture

to make official things. To make beautiful things, to make elaborate, constructive things, and sometimes you just want to unravel thread, or sort through sticks.

Simbi adds:

> And *think* with the sticks. I like that we've got such a collection that even that, by itself, it's inviting because they are colourful. Yours doesn't have to be like anyone else's, but you kind of add in. It's the community of sticks. Some now belong to this family of sticks. In some way, there's that sense of being together.

Faith emphasizes how simple this can be:

> It's a play space. What we realized was that rather than like doing activities, like a craft activity, all we had to do was put down some wool and some materials. You don't even have to just use sticks that are decorated and people can go, 'Ooh. What's this?' But now, we've got this whole collection of them. As Simbi was saying, that's really apparent—while people are there, they're resting, they're talking. They're putting their hands on the materials. They're going deep as they want to go, or not, you know. It just works really well in the space. And then, because we're in a play space, often they become play props, playthings.

The families are encouraged to take their sticks home.

Grief

Jermaine quietly says:

> I remember, I was in Year 6, age 9 or 10. I used to go to a breakfast club. And I literally remember the day it *went*—you know you can remember a story and you're playing. I remember a day when that switch just *went*. And I couldn't remember. It was a sad time for me, 'cause I remember I was there, and I went back the next day and went to the toys I was playing with before. And I sat there and just went, 'It's gone'. My imagination. It just stopped.

> I'll never forget that day. And it was so sad. I had an action man, but everything else was like an ornament—you know you create your stories and the like—and I was always creating stories and little towns underneath my bed. But that day I was like—I don't know what happened. And I really tried. So, I was like, so what do I do now?

The mood grows sombre. Mariyah speaks of carrying intergenerational grief, that her people came to the United Kingdom against their will:

> If we were allowed to be free, I wouldn't be here. I am one of the first people in my lineage to feel the pain and not be in survival mode.

Faith offers a moment of consolation: 'What you're feeling, that's the most important thing, as that is where it all connects'. Simbi, the elder, notes, 'Everything gets absorbed. The good, the bad. The ugly. Everything gets absorbed'.

They share stories of art/play projects where they were expected to work for free as a draw to bring families into shopping areas, about racism encountered, about the legacy of colonialism in the conflation of the control of bodies and the control of the land. They speak of some areas in Birmingham that were told to never have homes built on them due to the toxicity of the soil, but now have new homes built on them, with young families being none the wiser. There is a strong sense of being taken advantage of, and if only the families, the children, the workers, the artists had some rest, they could think their way out of this mess.

In one of the programs Simbi and Faith have worked with, there are play resources and a play garden, but at the end of the school day, or after the afterschool program, the gate is locked and the outside area is unavailable to the local children. There are families who live across the road from this gated resource with no safe place to play, where children play in unsafe water and rats abound. They are working to get permission to create the safety of an adventure playground on that site, so that the neighbourhood children could be welcomed, too.

Hospicing Modernity

Vanessa Machado de Oliveira writes:

> As things fall apart, for a window of time some who live at the margins will have a chance to experience a plastic form of redress as people will seek out their knowledge—but only to consume it. This consumption of marginalized knowledge is driven by a search for 'answers' for how to either reform modernity or build a prefabricated alternative to it. . .Beyond the fact that these marginalized knowledges will be selectively consumed, it is also important to note that not everything at the margins offers something new or generative.
>
> Before anything different can happen, before people can sense, hear, relate, and imagine differently, there must be a clearing, a decluttering, an initiation into the unknowable; and a letting go of the desires for certainty, authority, hierarchy, and of insatiable consumption as a mode of relating to everything.[3]

We discuss the selection that Simbi has chosen called 'co-sensing with radical tenderness'.[4] I hold that phrase in my mind, 'co-sensing with radical tenderness'. She has invited us to each pick a quote that speaks to us, that lands with us, and to share it with each other. The section comes from a portion of the book called 'gesturing towards a decolonialized future', and I am struck by the physicality in the language: 'sensing', 'landing', 'gesturing'. These are not just mere abstractions, a rare chance to get back to the adult version of physically playing with ideas in this still too isolated post-Covid world.

Mariyha begins:

> The one that literally just shouted at me is 'Feel your entanglement with everything, including the ugly, the broken, the messed up'. I'm obsessed with the idea of interconnectedness.

Jermaine says that every single one is resonating with him. The group laughs, smiling at his eagerness. Simbi invites him to pick one. In his excitement, he picks two.

> 'Integrate with a wider metabolism, with a much longer temporality than your human body'. Because in my work, as a trainer, I'm always trying to work down to what is your 'why'? Your why is getting you through the snowy days and rainy days. On that road to change this is a necessary step. How do we function? How do we process? Repeating, refining that process, going again.

His second quote:

> 'Stop fearing fear, uncertainty, and emptiness'.
> I think of fear as False Evidence of Acting Real. We have to live outside our comfort zone. But if you're outside, you can feel lost, but this is only temporary.

Faith, an artist who works with community gardens, blurts out that it was the first one that spoke to her straight away, and not just because it was first:

> 'Listen to non-human authorities and care about your relationship with them'. That's got weight to it. That's surfacing more and more in what I do. The knowledge I've got I haven't learned from a book. The knowledge I've learned from just being outside; I've learned from other children when I was small. I'm curious, but I'm not a scientist.
>
> I've fallen in love with the slugs. I have this little book by a scientist. I know them, the slugs, but why are they there? Everybody's got a purpose, even a slug. What happens as a result? I slow down. To slow down is to focus on the world in front of you. That's important, you take your time. Number one, it slows you down. Two, you're getting to know the world around you.
>
> This community program I'm working on, everything comes out of the shop. 'Compost? You buy it!' But I say, 'We're not going to buy compost. We're going to make it'. 'Make it? Everything comes from Amazon!' How do we change that culture within the culture? I really, honestly feel like we started a journey, with real baby, baby steps, but it's hard work. But worthwhile things are hard work.

Mariyha suggests:

> I feel like the first step to changing anything, the first step in the world is to change yourself. To embody that yourself. You have to set an example. The fact that you're doing something differently changes things as well. I think that's important to say and to hear that that's enough. I think that's really important for kids to see that as well, that you're embodying the change you want to see in the world.

Jermaine adds, 'We're always planting seeds, aren't we?' I wonder if the question is rhetorical or not, if it is a polite Britishism.

Mariyha responds,

> That's a ripple that goes out into the bigger world. It can be frustrating sometimes to create that big change. But we overlook that stepping differently creates a frequency that is real.

I am invited to share the quote that speaks to me. I offer, 'Increase care in proportion to risk. Do it with humility, generosity, and reverence'. Simbi says that the invitation is to sit with it over time, say over a month, and carry it with you.

'What's yours Simbi?' Everyone wants to know.

Simbi reads, 'Collectivize your heart so it breaks open and not apart. Let it hold all the pain of—and in—the world, without being numbed or overwhelmed'.

> That's the challenge that we carry, knowing that you can. I like the 'collectivize' because things seem too much to hold, but not collectively. Collectively you can. Individually you'd be a sopping mess. To be open to what's coming today, without being numb or too overwhelmed, that's coming back to something we can practice together.

I ask how do we hold the big change and the small change at the same time?

'To know they are one and the same', Mariyha says.

> The big vision is the small vision. The small change is the big change, and the big change is the small change. There's actually

> no difference. And that allows us to rest as well. When you're with people who are also passionate about the community, you can just keep going and keep going, and it feels like there's always things to fix, there's always more work to do. Whereas, if we just honour the small changes as well, we allow ourselves to rest and go a bit slower really.

Faith looks at the ground, 'We had hope during the pandemic, but after, it was back to doing business as usual. And there was hope in lockdown for a different way. Wouldn't it make sense to do everything outdoors after that?'

Simbi acknowledges the difficulty of 'sitting with tension that is to be sat with', and asking of ourselves: What is ours to do? What spaces do we hold (as makers of spaces) in this poly-crisis of basic human needs? Faith suggests that 'We need to learn from children'. Simbi nods, 'Children fail so well. How do we support children and each other to fail well?'

They speak of their experiences with racist organizations, of an inability for many organizations to hold difficult spaces for discussion, and of the discomfort in knowing there often is unwritten permission required in order to simply speak. They say the silencing is eerily echoed in most schools, and that the tempo of education is really off. They wonder aloud if schools will always reinforce the most stressful aspects of human practice, but acknowledge that there are schools that do understand play, and that it is even possible to change school culture. For this group, the getting rid of arbitrary boundaries at school reflects the getting rid of arbitrary boundaries that separate people outside of school.

Care Taking

Faith and Simbi offer a vision of culture change:

> That OPAL[5] space, Simbi, that we went to. You know where we did the training? I've never been to a school where you just got that adventure playground vibe, and it was a lovely school site to start off with. They had all this woodland area right down the bottom, and all that they did was like a cultural change. Like the whole school didn't have zones, like 'This is the Year

One Playground'. They played out altogether, and they were all allowed to just move freely between them, and it was just like, that's as simple as that.

And the site it was going on was just beautiful. And within the space there was big play happening. They were still playing football, but there was little things like the weaving. There was a little corner where there was one or two children just quietly doing something—and right down the end where it was just like mud. They got this new, big bath with a water supply, and obviously tubes and everything everywhere. It was just really, ahh (and she closes eyes and sighs).

Well, that was the other thing about that playground, where you know who was the most excited? In that OPAL school playground? The caretaker!

Simbi The caretaker.

Faith I said, 'Oh, you're a playworker in disguise aren't you?' And he went (bashfully) 'Yeah'.

(They all laugh.)

Anna Pardon my American ignorance, but what is the role of the caretaker?

Faith The janitor.

Anna That's funny, at the makerspace, the janitors were also the most excited. The teachers were nervous, but the janitors were very excited about it.

Simbi If you don't have an excited janitor, you'll have a very challenging time at any site. That's how powerful these janitors are—they kind of just make things work, or not. (We all laugh now.)

Faith 'You can come through here'. They'll unlock the door for you. 'You want these off cuts of wood? And these pallets?' (We laugh some more.)

Simbi It's so important and adaptive, the outdoor space, because all the children can be in it together. I'm thinking of my grandchildren, you know when you separate the different age groups on different playgrounds, because you have lots of siblings at school as well. So that relationship of care and being able to access siblings, that can be reassuring. And even if it's not siblings, just the relationship of care that can be weaved within the playground.

The children are getting sleepy after being fed and Simbi seems pulled in two directions, wanting to pack up the food she has brought, the loose arts, the small tent, and at the same time to comfort her grandchild who is particularly spent.

We say, 'You rest, Simbi'. 'We'll break camp. You rest'. And we do and she does.

On one of our many train rides to London, my copy of *Hospicing Modernity* lay open on my husband's seat tray. He was interested in it, as he had worked in hospice and currently helps people as a grief counsellor. A young man across the aisle introduces himself and says that he is reading the same book. Might we sit together and talk about it together over the next two hours? He works with urban schools and gardens...

Notes

1 Vanessa Machado de Oliveira (2021), 78-79.

2 See James Hillman (1996).

3 Ibid. (2021), 235.

4 Ibid. (2021), 57-61.

5 OPAL is an organization that supports play programs in British school playgrounds. See https://outdoorplayandlearning.org.uk

6. '100 Languages Spoken Here': The Playground as Sanctuary

Pitsmoor sits in Burngreave, a contested area in Sheffield, where the staff and board members of the Pitsmoor Adventure Playground often discuss the racial and ethnic diversity of the place, noting that 100 different languages are spoken on the playground. They attribute it to the fact that Sheffield is an official Sanctuary City, known for welcoming migrants. Some of the staff members are multi-lingual, and these discussions happened in the shadow of anti-immigrant protests in recent months.

Board member, government official, and former manager of the playground, Patrick Meleady started working there fifty years ago as a playworker when the area was particularly challenged by gang violence.

> And that's why the cohesion angle is really important. The inclusion and the celebration of different cultures in that particular facility is really important. They would tell us where they are from and what we were celebrating. You've got Eid. You've St. George's Day. You've got St. Patrick's Day. You've got Easter. You've got May Day. All of these types of events are celebration days. Like I said, now you've got football with the European nations which is a big thing. You could be having football competitions, or art, or an activity to celebrate that. Celebrating Eid, celebrating your Christmases, Chinese New Year and the cultural festivals, street parties, closing off the road and reclaiming the streets, and then working closely with the partners in the cemetery. For us, it was about creating opportunities for the children to have a childhood, because a lot of adults didn't have that opportunity. The children are trying to teach and encourage the parents how to play.

©2026 Anna Beresin, CC BY-NC 4.0 https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0511.06

Patrick speaks of the web of services that were made available at the playground:

> I was quite interested in the Burngreave location of making sure that children were safe and got fed. All the children got fed and accessed quality open access too. And you've got that program of helping impoverishment in Burngreave of making sure the children have coats. Making sure children have shoes. Because whilst you shouldn't be dealing with that, it's a necessity to do so, and you deal with them issues straight away.
>
> Everyone's got something to offer. That's what I've learned over the years. Everybody offers something. It's that one unique space (in Burngreave) where everybody comes together, in that adventure playground. You go elsewhere, people are separate. Separate services. And they stay within their own groupings. That's quite unique, and it's quite sad really for other places. It burdens me, really, in my heart. I wish we would make more opportunities where people would contribute. They have parallel lives. People like the idea of living in a multiple heritage area, but if you go to a party, or you go to a wedding, or you go to a funeral, it's only a handful of people. They're all living separate lives. Which I find odd when you go to a place like Pitsmoor Adventure Playground because there everyone is together. I don't get it.
>
> It was very rare to have problems (on the playground). It was never a noticeable thing with us. We were working collectively on it. And the thing is, it's an outlet for some of the children who have got caring responsibilities and large families. Sometimes you know you could get 100 people and there would be only be, say, 11 families. They're big families. They come from all across the world.

Steve Pool, board member, parent, and sculptor who has designed many of the playground's fixtures, looks at the larger power dynamics in the city:

> They're often in areas with perceived social issues, so often they get funded and supported maybe because there aren't any

> safe outdoor places for children to play, or places perceived to be safe for children to play. So, they open an adventure playground to give risky play in a safe environment. If you look at where they are, where the new ones are, they're often put in places with bad reputations in terms of crime and antisocial behaviour.

Anna Or on land that no developer wants.

Steve Yeah, land that doesn't get developed.

A Children's Space

Zaq, playworker, talks about the challenges of different generations being on site:

> You've seen the (teen) boy M.? Obviously, he was a child who grew up on the adventure playground. He went away (to his country of origin) and he came back. He's one of the older ones, and we tried over the years to keep hold of the children who have a deep interest in the playground, or a deep connection with the playground, and keep them on as volunteers. And we've helped them in different ways as well, getting them on certain courses, certain training, or whatever else.
>
> Since Covid, adults in Pitsmoor really struggled. They were being locked away for all that time, and then going through lots of issues at home with partners, the children, and whatever else. We found we were dealing with adults a lot, and they were taking up our time. And we're not there for them. We're fundamentally an adventure playground; we're here to help them, the children. Don't get me wrong, we have helped adults, but we don't want that to be the main thing that takes up our time, you know what I mean? It's been beautiful, the kids just being able to play—I watch the children play in a completely different way when parents aren't there.

To counterbalance the adult presence, the staff instituted 'No Grown-Up Wednesdays'. Sarah Truman, Playwork Manager, and Board Chair

Yanina Koszalinski explain.

Sarah begins:

> We did feel that it was really important, especially as more, and more, new families were coming, or equally, families that came a lot were a bit territorial almost, that it was their space. So, we were trying to readdress the balance and say, 'Actually, all this area belongs to the children', because the numbers were rising. That's just the way it's gone.

Yanina adds:

> We have to look at the community need. So, we can't ban parents from coming on completely, because there are so many extended families here, and the way in the families the older children look after the younger ones, sometimes they've not felt free because they've got to watch the younger ones. But in their community that's how they've done things, so it's difficult for them to say no to that. So, in a sense by having those (new) Wednesdays with no parents, it gives those older children that opportunity to do the things without the danger of knocking the little ones over.

Sarah And having to look over the younger sibling.

Yanina It was interesting, when we first did it, last month of the last summer we started doing it, we had all kinds of excuses from parents, of why they had to come on the playground. 'I just have to go to the toilet'. 'Oh, can I just have a drink of water?' 'I've I just dropped a—'

Sarah Or, 'Can I just wait ten minutes?'

Yanina Every excuse. It was really quite funny to watch, the answers they came up with. But the staff did a very good job in, not forcing them out, but encouraging them, walking them. I've noticed this, staff talking to them, but also walking them back down the hill to the gate. So then, we did have a group of parents who went and brought garden chairs—

Sarah And sat at the bottom of the drive—

Yanina In the space down there. (She giggles.)
But we stopped it over winter because of dark nights, and we've started again, but we haven't had the same thing from the parents.

Sarah No. Total acceptance now. And the children helped navigate that, because they would say, 'We don't need adults to play'. 'Oh, have a rest. You can have a rest while we're here'. And we actually have about five families that joke about it, 'See you later; I'll have rest', and the children play. It's one of those things again where you sort of step out, have a go, watch, observe, and you're quickly picking up your positives. Though it's not easy to navigate that with people who question it.

Yanina underscores the decision to keep the focus on the children at the playground:

> It was a decision very early on, because in this area, not just round the playground, but in other parts of this area as a whole, there was some quite serious drug dealing and pulling younger kids in, which we now call the grooming bit, and getting into gangs and things. And I know from when my son-in-law was working here, one of the issues they had was older ones coming on site and preventing the younger ones from actually playing. And then, they'd be smoking weed and stuff like that, and not taking any notice.
>
> There had been stuff like that, antisocial behaviour, and it did lead out on the street to a number of murders through gang fighting and drug dealing, drug wars. I think the youngest one was 12 years old. And he'd been on the playground earlier on that day, but where he got murdered was on another site close by. So, we were very conscious. We didn't want to bring that back here. And when the playground was being rundown by the council, there was more drug dealing taking place. And it still does happen from the local dealers, but they tend to avoid being around when we're open. It happens in the cemetery more, by the side of us,

> and round the back pass, at the back of the playground.
>
> That's why we cut the vegetation down, so we can see that path because they don't want to be seen. So, if they feel they're being seen, it prevents them from coming on here. Rather than say, 'No you can't come on', it was to make it more for the younger end. And then those older youths won't be here for what they want to be getting up to. It won't be cool to be on here. They won't want to be on here, rather than saying, 'Well, no, you can't come on'.

Zaq shares how they found ways to allow the older ones to attend if the playground wasn't too busy.

> The older kids, they might come, and sometimes we won't send them away. You know in the winter time, when it's a little bit more quiet, and I've had groups of teenagers come on and be like, 'Oh come on Zaq, can't we just come on for a little bit?' And I'm thinking, 'The site is quiet. It's dark. It's dingey. There's hardly anyone here'. If you just want to go on the kick and play football, or just sit around the fire for a while, I'm not going to turn them away. You know what I mean? I'll use my own judgment on the situation. But if it's super busy, and we've got 150 people on there, and you've got a group of 15-year-olds that want to come on, it's probably, 'Not today, guys'.
>
> Because of the area, and the reputation of the area, children from deprived backgrounds who come from really deprived families really, come from tough backgrounds and stuff, and those kids could kind of be a little bit aggressive. And it wasn't a problem for us dealing with it, especially us workers, as me and Julius were obviously a lot younger at that time as well. We had a connection with those kids and whatever else, but, when we looked at the dynamic at the site, they would just monopolize the whole site to the point where it would make it not very enjoyable for younger children. And we kind of said that we wanted to focus on the younger ones, really. We felt that they got more out of the adventure playground.

Steve Pool reminisces about Pitsmoor playground's riskier history.

> So, in terms of the history of the playground, it was our 50th anniversary a few years ago, in 1971 it was set up. It was set up by local parents just doing stuff in the summer with kids, and that happened for two, three years. And then it became more formalized, and in the mid-'70s it was funded and taken on by the local authority. So, when I arrived in '94, it kind of went through cycles, cycles like with any provision like that. There was a group of kids and they'd get really involved, and they'd grow up and move on, and there's another cycle. There are younger kids there, but it's a cyclical provision. It's very local, around local kids. We used to call them 'The Adventure Kids', the kids who went to the adventure playground all the time. There was nowhere near as many kids who used it then who use it now.
>
> It would be like a little cohort of kids who would go every day, and in the summer more kids would go. I think it probably looked more like a traditional British adventure playground, big structures, bigger structures made out of telegraph poles, more kind of risky swings. Scruffier, in a nice way. More like the Big Swing. Bigger, taller structures in the mid '90s, but it was a series of cuts and austerity, that meant it wouldn't get replaced. It was pretty scruffy.
>
> The council paid playworkers. The council would have full-time playworkers. There were four adventure playgrounds and there would be a department in the council that revolved around play. And the staff wouldn't be dedicated to Pitsmoor; they'd move around adventure playgrounds. And you had a kind of turnover because people would come, and it would be a stepping stone to another job. So, you'd do a couple of years and then move on. It looked very similar in lots of ways, but it was quite different. The local authority aspect of it meant you didn't have to apply for funding, so you could concentrate on the play offer, and with it comes issues of motivation, and staff and engagement of the community, and services. Pros and cons to both systems, really.

The Playground's Longevity

What is the secret to Pitsmoor's longevity, given that so many adventure playgrounds across England have been closed? There were several more in Sheffield in years past, and now, officially just, two. Besides being a sculptor, Steve also has a PhD from Sheffield University, and I read his dissertation with care as it documented aspects of the playground's design history. He thoughtfully responds:

> I suppose the kind of need is there. There's a will and a need. If I was doing this as a social scientist, trying to think of the practical things that are a part of its longevity, Burngreave, I don't know if you came across it, but Burngreave had a program called New Deal for Communities that was between 1996 and 2007. And it was a big investment in money, and it was a new Labour flagship regeneration program, which was very unsuccessful in many, many ways, but it did build the capacity of a small group of people to understand the bigger systems of funding. I cut my teeth on that politically, as an activist. And other people did that, too. And that brought in a chunk of investment which allowed some work in terms of making the site safer, so the kick pitch (for football), and the lighting, and the building had a bit of work done. It wasn't a vast amount of money, about 180,000 pounds, and I think that intervention in the early 2,000s had a big impact on the ability for people to see outside the very local, the hyper local, to draw in funding.
>
> And then key individuals, I think that was massively significant in the fact that we were able to survive austerity. We just managed to survive the cuts because the council really wanted it to be closed down. They came and started sawing down equipment with a chainsaw; and we all sat there. They came unannounced. They came two people and they chopped down two pieces of equipment that would have lasted three or four years. It didn't need to come down. Then, working closely with the local authority, getting them on our side, and the capacity started drawing the funding in. It was a significant amount of money, it only cost about 140-150,000 a year, a significant amount of money to draw in.

> I should mention Yanina, 'cause she was consistent and comes from that history of play and activism community work, that experience on the management committee. I think, now that we have Sarah's energy and the staff's energy is a significant part of its surviving. The area, coming together through play, families from massively different and diverse backgrounds, it seems a need. And there's a good, not vast, but a good amount of volunteers who do quite a lot. So those things, the history of it, the fact that there's lots of people who played there as kids, who still live in the area who have families, and without the commitment of five or six key individuals, I don't think it would be here. I suppose that's a worry in terms of sustainability. You've got to get the next five or six of those key people. But, at the minute, we're fine. I don't know if you know, but we got the national lottery money, which is thousands, five years of funding.

I share with Steve that while I was at the playground, I had chatted with three mothers in their forties who had grown up playing there. They said, 'We remember the castle. Where's the castle?' The present slide was not there when they were little; there had been different kind of slide structure. They had brought their kids who were four and six to Pitsmoor for the first time and had not been back since their own childhoods. Meanwhile, the four-year-old was going down the big slide with abandon, headfirst, feetfirst, repeatedly flying down the slide. And the mums wanted to organize to go down the slide, and two were very fearful. As we spoke, one of them did it with gusto, and the second and the third did it after much encouragement while one held a camera.

Steve smiles, as he had built that castle and had designed the partially built platforms that now stand in its place. The pirate ship he built still stands, along with its flag and plank. The staff knew that he built the ship in honour of his father, and that he has personally reinforced many of the wooden structures scattered throughout the playground, an inverted form of piracy where labour is sneakily added after hours.

Julia Sexton, board member speaks about the stability, not of the wooden structures, but of the staff.

> And that (funding) is something that makes a big difference because it is expensive to run, and it's not relying on parental

payment. So that makes it much more stable for the staff and consistent for the children, which is really good. But it's always an ongoing thing. And there's almost no guarantee how well you will do in your funding bid.

But people have got families and bills to pay. It's not good to say to people, the staff, 'Well, we've only got funding for three more months, and then we might need to let you go'. That's not really good. And when I first got involved in Pitsmoor that's how it had been, kind of run down, with the council and their reducing their involvement. So, I was pretty sure Zaq or Julius, two of the current playworkers, were involved in that. And they will say that they used to go, but they would only go on certain days for certain hours, and it wasn't that sense of belonging that everybody had, and that's problematic. So yes, it's really, really good, and we're happy that they got their funding. It's great.

Patrick Meleady reflects on the neighbourhood's challenging history:

Overall, the area was made up of Caribbean and Pakistani and white working-class children, young people and families. It was quite violent in and around the area, but we never had any issues, worries, or problems on the playground. We just ran it really well as a group of people. That went on for five years, as I said, and then after these roles, I went in to work in local government, and led on community safety and policing, and some other stuff.

I was at home one day, many years later, in 2007, 2008, was home watching the news, and across the news channel on the TV, a 15-year-old boy shot dead in Sheffield. I phoned up work and asked if they'd like me to come in and they said, 'Yeah, we'd love you to come in'. I went to work, and this 15-year-old boy had been assassinated in Burngreave across from the playground. They shot at this boy three times, chased him across the park and assassinated him. There was a problem with gangs and guns and issues, and we needed to get some interventions in place. So, I got tasked with the responsibility to try to lead on redressing this with some workers in the same place as the families in their locality, and I did that in the part of Burngreave where the violence was

at its most, across the main road. The main road is a big division that was like a postcode war: S3. S4. They were following what goes on in America; it was that type of approach.

So, we put some interventions in place, and the murders stopped. The shootings stopped, and we put on positive activities for young people, and we used play as a vehicle for that basis. We also developed and delivered some hip hop shows, doing it with a (real) sound system. People who were reflective of that community were able to engage with them. It was the antidote to what was going on. So, it went really well. It was a model of best practice. Had two home secretaries came out to look at what we had developed and were doing, praising it and saying, 'Yeah, we need to do more of this'. Then people like me do what we do, get on with the business, and get on with the next role.

And from there, I went on to look at something else, but in 2011 was the start of talk about austerity kicking in and a change of government, and cascading down was talk that the government were not going to be supporting an adventure playground. The leisure centres and even the libraries were closing down. I was horrified and thinking to myself 'You can't do that to communities who are so disadvantaged'. You know, education is really important, and especially informal education for some people. And I know that the playgrounds provided a lifeline. You know they do save lives and provide a whole range of services discreetly, without stigmatizing and labelling people.

So, I was asked to attend a meeting in Burngreave, and I didn't want to go. They said to me: 'There are two playgrounds. The one in Sharrow (Highfield) has a good strong base with families using it who are professionals, educated types of people, in professions like social workers, probation workers. People in authority who can shape it, and keep it going, but in Burngreave, we have nobody'.

I said, 'I owe you to come to one meeting, and that's all', and as I'm coming up the path, my wife said to me, 'Don't get involved, Patrick, because I know what you're like'. I said to her, 'I said

I'd go to one meeting'. And as I was going up the path, there on the right-hand side there was, you know, the metal fence beside the sand pit? I looked in, and it was like children in a refugee camp. Skin and bones. Rags. Very, very disadvantaged and in a bad way, and I thought, 'You don't need to go abroad and go to do a VSO and help other underserved countries. It's here. It's on our doorstep'. You know the term they used to use was a so-called 'third world country'? It was that type of thing. Failure to thrive. They looked scrawny. Wasn't eating properly. There was no clothes hardly on them. So, I came home and started crying, and said to my partner, 'We've got to do something'. She said, 'I knew you were going to do this' because she works in a similar sort in an educational field. 'I knew you were going to get involved, and I can't believe it'. And I said, 'It's our responsibility'.

So, we worked closely with a committee and created a CIC company, a community interest company, and I was doing that on a voluntary basis. I had a job elsewhere. Well, I was spending more time securing the playground for the children and families. It was overtaking my life. I was talking to the ex-home secretary and he was saying, 'Well, we need to find some money to get you to do it properly'. And I said, 'Well I don't particularly want it. I'm an old Billy now. I've not got the appetite for it really. I don't really want to do it'. Well, the Council argued there were no playworkers, no qualified playworkers to run the provision. So, the place was left to rack and ruin and run down. It was really, really poor. So, they had to reemploy us. Without the University of Sheffield, we wouldn't have been able to really kickstart some of the work that we did.

A lot of young families was encouraged to come on in to play in Burngreave, and that was a conscious decision, where at Highfield, they didn't have the problems that we in Pitsmoor Adventure Playground had in those days when we set out. Obviously, we had this boy that had been shot dead across from us; he'd been chased from across the road. Whatever the circumstances or situation in relation to that, the area was quite violent. We needed to make sure that we created a welcoming,

safe, secure environment for children and their families to use. That there was clear rules and boundaries in it. It was a conscious decision really. But I would review it, and change it, and adapt it to suit. Because we started out that way doesn't always mean we keep doing it the same way. But people can get caught in the routine, So, that's the way to review, and that's the way it's going to be and it should be.

There's a parallel process going on, that I was encouraging the staff to understand, to learn from, because all the playwork for me, like you look at all the developments with the adventure playground people—providing people with opportunity to come together socially in physical activity, and through intellectual stimulation, to be creative—the emotional wellbeing in support of each other. The peer mentoring. The peer-to-peer support. The family support in looking after their children together, to taking them out for day trips. There are a number of things that take place, all a by-product of the play.

In the past, the play and the playwork was often seen as an add on. A bit of money would come, and it would be, 'Oh yeah, we're doing sport', whereas only a bit of money would be in for play by the funders. Or we would get a problem with crime, and the funders would say 'We'll put a bit of money into the playground'. Now, the playground is there on its own merits. It's the playground, and they are saying, 'We want to work with the playground,' and then everything else is the partnership.

I think there's a lot of people like Steve, and Yanina, and Julia Sexton and board members that you don't see that are quite active in specific roles, like front of house. There's a lot of people. There's all the volunteers. And there are counsellors and MPs, the support from local businesses, everybody seemed to get behind a particular resource in the area and value it. And that wasn't always the case, but it's because of the collective work that we've all done, and it's why for the next 20 years, it will be there. It's because of all the people, not because a few people have taken responsibility for a short period of time.

Yanina Koszalinski reflects on her own involvement in preventing Pitsmoor's closure:

> I had news from someone who lived on the road here, as I supported her after school club. And she said, 'Have you heard the news? That the Council wants to close the playground?' So, she said we have a campaign group to try and save it.
>
> I would say 2011ish, might be 2010, I joined the campaign group. First meeting I went to, Patrick Meleady, he turned up. He had heard and joined the campaign. It was his first meeting. So that pulled us all together with all the local people trying to save it through the campaign. They were trying to close Highfield as well. But for Highfield, they wanted the community to take it on. They weren't really offering that to us, because they felt this site wasn't suitable. It was out of the way. It was hard to find. It was run down. They were more likely to close here than Highfield.[1]
>
> So, we tried to save it and run some joint meetings with Highfield group, saving theirs. That's where the split happened. In Highfield area, they had Sharrow Community Forum as a big regeneration project. And their employed staff did lots of things, and they agreed to take it on as a legal entity. We didn't have anything like that in this area. So, there was quite a while where people in our group thought, 'No, we can't run it. It needs to be the council that runs it'. But then, there were some of us, and some of us as qualified playworkers at different levels, and quite high levels, and we thought, 'If we can't run an adventure playground, then nobody can'.
>
> So, we kind of had to say to ourselves, 'We have to put our money where our mouth is', and we thought we would look at taking it on. But because of the experience we've got, we felt that we knew how difficult running and managing a place like this can be from a legal point of view, from all different aspects. So, we were quite challenging with the council, when they were very blasé, with, 'Oh it costs this much to run, and that's all you have to do'. And we thought, 'Well, what about this?' And we put a whole load of questions to them. And the site was run down

because they actually let it get run down. So, we were on about the equipment not being up to standard. It wasn't being staffed properly. Numbers had dropped off because there wasn't much continuity going and, often it was closed, open, closed with a staff that weren't qualified in running an adventure playground. Things like that. So, we initially looked at working alongside the council, and we wanted to show that it could be possible.

So, we set up a number of what we call Family Fun Days, all of us campaign group and us workers organized those days, but working alongside their staff, and showed how good the site was for being an adventure playground. So, we did that, and we managed to get a bit of funding that enabled us to employ two people, and one of them was Patrick, to look at the work needed to get this site up and running, what we needed to do to develop it. And that happened for a few months. And in that time, we started negotiations for the lease.

We got pro bono legal advice from a very experienced person within the voluntary sector and working in communities. And we nit-picked every single clause in the lease (and she laughs) and we wanted clarification on every single thing. What does this mean? We were able to negotiate a lump sum of money to address problems for the first year, and an agreement that any major problems, like the boiler breaking down, or stuff like that, that the council would repair it. We wanted them to hand it to us with everything working properly, and everything up to scratch and up to standards. So that negotiation took a long time, because before a lease they have, is it 'heads of terms'? Something like that. It's a phrase, a legal phrase, and it sets out everything that had to be looked at before the lease. So, we did that; it took a long time. We thrashed out every point. And they wrote the lease, and we did it all again because some of the lease didn't match the heads of terms. It was, probably 2010, because I know it took quite a few years to work through all that, before we felt we were confident before taking it on, and we knew exactly what we were walking into. And that's how I got involved.

> So, we were a campaign group, and we had to take on the lease, we had to become a registered charity, because you had to do that. So, while that was happening, we had to then set up as a charity, and everything like that. And we became trustees. And it was after we formed that, we had to name a chair, and I got pushed. (She laughs.) You know when they say, you know, 'Step forward'? Well, everybody stepped back except me.
>
> And that's how I got directly involved. But we had to be, at that point, very hands on as trustees, because various jobs needed to be done.

Julia Sexton was recruited to the board and describes a similar sense of somehow being courted:

> The council was reducing its involvement in the play projects, and just before then, Perry Else and I had done some (playwork) training. It was one about risk. And I sort of reengaged my involvement there, and then one of the people that I knew was saying, 'Well, we're looking for trustees. Would you be interested?' Well, they always trick you, because they say, 'Well, could you come along to a meeting?' And then, you go to a meeting and then like, 'Oh, now I'm part of this'.

Sarah Truman, the Playwork Manager, speaks of her journey to the playground as an outsider:

> When I landed here, I sort of promised myself that I'd give myself six weeks just to get to know Pitsmoor, Burngreave, which I think now, set me up for the rest of my life, because I walked it. I cycled it. I bused it. I did everything, and I couldn't believe how I got that connection with the whole of the city, which I never before either experienced with a city. I quickly realized that there were little pockets here and there with a really strong community spirit.
>
> So, when I first landed, I went off and just signed myself up for six, seven courses to feel like I belonged somewhere. I did a community health and well-being one, which was awesome, because it was my first instance of learning alongside all these different cultures. And I think the thing I took from that was, we

> were all like fish out of water, together, which was a lovely place to start. Nobody could speak the other person's language. We were all at different levels and abilities and attachments to Sheffield.
>
> We moved the family business back over to Sheffield, and I ended up living on this street, so I keep looking over my shoulder thinking, 'There's some fun going on over there'. And I think as years went on, just my whole understanding and appreciation of play, and it really did change my perspective, my lens.
>
> My brother was actually coming and doing pop-up, voluntary, mad painting days, all sorts, and he'd say, 'Just come along'. And I think I just sat on the grass, not an hour, not even brave enough to join in with it, but watching the whole world go by. I thought, 'What a beautiful place'. I just felt like I'd come home. Just the mess you could do. The noise you could make. The height you could be. It's everything, and I thought, 'I just love it here'. So, I thought I'd put myself forward to just do some voluntary slots. Those three days, that was me sold. Although I'd be running that (other) after school club for about ten years, I said to Patrick one day, not understanding anything about the charitable business, funding, anything, I just said, 'I want to come and work here, and if you give me as little as 12 hours, I'll pack that job in.'
>
> Somehow something happened, because by that September, they actually said, 'We've got you 15 hours'. So, I packed the job in. Never looked back. Never looked back. And it's been so such an experience. Life changing. I think those things coupled together, the real passion for understanding, appreciation and respect for this beautiful community that embraced me, with nothing or anything. And I just merrily blended in with everyone and then sorted it all. I experienced the joy of play and everything. The risky play. The open access. It was all the things that I was missing in the before and after school club, so I thought I was in heaven. And eight years later, still feeling like that.

There is much ethnographic caution about placing a community's positive story within a negative one, and one person I spoke with had concerns about potentially romanticizing Burngreave's complex history.

The success of the playground is that it is a quality offering, no matter the challenges, and it can stand next to the very finest of children's programs. Julia Sexton sees room for both:

> I think it needs to be authentic. Pitsmoor Adventure Playground is situated within a changing, troubled, often challenging environment. That's part of it. It is a success story. But it is a success story because of all the different entangled elements, and that's situated within the context that it's in. Other play projects have been less successful for different reasons. So, it's very difficult for outsiders to pinpoint it. It needs to recognize the deficits, as well as the positives to tell the true story. It's easy for us to always present the positives and say, 'Well, yes, whilst that's negative, this is always really positive'. But that's not realistic; it's not authentic. That's something that I think playworkers ought to own a bit more.
>
> We often encounter a hierarchy where, maybe education is the way forward and then child care is the next, and then *way* below it is the playwork approach. Whereas we would want to address that. So instead of trivializing a centre that focuses on play, we would say, 'Well actually, this is the space where children can be. They can be themselves, and we as playworkers, we are supporting that, offering them opportunities and choices'. Whereas, they may not encounter that in a lot of the other centres, in fact, in all of the other environments that they are in.
>
> And each adventure playground is going to be unique, because it reflects, or it should reflect, the community that it's based in. So, we've had funding in the past to quick-build staffed adventure playgrounds. And it was sort of 'Rocket into Rotherham; put this equipment here'. Rocket into somewhere else. And in many of them, there was no consideration of maintaining it in any form. And some of them have died the death because it wasn't suited to the particular community. Community cohesion is a really big part of it.

The trauma associated with the early days of the playground comes up again and again, passionately repeated like all difficult stories. Patrick

Meleady circles back to violent imagery softened through collective action, a tale of playground survival and community change:

> The council approached me and said that Pitsmoor's (playground) has been closed for three months, and asked me, 'Would you reopen it?' It had closed because there was two women trapped in the toilet, a bloke held a knife to their throat, and so they asked if I would be willing to reopen it with a couple of other people as support. So, I thought long and hard about it, and I thought, 'Yeah, let's do it', and that's what I did. I opened it up with the two workers.
>
> It was an interesting time. The first day we were there, a person was shot in the shoulder, off the site up the road. I think it was around 1994. So, I got a call from my partner who came to collect me, and I said, 'We're in trouble with this. I don't know how we'll get through this. Something bad's gone on'. The children were all running down the hill as we were closing. The playground was open round 10:30 to round 6, and this was on the first day.
>
> Anyway, I managed to get the children off the site, to go to anywhere they needed to, with myself and the two colleagues safeguarding them, after which in the community I was waved at by what was described to me by local community members to be the 'big men' in the community. And I approached them to say that I would not tolerate any violence or aggression in or near or around Pitsmoor Adventure Playground, and that I would do everything in my power and influence to ensure that no child or their family members using the playground would be harmed, or put at risk, or in harm's way whilst I was managing the provision.
>
> I told them that I expected safe passage for the children and families and assurance that violence and aggression around the playground and surrounding areas would cease and desist, and I requested that my position and my intent be made known clearly, and shared by them to and with every quarter of the community. This was followed through on. I also informed the children and families and the authorities that I had made my position on the above known in the community. The playground was, in follow

through, assured as a safe space and sanctuary for children and their family members.

I spent five years with my colleagues making something really great for the children. It was a very special place for the children, young people, and the families to flourish and grow. We did lots of activities. We had plenty of fires. Plenty of self-builds. Lots of environmental and elemental play, which I was very big on at the time, then and now. We made it so it was more accessible, and it was a really great time, taking young people camping on day trips, accessing the ranger services. I had five great years there with little ones. Now their children use the facility and their grandchildren use the facility.

And we opened for three days. We got a small team together. Then we did four. Then we did five. We had some success. Some of the play stuff that we did was about being creative and opportunistic. Some of the early thoughts were that we needed to get hooked into the community-safety angle, so we got some of the fire services to come in to teach children how to light fires safely. Money came from the police to reduce antisocial behaviour, some health money, and we got money from a diverse range of other people and funders including money from Virgin Bank.

We were approached by someone who said, 'If you go to the local bowling alley and bowl for an hour, you'll get six grand', and the local newspaper asked us if we would we evaluate toys for them. So, they give you the toys and you assess them, and then write up a report on it, and they published it in the newspaper.
So, we were quite creative, and obviously there was the work with the university on going for equipment, and support, and the students input too, that was highly valuable. The help from the Sheffield School of Architecture was absolutely immense. That really helped us substantially. The local council, and our MP (member of parliament), and the local Tesco market is a community champion, all of whom contributed, too.

That joint working model is the type of thing that you need in a small organization, because it wasn't seen as an essential service, although during Covid it was an essential service. Because when

> everyone ran away, we were the only ones left delivering, along with the food bank working locally in that area, working to ensure delivery continued to take place. It was quite hard and harsh, but the team, we had worked together, and we did some training with the team. We raised the standards. We looked to deliver high quality play there.
>
> We started to do trips; people were feeling good about life. They were feeling valued. That was really important. I did this work there for ten years and had a great time. Maybe stayed a little bit too long. But I dare say, now the legacy of the Pitsmoor Adventure Playground is fifty years in operation now, and there's a lot of people who have put the time, effort, and energy into it. They're all to be commended. I've met some wonderful people. There's wonderful people there. There were wonderful people before I was there. I just got them over the bump. Let's see where it goes now. We've got good, strong, solid foundations. Where are they going to take it now? They've got to develop a clearer strategy, a way of working to move it forward.

Zaqer Mused ties the communal aspect of the adventure playground to its culture:

> It's kind of like part of the playground culture is about sharing, and parents especially want to give something back. Like to bring their old clothes. And we had this idea for a clothes rail where you could, you know, bring things you didn't want, and if you needed a jacket, you could help yourself to it. I had some books at home which my partner's mum found at school. She works at a school, and they were going to dump, throw them away. You know we try and recycle things. We try to recycle as much as we can on the playground, find a purpose to things people kind of think there's no purpose to anymore.

Steve Pool offers a subtly different perspective on this web of support that surrounds the children's play:

> Social cohesion has to be a by-product, and it can't be the function of a playground. I mean, I like the notion of Colin Ward that the self-regulation of young people holds a utopian imagination,

> that children are inherently good and they need a place for that goodness to come through, whereas lots of education sees children to be essentially—'bad' is a funny word—but in deficit. Well, it's quite nuanced, but it's not about the stuff, or about what you do. I think it's about the attitude towards young people and giving opportunities for an emergent way of being in the world through play, which we can all know, but so very easily forget.
>
> I think that in terms of my experiences with adventure playgrounds in the UK, there is something about it becoming a home from home, the surrogacy. The playworkers, they are not like surrogate parents, but there's an element of care and concern with the playworkers. There's lots, and lots, and lots of families who use the playground, but there are probably about 25 kids that are part of that extended family way. It's not that their own families have got things wrong, it's just an extended family caring space. I think that's part of our adventure playground, you know, somewhere else where people care what happens to you.

The Pitsmoor Adventure Playground and its neighbour, Highfield Adventure Playground, and a small afterschool program called MASKK, Manor After School Kids Klubs, are being shepherded by Patrick Meleady in a new organization called the Sheffield Play Partnership. Together, they visit other programs in the region, traveling all the way to Eastbourne and to Wales for guidance. They are currently teaming up with researchers to demonstrate the need for a new adventure playground in Sheffield's Gleadless Valley, a place with even more scarcity. They exude confidence in their collective abundance. Patrick, ever the organizer:

> It's massively under developed. They're screaming out for provision. They don't have a youth centre. No junior club provision. No play schemes, and already we've had a quick delivery of one where we've found money to employ a worker, and to develop a play project and have a coordinator, and to commission pieces of work. We're going to have a look at doorstep play, street play, and eventually there's a design for another adventure playground

that we are creating from scratch. There's lots of issues in the Valley in relation to housing, substance misuse issues, and they need a focal point. And the playwork works. It's worked in other areas. It will work there.

Notes

1 Highfield has now secured its own funding and has a host of robust social services ranging from a youth club to work training to a Healthy Holidays play scheme for children. They are known for their Future Makers theatre program and a recent multimedia celebration of the launching of homemade boats.

Conclusion: Play at the Centre of Culture Change

I am struck by the buoyancy of both the children and the adults. Brian Sutton-Smith noted that play is associated with optimism[1], even an unrealistic optimism, that children through the process of play imagine things fixed, cured, lifted, and flown. Optimism is perhaps one of the evolutionary purposes of play itself, to give us hope, that original thing with feathers.[2] No one in the presence of Alison Buxton, Simbi Folarin, or Patrick Meleady, or their teammates, will doubt that they will keep making and unmaking with play at the centre while they have breath.

In Part II, we heard about equity for women and girls, for migrants, for colonized peoples, for under-resourced communities in a time of renewed divisiveness. As programs were unmade by funding cuts, by erosion of materials, by prejudice, these leaders and their teams remade the programs with alternative funding, recycled materials, new collaborations. I sense that the play at the centre fuelled their optimism, that the children's energy lifted the adults as they, in turn, worked on the children's behalf.

These were utopian visions done in very real spaces. All three programs wrestled with large questions surrounding work and resources: how they were allocated, who was left out, and what changes would occur in their communities over time. Each program found their own way to align with larger, more powerful groups in order to move forward with their creative agenda. For the Pitsmoor Adventure Playground, it was through universities and through local corporations and through a new coalition of play programs within Sheffield. For the GLUE Collective, it was through the art and activist communities and a network of gardens in Birmingham. For Maker{Futures}, it was linking to the longevity of the institutions of schooling and through the

©2026 Anna Beresin, CC BY-NC 4.0 https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0511.07

flexibility of a mobile maker van.

All three organizations aimed to shift organizational culture within those institutional partnerships—changing the focus from an individualized model of schooling and informal education by modelling teamwork, even shifting the less visible inequalities in terms of speaking opportunities and language used. The small and large injustices are intertwined for all of these groups, reflecting a philosophy of systems within systems and their capacity for change. All three safeguarded children's own culture, yes, its playful combinations and surprises, but also demonstrated a deep respect for children's cultural heritage. They insisted that there does not need to be a final product in order for growth or change to occur. They had intact memories of their own childhood play.

All three programs wrestled with time and how to find more of it. For the adventure playground it was on fieldtrips and holiday programs that time expanded, with more funding leading to more hours at play. For the GLUE Collective, it was the reclamation of rest for both children and their families, that rest and art were in fact intertwined. For Maker{Futures}, it was to work with teams of educators to become makerschools, where invention became the centre of a whole curriculum stretching across grades.[3] These programs understand that play is one of nature's multipurpose tools, and yet opportunities for play are shrinking.[4] This sense of unnecessary limitation is palpable all of the way through high school, and through college, and even into our research professions. Columnists Ezra Klein and Derek Thomson write: 'We have chosen to create a system that rewards caution and punishes outsider thinking and risk in scientific research'.[5] Yet, 'An idea going from nonexistence to existence—from zero to one—introduces the possibility of change'.[6]

Although the cultures of these three places were different, in part by time allotted, in part by landscape, and in part by the staff who crafted the programs and gathered the resources—for the children, all of these sites were glossed as places for play. Underneath all of the making and unmaking is the small power of making things different, and underneath that an editing process of discerning and evaluating. It is not just play as 'yes and', but also 'no and', plus 'maybe and'. Culture, writes folklorist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, is 'a reworking of the material at hand'.[7]

Culture change begins with imagining life as something else.

Neurologist Oliver Sacks wrote that a person's passions and curiosity build upon the ideas that have come before, and it is this combinatorial boldness that leads to innovation. Creativity, he writes, is associated with 'innumerable connections and synchronizations occurring'.[8] His essay 'The Creative Self' opens with this line:

> All children indulge in play, at once imitative and, equally, exploratory and innovative. They are drawn both to the familiar and the unusual—grounding and anchoring themselves in what is known and secure, and exploring what is new and has never been experienced.[9]

And yet,

> It takes a special energy, over and above one's creative potential, a special audacity or subversiveness, to strike out in a new direction once one is settled. It is a gamble as all creative projects must be, for the new direction may not turn out to be productive at all.[10]

Although play's potential utility, what Brian Sutton-Smith calls 'adaptive potentiation' only becomes apparent longitudinally, I have seen that mere access to novel materials is not enough.[11] It needs a culture of play acceptance with that material—whether called a 'play ethos', a 'maker spirit', or a valuing of the artistic aspects of play—to gain enough momentum to make cultural shifts possible. That connection between play and culture, ever evocative of the writer Johan Huizinga,[12] here differs in that these programs recognized that playfulness is profoundly localized and universally opportunistic, and at the same time, these programs demonstrated that without intentional access some children will be pushed aside and miss those chances. Without long-term and widespread support for play, momentum for new ideas can be repressed and fizzle.

One of the founders of maker education suggested that we need to think of our tools, even our computers, as mudpies.[13] These organizations suggest that programs that support children need to tolerate more mess, more noise, to safeguard the value of open-ended activities. Seymour Papert's own digital ideas about maker education came from nondigital images: gears in motion,[14] soap-sculpture art,[15] yet many places have

reduced makerspaces to specific tools like iPads and laser printers,[16] or equated adventure play with fixed slides and ziplines. To paraphrase David Bjorklund from our introduction, it is not what these things can do, but what we can together do with these things. We have to trust children more and follow them.

The children have shared with us plenty of information, if only we would really look. They utilized a wide range of materials in novel combinations and locations within each space. At the same time, they varied their activities, adopting and adapting others' variations over time. Play fostered cultures of change within each context. The adults who crafted these programs literally pointed out things worth seeing, like experienced deep-sea divers in a vast ocean. They continuously referred to the markers of current change:

> You know the structure in the sandpit?
> It's gone now.
> It's gone.
> Everything changes.
>
> You'd find a brush.
> You'd find odd things.
> And you'd create a den.
> Claim an area.
>
> It was moveable, and it went all over the playground.
> Sometimes it was just laid on the hill and they'd slide down it,
> It fell apart. It fell apart in the end.
> It fell apart completely.
>
> They made about four of them.
> That were the children,
> the children doing that themselves.
> It's kind of a dreamy state they're in.
>
> Everything around them is not really happening.
> I'll see them create something in the mud kitchen
> and transfer it to another part.
> I'm always finding pans and pots with flowers in them.

That much freedom? Really? Really?
Sometimes parents say, 'Where's the activity?'
I just point to all the materials.
Don't they see?

'Well, they're just playing'.
But you've not watched.
You may have observed,
but you've just not seen what other people are seeing.

You can never know
how kids will use a piece of equipment.
The possibilities
of more possibilities.

The most powerful thing is that not giving up.
This one little boy, he spent ages
trying to perfect his parachute,
and he would have a go, and it wouldn't work,

And I just watched him
just try over, and over, and over again.
You wouldn't have gotten that in a classroom.
You wouldn't have gotten that kind
of tenacity and resilience.

He took a piece of string and ran off.
'What is he doing?'
I suddenly thought,
'Oh, he's doing something important'.

It turned out, that it wasn't physically growing crops
that we were going to do.
It was more like growing people
and skills and things.

I always tell them to imagine
a cook writing a cookbook,
without ever *making* anything.
You know, it doesn't work like that.

> You know they're constantly trying,
> tasting, and making it better
> til they're happy with it.
>
> Then, they commit it to paper.

In Part I, we saw how the children moved small things, practicing ways to follow each other as birds and as robots, to repair whatever may be broken that they might need—housing, food access, a ripped alligator, a missing Queen. The children circled through multiple design cycles whether indoors or out, pivoting towards resourcefulness, fueled by the objects of surprise, by nature, and by each other's company. Each program was intentionally partially built with fascinators, loose parts, loose arts, and maker boxes as mini maker festivals. In each place was a sense of abundance and little child-initiated conflict.

Children who have a hard time making or unmaking can be rigid, antisocial, and in my experience, helped through play therapy or with gentle and accepting play peers. Some adventure playgrounds are known for their risky play with fire, their precarious buildings. These small-scale destructions were kept safe by skilled playworkers and other children, the relationships holding a delicate balance between children and their things. Adam Phillips echoed his mentor D.W. Winnicott when he recently wrote, 'It might be a sign of aliveness, he suggests, to want to destroy things'.[17] It can be said that all making and unmaking is social, relational, and deeply aesthetic, and the pulsing of creation and destruction is life itself.

We witnessed sculptural solutions in the act of alternative-finding, a folk process of object movement,[18] the materials in relationship with each other symbolically acting as relationships to other people and to the ground. Loose parts contained their own kind of folklore, the unfinished crafts an intangible cultural heritage. Yet, anthropologist E.T. Hall writes, 'A given culture cannot be understood simply in terms of parts. One has to know how the whole system is put together, how the major systems and dynamisms function, and how they are interrelated'.[19]

There is much evidence in the anthropology of play that children's homemade toys can serve as cultural repositories or archives of old tech, which makes sense as children have for millennia played with objects no longer considered useful.[20] Sheffield and Birmingham are attempting to attach the past to the future through these material pieces, and these

programs intuit that somehow art, science, tech, and play must be part of the equation. How this could be done reflects a renewed debate between Rousseau and Locke over the wisdom of the playground giantess in her wood-filled garden versus the design of the rocket launcher. But the giantess can have her rocket and launch one, too.

Fig. 32 Playground as Makerspace, Pitsmoor Adventure Playground, Sheffield. Photo by the author, spring 2024.

There are obstacles. In my recent STEAM studies in the United States, LEGOs and other plastic blocks were offered officially for copy work and pattern recognition, and try as the children might to innovate and go off-script, their teachers would often praise the copy and not the innovation. There was a blind spot in seeing the value of play in many settings, the creativity in the movement of the pieces, of Einstein's combinatory thinking. Child culture in these American contexts is often reduced to something to be controlled. This sense of internalized self-limitation and cultural shyness became painfully clear in my own university's makerspace partnership when we encouraged children to craft new games out of old materials. One child shook his head and said, 'I didn't know you could change the rules'.

When culture is not at the centre of our discussion about play, we end up reaffirming biases that see children's play as an individual puzzle with set answers and fixed rules, and that play is reducible to a single function, or to a single colonized style. We can then equate children's play with generic activities organized by adults, whether organized in school, after school, or electronically by toy companies. It is well known that children without play *that is meaningful to them* tend to be depressed, anxious, and often cannot sleep.[21] I have seen children slowly brighten and become luminous when offered the opportunity to play as they wished in these makerspaces, gardens, and playgrounds.

Here, we see that object play is strategic, although sometimes strategy is a discovery rather than a plan, an accidental surprise worth repeating. [22] In play's negotiated exaggeration, the play becomes not only individually psychologically protective, but socially invaluable, potentially keeping in check the twin dangers of greed and destruction—over-making and over un-making.

UNICEF wisely points us to a collective future of shifting demographics, the climate crisis, and changing forms of work. Play gets a few cameos in their document about the future of childhood, but play is not mentioned in their conclusion.[23] Separate pieces are highlighted, like the need for early years education and the need for safe public spaces in cities, the need for equitable access to technology. Yet many programs that focus on skill training forget that children have multi-temporal needs, multi-emotional needs, that exploration is different than play. Play in its elasticity offers the capacity to deal with all of our time zones: the traumatic or puzzling past, our complex social present, and the technical unknown. Paradoxically, it takes material to help children think past the material.

In each of these places, children negotiated all sorts of cultural schemas into a form of absurdist sculptural folk art:[24]

wheels in mud kitchens
loose pipes on slides
raw materials in air chutes
bubbles on tennis racquets
checkers as swings in trees
nightlights in carboard rooms
robots on art as art

Some of the hybrid forms were unique to their specific places—alligators flew on slides in one locale, chickens in space in another. In all of these programs, children flew. Their ideas turned into recognizable cultural activity: space travel, layer cakes, furniture design, and home construction. These patterns were then adopted by other children from across the locale and repeated over several days or months—repeated, erased, and repeated.

> The staff recognized these constructions as not just art work,
> not just clever design challenges,
> not just scientific exploration,
> not just leisure,
> makerspaces and mud kitchens transformed junk into motion,
> dirt into care,
> the elements of change.

Notes

1 Brian Sutton-Smith (1997), 63-64.

2 The phrase is from Emily Dickinson's poem, '"Hope" is the thing with feathers'.

3 For more on the need for time in makerspaces see Matthew Berland (2020). See Paulo Blikstein in the same volume on the difference between the rapid changes associated with maker education and the slow process of school reform.

4 See Ed Baines and Peter Blatchford's longitudinal study on the decline of play in Britain (2023). For more about advocacy for children's playtime visit the Global Recess Alliance, globalrecessalliance.org

5 Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson (2025), 201-202.

6 Ibid. (2025), 171-172.

7 Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1996), 548.

8 Oliver Sacks (2017), 147. It has come to my attention that the writings by Oliver Sacks may have been poeticized, raising questions about the validity of some of his scientific work (see Rachel Aviv, 2025). This does not change the power of this particular observation.

9 Ibid. (2017), 129.

10 Ibid. (2017), 140.

11 Anna Beresin (2014).

12 Johan Huizinga (1955). See also Thomas Henricks (2006).

13 Seymour Papert (1984; 1980).

14 Seymour Papert (1980).

15 Seymour Papert and Idit Harel (1991).

16 Nathan Holbert, Matthew Berland, and Yasmin B. Kafai (2020), 11. For more on the idea of education as a cultural practice see Peter Gray (2019).

17 Adam Phillips (2024) 42.

18 It is interesting that Sutton-Smith found that verbs were central in his collection of very young children's folk stories (1981a).

19 E.T. Hall (1976), 222.

20 For more on children's play with discarded artifacts see Sheina Lew-Levy and Dorsa Amir (2024).

21 See Anna Beresin and Julia Bishop's introduction (2023).

22 See the games at the British Museum dating back 4,500 years.

23 UNICEF (2024), https://www.unicef.org/reports/state-of-worlds-children/2024

24 One of the finest writers on the subject of folk art and its many definitions is Henry Glassie. His book (1989) offers a poetic reminder of what the arts can do for the human spirit.

Bibliography

Allen, Marjorie Gill, Lady Allen of Hurtwood, *Planning for Play* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971).

Allen, Ruth, *Weathering: How the Earth's Deep Wisdom Can Help Us Endure Life's Storms* (London: Ebury Press, 2024).

Appadurai, Arjun, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

Ariès, Philippe, *Centuries of Childhood* (New York: Knopf, 1962).

Aviv, Rachel, 'Mind Over Matter: Did the Celebrated Neurologist Oliver Sacks Write his Patients into Case Studies of his own Psyche?', *The New Yorker*, December 8, 2025.

Baines, Ed, and Peter Blatchford, 'The Decline in Breaktimes and Lunchtimes in Primary and Secondary Schools in England: Results from Three National Surveys Spanning 25 Years', *British Education Research Journal*, 49.5 (2023), 925-946, https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3874

Bakhtin, Mikhail, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981).

Barker, K. Brandon, and Daniel J. Povinelli, *The Aesop's Fable Paradigm: An Unlikely Intersection of Folklore and Science* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2021), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv21ptrwd

Bateson, Nora, *Combining* (Charmouth: Triarchy, 2023).

Bateson, Patrick, and Paul Martin, *Play, Playfulness, Creativity and Innovation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781139057691

Beresin, Anna, *Recess Battles: Playing, Fighting, and Storytelling* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), https://doi.org/10.14325/mississippi/9781604737394.001.0001

------ *The Art of Play: Recess and the Practice of Invention* (Philadelphia, PN: Temple University Press, 2014), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvrf88kv

------ 'Play Signals, Play Moves: A Gorilla Critique of Play Theory', with Kristen Farley-Rambo, Gorilla Keeper of the Philadelphia Zoo, *International Journal*

of Play, 7.3, (2018), 322-337, https://doi.org/10.1080/21594937.2018.1532681

------ 'A More Serious Introduction: A Critique of the Inherent Racism in the Play Theory of Yrjö Hirn', *International Journal of Play*, 10.2 (2021), 133-138, https://doi.org/10.1080/21594937.2021.1934945

------ 'Unequal Resources: Space, Time, and Loose Parts and What to Do with an Uneven Playing Field', in *Play and Social Justice: Equity, Advocacy, and Opportunity*, ed. by Olga Jarrett and Vera Stenhouse et al. (Lausanne: Peter Lang, 2023), 135-142, http://doi.org/10.3726/b20194

------ 'Review of David Lancy's *Learning without Lessons: Pedagogy in Indigenous Communities'*, *International Journal of Play*, 13.4 (2024), 434-436, https://doi.org/10.1080/21594937.2024.2419808

------ 'Key Ideas of Brian Sutton-Smith', in *Brian Sutton-Smith, Playful Scholar: A Centennial Celebration*, ed. by Michael Patte, Fraser Brown, and Anna Beresin (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 35-43.

Beresin, Anna, and Julia Bishop, *Play in a Covid Frame: Everyday Pandemic Creativity in a Time of Isolation* (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2023), https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0326

Bergson, Henri, *The Creative Mind* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1934).

Berland, Matthew, 'Playful Constructionism in Museums, Libraries, and Other Voluntary Spaces: Co-Construction, Co-Facilitation, Co-Dread', in *Designing Constructionist Futures: The Art, Theory, and Practice of Learning Designs*, ed. by Nathan Holbert, Matthew Berland, and Yasmin B. Kafai (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020), 219-227, https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/12091.003.0027

Bjorklund, David, 'Incorporating Development into Evolutionary Psychology: Evolved Probabilistic Cognitive Mechanisms', *Evolutionary Psychology*, 14.4 (2016), 1-14, https://doi.org/10.1177/1474704916670166

Blikstein, Paulo, 'Cheesemaking Emancipation: A Critical Theory of Cultural Making', in *Designing Constructionist Futures: The Art, Theory, and Practice of Learning Designs*, ed. by Nathan Holbert, Matthew Berland, and Yasmin B. Kafai (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020), 130-140, https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/12091.003.0016

Blum-Ross, A. K. Kumpulainen, and J. Marsh, *Enhancing Digital Literacy and Creativity: Makerspaces in the Early Years* (London: Routledge, 2020), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429243264

Bronfenbrenner, Uri, *Two Worlds of Childhood: US and USSR* (Simon & Schuster, 1970).

------ *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

Brown, Fraser, *The Venture: A Case Study of an Adventure Playground* (Cardiff: Play Wales, 2007).

------ *Play and Playwork: 101 Stories of Children Playing* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2014).

Brown, Fraser, and Chris Taylor, *Foundations of Playwork* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2008).

Brown, Fraser, and Bob Hughes, *Aspects of Playwork: Play & Culture Studies*, Vol. 14 (Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books, 2018).

Brown, Fraser, and Mike Wragg, *Play and Playwork: Notes and Reflections in a Time of Austerity* (Abingdon on Thames: Taylor and Francis, 2020), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351037747

Bruner, Jerome, *On Knowing: Essays for the Left hand* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1962).

------ 'The Conditions of Creativity', in *Contemporary Approaches to Creative Thinking*, ed. by Howard Gruber, Glenn Terrell, and Michael Wertheimer (Palo Alto, CA: Atherton Press, 1967), 1.

Bullough, Dave, Claire Pugh, and Ben Tawil, 'The Land', in *Aspects of Playwork: Play & Culture Studies*, Vol. 14, ed. by Fraser Brown and Bob Hughes (Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books, 2018), 125-144.

Burghardt, Gordon, *The Genesis of Animal Play: Testing the Limits* (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 2005), https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/3229.001.0001

Burghardt, Gordon, and Elisabetta Palagi, 'The Evolution and Ontogeny of Play: Comparative Perspectives', *International Journal of Play,* 12.1 (2023), 1-3, https://doi.org/10.1080/21594937.2022.2152183

Buxton, Alison, Louise Kay, and Beth Nutbrown, 'Developing a Makerspace Learning and Assessment Framework', in *Proceedings of 6th FabLearn Europe Conference/ MakeEd 2022: 6th FabLearn Europe / MakeEd Conference 2022*. Copenhagen, Denmark, 1-7, https://doi.org/10.1145/3535227.3535232

Cankaya, Ozlem, Jamie Leach, and Kadriye Akdemir, 'The Journey of Loose Parts across Educational Landscapes and History', *American Journal of Play*, 16.2, (2024), 210-245.

Chilton, Tony, 'Adventure Playgrounds: Brief History', in *Aspects of Playwork: Play and Culture Studies,* Vol. 14, ed. by Fraser Brown and Bob Hughes (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018), 157-178.

Clapp, Edward P., Jessica Ross, Jennifer O. Ryan, and Shari Tishman, *Maker-Centered Learning: Empowering Young People to Shape Their Worlds* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2017).

Clapp, Edward P., S. Lynneth Solis, Carolyn Har Ning Ho, Katherine Laguzza, *Maker-Centered Learning Playbook for Early Childhood Education* (Boston, MA: Harvard University, 2020), https://pz.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/AbD_Playbook.pdf

Coles, Robert, *Children of Crisis* (New York: Delta Publishers, 1967).

Cross, Gary, *Kids' Stuff: Toys and the Changing World of American Childhood* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

Davidson, Dana H. David, Y.H. Wu, and Joseph Tobin, *Preschool in Three Cultures: Japan, China and the United States* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989).

Delorme, Maxine, 'Hysterical about Playwork', in *Aspects of Playwork: Play and Culture Series,* Vol. 14, ed. by Fraser Brown and Bob Hughes (Lanham, MD: Hamilton, 2018), 179-191.

Dewey, John, *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier, 1938).

Dickinson, Emily, "'Hope' is the Thing with Feathers", *The Compete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. by Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1951, 1955, 1979, 1983).

Douglas, Mary, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966).

Einstein, Albert, *Ideas and Opinions* (New York: Crown, 1945).

Else, Perry, *The Value of Play* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012)

Erickson, Frederick, 'A History of Qualitative Inquiry in Social and Educational Research', in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2011), 36-65.

Erikson, Erik, *Childhood and Society* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1950).

Etzioni, Amitai, and Eva Etzioni-Halevy, *Social Change: Sources, Patterns, and Consequences* (New York: Basic Books, 1964).

Fagen, Robert, *Animal Play Behavior* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

Freud, Sigmund, *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (London: Hogarth, 1905/1916).

Froebel, Friedrich, and Miriam Mathis, eds., *Where Children Grow: Wisdom for Raising Resilient Humans from the Inventor of Kindergarten* (Walden, NY: Plough Publishing, 2024).

Frost, Joseph, *A History of Children's Play and Play Environments* (Abingdon on Thames: Taylor and Francis, 2010), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203868652

Geertz, Clifford, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic, 1973).

Gennep, Arnold van, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. M. B. Vizedom and G. L. Caffee (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1909/1960).

Gibson, James J., *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (London: Routledge, 1979).

Giddings, Seth, *Toy Theory: Technology and Imagination in* Play (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2024), https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/14221.001.0001

Glassie, Henry, *The Spirit of Folk Art* (New York: Abrams, 1989).

Godfrey, Lesli, *Play England's Report into Adventure Playgrounds in England*. Winter (Play England, 2022), https://tinyurl.com/2zu5vyhd

Goodall, Jane, *In the Shadow of Man* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1971).

Gray, Peter, 'Evolutionary Functions of Play: Practice, Resilience, Innovation, and Cooperation', in *The Cambridge Handbook of Play: Developmental and Disciplinary Perspectives,* ed. by Peter K. Smith and Jaipaul L. Roopnarine, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 84-102, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108131384.006

Hall, Edward T., *Beyond Culture* (New York: Anchor, 1976).

Henrich, Joseph, *The Weirdest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2020).

Henricks, Thomas S., *Play Reconsidered: Sociological Perspectives on Human Expression* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

Hermann, Brigitta, Manfred Fischbeck, Elia Sinaico, and Anna Beresin, *Group Motion in Practice: Collective Creation Through Dance Movement Improvisation* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2018).

Hillman, James, *The Soul's Code: In Search of Character and Calling* (New York: Random House, 1996).

Holbert, Nathan, Matthew Berland, and Yasmin B. Kafai, 'Introduction: Fifty Years of Constructionism', *Designing Constructionist Futures: The Art, Theory, and Practice of Learning Designs*, ed. by Nathan Holbert, Matthew Berland, and Yasmin B. Kafai (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020), 1-16, https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/12091.001.0001

Huizinga, Johan, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1949).

Johnson, Steven, *Wonderland: How Play Made the Modern World* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2016).

Kapchan, Deborah A., and Pauline Turner Strong, 'Theorizing the Hybrid', *Journal of American Folklore*, 112.445, (1999), 239-253.

Kendon, Adam, *Conducting Interaction: Patterns of Behavior in Focused Encounters* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

------ *Gesture: Visible Action as Utterance* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara, 'Ordinary People/Everyday Life: Folk Culture in New York City', in *Urban Life: Readings in Urban Anthropology*, ed. by George Gmelch and Walter P. Zenner (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1996), 548-562.

Klein, Ezra, and Derek Thompson, *Abundance* (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2025).

Konner, Melvin, *Evolution of Childhood: Relationships, Emotion, Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1p6hnrx

Lancy, David, *The Anthropology of Childhood: Cherubs, Chattel, Changelings* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

------ *Learning without Lessons: Pedagogy in Indigenous Communities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197645598.001.0001

Lange, Alexandra, *The Design of Childhood: How the Material World Shapes Independent Kids* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

Leichter-Saxby, Morgan, and Suzanna Law, *The New Adventure Playground Movement* (London: Notebook, 2015).

Leorke, Dale, and Danielle Wyatt, *The Library as Playground: How Games and Play are Reshaping Public Culture* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2022), https://doi.org/10.5771/9781538164327

Lester, Stuart, and Wendy Russell, *Play for a Change: Play, Policy and Practice: A Review of Contemporary Perspectives Summary Report* (London: Play England, 2008).

Lévi-Strauss, Claude, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1962/1966).

Lew-Levy, Sheina, and Dorsa Emir, 'Children as Agents of Cultural Adaptation', *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* (2024), 1-68, http://doi: 10.1017/S0140525X24001377

Locke, John, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), https://dn720701.ca.archive.org/0/items/somethoughtscon01lockuoft/somethoughtscon01lockuoft.pdf

Machado de Oliveira, Vanessa, *Hospicing Modernity: Facing Humanities Wrongs and the Implications for Social Activism* (Berkeley, CA; North Atlantic, 2021).

Marsh, Jackie, and Julia Bishop, *Changing Play: Play, Media and Commercial Culture from the 1950s to the Present Day* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2014).

McWhorter, John, *Our Magnificent Bastard Tongue: The Untold History of English* (New York: Gotham, 2008).

Newell, William Wells, *Games and Songs of American Children* (New York: Dover, 1883/1963).

Nicholson, Simon, 'How Not to Cheat Children: The Theory of Loose Parts', *Landscape Architecture Quarterly* (1970), 62.1, 30-34.

Opie, Iona, and Peter Opie, *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).

------ *The Oxford Nursery Rhyme Book* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963).

------ *Children's Games in Street and Playground* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969).

Opie, Iona, Brian Alderson, and Robert Opie, *The Treasures of Childhood: Books, Toys, and Games from the Opie Collection* (New York: Arcade, 1989).

Orwell, George, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (London: Victor Gollancz Publisher, 1937), https://files.libcom.org/files/wiganpier.pdf

Panksepp, Jaak, and Lucy Biven, *The Archaeology of Mind: Neuroevolutionary Origins of Human Emotions* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012).

Patte, Michael, with Alex Cote, Rusty Keeler, Suzanna Law, and Morgan Leichter-Saxby, 2018, 'Playwork in America: Past, Current and Future Trends', in *Aspects of Playwork: Play & Culture Studies*, Vol. 14, ed. by Fraser Brown and Bob Hughes (Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books, 2018), 63-78.

Pahl, Kate, and Jennifer Rowell, with Diane Collier, Steve Pool, Zanib Rasool, and Terry Trzecak, *Living Literacies: Literacy for Social Change* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020), https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/11375.001.0001

Papert, Seymour, *Mindstorms: Children, Computers, and Powerful Ideas* (New York: Basic, 1980).

------ 'Computer as Mudpie', in *Intelligent Schoolhouse: Readings on Computers and Learning*, ed. by Dale Peterson, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Reston, 1984), 17-27.

------ 'Why School Reform is Impossible', in *Designing Constructionist Futures: The Art, Theory, and Practice of Learning Designs*, ed. by Nathan Holbert, Matthew Berland, and Yasmin B. Kafai (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020), 87-99, https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/12091.003.0010

Papert, Seymour, and Idit Harel, 'Situating Constructionism', in *Constructionism*, ed. by Idit Harel and Seymour Papert (New York: Praeger, 1991), 1-17.

Pellegrini, Anthony D., and Peter K. Smith, *The Nature of Play: Great Apes and Humans* (New York: Guilford, 2005).

Peppler, Kylie, Anna Keune, and Naomi Thompson, 'Reclaiming Traditionally Feminine Practices and Materials for STEM Learning Through the Modern Maker Movement', in *Designing Constructionist Futures: The Art, Theory, and Practice of Learning Designs* ed. by Nathan Holbert, Matthew Berland, and Yasmin B. Kafai (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020), 142-154, https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/12091.003.0017

Phillips, Adam, *On Giving Up* (New York: Picador, 2024).

Piaget, Jean, *The Moral Judgment of the Child* (New York: Macmillan, 1965).

------ *Six Psychological Studies* (New York: Vintage, 1968).

------ *To Understand Is to Invent: The Future of Education* (New York: UNESCO, 1973).

Potter, Dave, *Risk and Safety in Play: The Law and Practice for Adventure Playgrounds* (London: Taylor and Francis and PLAYLINK, 1997).

Powers, Richard, *Playground* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2024).

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, *Emile: Or On Education* (1762), https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5427/5427-h/5427-h.htm

Sacks, Oliver, *The River of Consciousness* (New York: Knopf, 2017).

Salen, Katie and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).

Schwartzman, Helen, *Transformations: The Anthropology of Children's Play* (New York: Plenum, 1978).

------ *Children and Anthropology: Perspectives for the 21st Century* (New York: Praeger, 2001).

Streeck, Jürgen, *Gesturecraft: The Manu-facture of Meaning* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2009).

Sutton-Smith, Brian, *The Folkgames of Children* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1972).

------- 'Play: The Useless Made Useful', *School Review* (1975), 83, 197-214.

------- *The Folkstories of Children* (Philadelphia, PN: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981a).

------- *A History of Children's Play: The New Zealand Playground 1840-1950* (Philadelphia, PN: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981b).

------- *Toys as Culture* (New York: Gardner Press, 1986).

------- 'Piaget on Play: A Critique', *Psychological Review* (1996), 73, 104-110.

------- *The Ambiguity of Play* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

------- *Play for Life: Play Theory and Play as Emotional Survival* (New York: The Strong Museum of Play, 2017).

Tan, Michael, *Makerspaces, Innovation and Science Education: How, Why, and What For?* (London: Routledge, 2022).

Thomas, Douglas, and John Seely Brown, *A New Culture of Learning: Cultivating the Imagination for a World of Constant Change* (Seattle, WA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform/Kindle Direct Publishing, 2011).

Toelken, Barre, *Dynamics of Folklore* (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 1996).

Tucker-Raymond, Eli, and Brian Gravel, *STEM Literacies in Makerspaces: Implications for Learning, Teaching, and Research* (London: Routledge, 2019).

Turner, Victor, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Press, 1974).

UNICEF, *State of the World's Children 2024: The Future of Childhood in a Changing World* (New York: United Nations Children's Fund/ United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, 2024), https://www.unicef.org/reports/state-of-worlds-children/2024

Voce, Adrian, 'The State of Play in England', in *Foundations of Playwork*, ed. by Fraser Brown and Chris Taylor (New York: Open University Press, 2008), 22-25.

------ 'The State of Playwork', *International Journal of Play* (2015), 4.3, 217-223, https://doi.org/10.1080/21594937.2015.1106040

Vygotsky, Lev, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, ed. by M. Cole (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).

White, Jan, and Liz Edwards, *Making a Mud Kitchen: Opening Up the Wonderful World of Mud Play* (Sheffield: Early Childhood Outdoors & MuddyFaces, 2018).

Willet, Rebekah, Chris Richards, Jackie Marsh, Andrew Burn, and Julia Bishop, *Children, Media and Playground Cultures* (Princeton, NJ: Springer, 2013).

Wilson, Penny, *Play Works* (Independently Published, 2024).

Winnicott, D.W., *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock, 1971).

Wohlwend, Karen, Anna Keune, and Kylie Peppler, 'Design Playshop: Preschoolers Making, Playing, and Learning with Squishy Circuits', in *Makeology: Makerspaces as Learning Environments*, ed. by Kylie Peppler and Erica Rosenfeld Halverson (London: Routledge, 2016), 83-96, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315726519-6

Wragg, Mike, and Sion Edwards, 'Encouraging State of Playwork in the UK', *International Journal of Play* (2024), 13.3, 222-227, https://doi.org/10.1080/21594937.2024.2388951

Zurn, Perry, and Dani Basset, *Curious Minds: The Power of Connection* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2022), https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/11009.001.0001

List of Figures

All photographs were taken by the author in Spring 2024

1	Jeugdland Amsterdam, Adventure Playground.	p. 6
2	Utopia, Pitsmoor Adventure Playground, Sheffield.	p. 21
3	Slide and Zip Line, Pitsmoor Adventure Playground, Sheffield.	p. 22
4	Imagine, Loose Parts, Pitsmoor Adventure Playground, Sheffield.	p. 30
5	Alligator, Pitsmoor Adventure Playground, Sheffield.	p. 32
6	Swing, and Tree with Swings, Pitsmoor Adventure Playground, Sheffield.	p. 33
7	Wheel in Pan, Chef with Wheel, Pitsmoor Adventure Playground, Sheffield.	p. 37
8	Three Chefs, Pitsmoor Adventure Playground, Sheffield.	p. 39
9	Lolly Sticks, A Way In, Pitsmoor Adventure Playground, Sheffield.	p. 39
10	Slide and Box for Two, Pitsmoor Adventure Playground, Sheffield.	p. 41
11	Partial Platform, Changed Platform, Pitsmoor Adventure Playground, Sheffield.	p. 43
12	Children's Fire, The Glue Garden, Birmingham.	p. 50
13	The Swing, The Glue Garden, Birmingham.	p. 52
14	The Green Glue Garden, Birmingham.	p. 54
15	Willow Wall, The Glue Garden, Birmingham.	p. 55

16	Loose Arts, The Glue Garden, Birmingham.	p. 56
17	Rubbery Stuff, The Glue Garden, Birmingham.	p. 57
18	Ring Toss, The Glue Garden, Birmingham.	p. 58
19	Mud Kitchen, The Glue Garden, Birmingham.	p. 71
20	Full Room, Sample Materials, Maker {Futures} Mobile Makerspace.	p. 75
21	Super Chicken, Maker {Futures}, Mobile Makespace.	p. 76
22	Duck in a Cup, Plastic Bag, Maker {Futures}, Mobile Makespace.	p. 78
23	Launcher, Maker {Futures}, Mobile Makespace.	p. 79
24	Cork Guy, Maker {Futures}, Mobile Makespace.	p. 81
25	Bear in a Cup, Covered Bear, Maker {Futures}, Mobile Makespace.	p. 81
26	Clips, Feathered Flyer, Maker {Futures}, Mobile Makespace.	p. 82
27	Ozobot, and Ozobot Tools, Maker {Futures}, Mobile Makespace.	p. 84
28	Drawings for Ozobots, Maker {Futures}, Mobile Makespace.	p. 85
29	Top of Hessian Table, Maker {Futures}, Mobile Makespace.	p. 90
30	Two in a Tube, Maker {Futures}, Mobile Makespace.	p. 95
31	'Changed Priority Ahead', Street Sign, Sheffield.	p. 100
32	Playground as Makerspace, Pitsmoor Adventure Playground, Sheffield.	p. 163

Acknowledgements

Books are made by making and unmaking, yet nothing tests one's stamina like being unmade by illness. My very flexible and athletic husband Neil was terribly unwell during part our stay in England. Thank you to our friends, and to our adult sons, Noah, Matti, and Gabe Beresin who were particularly patient and supportive as his health returned. For the gentleness of the staff at Sheffield's hospitals, and for our American medical team—gratitude, gratitude, gratitude. For Neil, gratitude.

Funding was provided by the US-UK Fulbright Association through a scholar award; may your program have long life. Hats off to Dr. Alessandra Tosi and team at Open Book Publishers for your integrity. Thank you to Professor Rebecca Lawthom, Head of the School of Education at the University of Sheffield for showing me the Maggie Thatcher Nutcracker and for making me feel welcome. Dr. Yinka Olusoga and Dr. Aneesh Barai graciously hosted me at the Childhood and Youth Research Cluster, and Dr. Catherine Bannister arranged a fruitful guest lecture through the University's Contemporary Folklore Research Centre. Our Sheffield hosts, honorary sister and brother Dr. Yael and Richard Benn fed us body and soul. Dr. Julia Bishop, you have a particular place in my heart and in my library. Dr. Steve Pool, Julia Sexton, and Hadrian Cawthorne, Sheffield is rich with resources like you.

Thank you to Meynell Walter and Dr. Sylwyn Guilbaud for their conference on Play and Playwork in Eastbourne. To Patrick Amber, Joziah Brown, Rosa Curtis, Glenda Giblin, Yanina Koszalinski, Patrick Meleady, Zaqer Mused, Beverley Nunn, Sarah Truman, and Julius Turner, I hope this book does your award-winning playwork in Pitsmoor justice. Thanks to Lucy Halstead of the Highfield Adventure Playground and to Craig Judson of MASKK for their time showing me around their oases. The GLUE Collective's Simbi Folarin, Faith Pearson,

Jemima Graham, and Chantelle Folarin, and also Jermaine Buchanan and Mariyha Buchanan, thank you for the fuel and the rest.

The Cambridge Centre for Play, Education, Development and Learning at the University of Cambridge provided a spirited discussion about play during my lecture there. I also deeply appreciate the good company of Dr. Suzanna Law of Pop-Up Adventure Play, and the resources shared by Dr. Fraser Brown and Dr. Michael Patte. Part of the research plan was to observe the renowned Maker{Futures} program. Little did I know that it would lead to volunteering in their mobile makerspace. Kudos to the Maker{Futures} staff who answered questions while they juggled materials: Katherine Greenacre, Liz Jansen, Sarah McGoldrick, Saman Qarni, Dr. Louise Kay, and co-founders Dr. Jackie Marsh and Dr. Alison Buxton. To all the children and families who welcomed me onto their playground, into their garden, and into their schools, all the best to you.

Lindsay Sparagana, cofounder of NEUARTS, Neighborhood Engagement at the University of the Arts—we were a maker van without a van, an adventure playground without outdoor space, an artist collective with three generations of artists. Somehow the sudden closing of UARTS made writing about the ebb and flow of making seem even more urgent.

My father broke things. Not that this was his goal. One would hear him on a Saturday in his tiny workshop in our basement, cursing as he tried to 'fix' things. He would break them more, and more often than not call in someone else to actually fix them. Except in the garden, there he would break things apart delicately, trusting that nature would fix what he could not. My mother was forever rearranging flowers and syllables of made-up words. My brother Charlie would take things apart, bicycles mainly, down to the ball bearings, the little balls strewn everywhere like seeds.

One of them landed in this book.

Index

Allen, Lady Marjory (of Hurtwood) 5, 15
Allen, Ruth 14
Auerbach, Frank 62

Baines, Ed 165
Barker, K. Brandon 16
Basset, Dani 69
Bateson, Patrick 16
Berland, Matthew 165
Big Swing Adventure Playground (Play Bradford) 12, 42, 139
Bishop, Julia 4, 16, 99
Bjorklund, David 9, 160
Blikstein, Paulo 165
Blum-Ross, Alicia 109
Bronfenbrenner, Uri 15
Brown, Fraser 15
Bruner, Jerome 99
Buchanan, Jermaine 119–122, 124, 126
Buchanan, Mariyha 119–121, 123, 126, 128
Burghardt, Gordon 9
Burn, Andrew 16
Buxton, Alison 17, 74, 77, 80, 86, 93–95, 98, 105, 107–108, 110, 115, 117, 157

Cankaya, Ozlem 15
cardboard 39, 42, 46, 59, 65, 87–90, 92, 98, 113
childhood
  anthropology of 5, 7, 12, 14, 162
  folklore of 5, 7, 11–12, 15, 158, 162
  psychology of 5, 9–10, 12, 70, 101, 164
childlore. *See* childhood: folklore of
climate crisis 8, 119, 123, 164
construction 11, 56, 78, 90, 93, 107, 113, 123, 165
  forts and dens 29, 31, 33, 44–45, 55, 68, 83, 90–91, 160
Covid-19 4, 36, 109, 126, 135, 152
  effect on play and play programs 36, 109, 135
craft 4, 9, 26, 39, 41, 46, 55, 64, 101, 124, 162–163
creativity 5, 7, 10, 13, 16, 38, 52, 60–63, 91, 101, 105–106, 113, 117, 145, 152, 159, 163
Cross, Gary 15
culture
  change 7–8, 11, 33, 46, 129, 157, 159–160
  children 163
  children's 4–5, 37, 158
  WEIRD ('Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich, Democratic') 9, 16
Curtis, Rosa 29, 41

Davidson, Dana H. 17
design 10, 17, 31, 33, 51, 69, 70, 73, 74, 77, 93, 94, 96, 106, 140, 154, 162, 163, 165. *See also* self-build
destruction 59–62, 64, 71, 123, 162, 164
  as part of making 61–62
Dewey, John 115
dialudics 49, 51, 70, 71. *See also* Sutton-Smith, Brian
Dickinson, Emily 165
Douglas, Mary 14
Duncan, Isadora 12

education 9, 82, 88, 93–94, 98–99, 105, 107–108, 110, 113, 115, 129, 143, 150, 154, 158–159, 164–166
  culture of 87, 115, 129
  rigidity in 64
  sneakiness in 8, 83, 92, 98–99
Einstein, Albert 34, 163
Else, Perry 47, 148

environmental challenges. *See* climate crisis
Erickson, Frederick 47
Erikson, Erik 15
ethnography 11–12, 14, 149
  microethnographic video analysis 12, 14, 35
Etzioni, Avitai 7
Etzioni-Halevy, Eva 7
exaggeration 10, 14, 32, 99, 164

Fagen, Robert 9
fascinators and provocations 29, 31, 39, 162
Fischbeck, Manfred 62
Folarin, Chantelle 53, 61
Folarin, Simbi 51, 53–58, 60–69, 119–120, 123–126, 128–131, 157
Freud, Sigmund 5, 15, 72
Froebel, Friedrich 115
future, the 8, 74, 92, 162, 164

games 10, 15, 22, 34, 70, 83, 88, 93, 109, 114, 163, 166
gender 105–107, 118, 157
  equality of opportunity 105–107, 157
Giblin, Glenda 34
Gibson, James J. 30
Giddings, Seth 15
Glassie, Henry 166
GLUE Collective 11, 49–51, 53, 56, 62, 64–65, 72, 119, 157–158
Godfrey, Lesli 15
Goodall, Jane 16
Governor’s Island 6
Graham, Jemima 53, 123
Gray, Peter 166

Hall, Edward T. 162
Henrich, Joseph 16
Highfield Adventure Playground 12, 36, 143–144, 146, 154–155
Hillman, James 120
Huizinga, Johan 16, 159
hybridity 7–8, 10, 16, 34, 38, 46, 49, 81, 165
  designing for 34, 46

Janson, Liz 74
Jeugdland Amsterdam 6
Johnson, Steven 93
justice. *See* climate crisis; *See* gender; *See* migration

Kapchan, Deborah 16
Kay, Louise 17, 74, 99, 112, 116
Kendon, Adam 47
Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara 158
Klein, Ezra 158
Konner, Melvin 16
Koszalinski, Yanina 25–26, 29, 31, 136–137, 141, 145–146

Lange, Alexandra 17
Law, Suzanna 15, 27, 47
learning 25, 45, 49–50, 53–54, 59, 64, 72–73, 77, 80, 86, 88, 90, 93, 98, 108, 111, 113–114, 127, 129, 134, 145, 148
  bodily 87–88
Leichter-Saxby, Morgan 15
Lester, Stuart 17
Lévi-Strauss, Claude 16
Lew-Levy, Sheina 166
Livingstone, Sonia 109
Locke, John 115, 163
‘loose (p)arts’ 6–7, 15, 22, 25–26, 29–30, 34, 51–52, 56–57, 70, 72, 86, 131, 162

Machado de Oliveira, Vanessa 119–120, 126
Maker{Futures} 8, 11, 73–76, 78–80, 82, 85, 94, 105, 110–112, 116–118, 157–158
makerspaces 4, 6–8, 10–12, 14, 16–17, 49, 73, 75, 99, 101, 105–110, 113, 118, 120, 130, 160, 163–165
Manor After School and Kids Klubs (MASKK) 154
Mari, Enzo 69

Marsh, Jackie 16, 74, 77–79, 87, 98, 105–108, 112, 117–118
masking identities 13–14
materiality 46, 51, 74, 77, 98, 99, 164. *See also* 'loose (p)arts'; *See also* Nicholson, Simon
McGoldrick, Sarah 74, 83, 85–86, 91
McWhorter, John 16
Meleady, Patrick 25, 28, 38, 133–134, 142–143, 146–147, 149, 151, 154, 157
migration 4, 8, 82, 112, 133, 157
  prejudice against 133
Morris, William 4
mud kitchen 22, 35–36, 46–47, 52, 71, 120, 160, 164–165
Mused, Zaqer 22–23, 26–27, 31, 33, 35, 37–40, 135, 138, 142, 153

negotiation during play 14, 71, 164
  with adults 12, 28, 42, 45–46, 65, 98, 135, 137
Newell, William Wells 5, 15
Nicholson, Simon 10

Opie, Iona and Peter 15
optimism 101, 157
Orwell, George 4
Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL) 47, 129–131

Panksepp, Jaak 70
Papert, Seymour 99, 159
Pearson, Faith 51, 53–69, 119, 121–122, 124–125, 127, 129–130
Peppler, Kylie 118
Phillips, Adam 162
Piaget, Jean 10, 99, 101
Pitsmoor Adventure Playground 11–13, 21–22, 24–26, 28, 30, 32–37, 39, 41, 43, 45, 47, 49, 133–135, 139–142, 144, 146, 148, 150–151, 153–154, 157, 163
play
  and art 52, 55, 62, 119, 125. *See also* 'loose (p)arts'
  animal 9, 62
  as negotiated exaggeration 164. *See also* dialudics
  digital 13, 98, 106, 109, 113–114, 159
  policies and programs 4–8, 10–14, 23, 26, 35, 47, 50–51, 56, 62–67, 74, 77, 80, 86, 95, 98, 101, 105, 109, 111–112, 114–115, 117, 125, 127, 131, 134, 140, 150, 154–155, 157–160, 162–165
playground 4–6, 8, 10, 13–15, 17, 21–29, 31–32, 34, 36, 38, 40, 42, 45–47, 51, 56, 60, 62, 67, 101, 125, 129–131, 133–148, 150–151, 153–154, 158, 160, 162–164
  adventure 4–6, 10–15, 17, 21–28, 30, 32–34, 36–39, 41–43, 46–47, 49, 51, 56, 60, 125, 129, 133–135, 138–140, 143–147, 150–151, 153–154, 157–158, 162–163, 172
  as provider of social services 134, 143, 155
  fixed structure 24, 36, 160
  safety and inspection 8, 23, 38, 45, 47, 87, 125, 142, 152
playwork 25–28, 42, 47, 49, 72, 145, 148, 150, 155
playworker 6, 22–23, 25, 27–29, 31, 39, 41, 46, 60, 130, 133, 135, 139, 142, 144, 146, 150, 154, 162
policy. *See* play: policies and programs
Pool, Steve 13, 36, 42, 134, 139, 153
Potter, Dave 17
Powers, Richard 34

Quarry Adventure Playground 12

rest 47, 50, 55, 119–120, 122, 124–125, 129, 131, 137, 158
Richards, Chris 16
risk 6, 28, 86, 120, 128, 135, 139, 148–149, 151, 158, 162
robot 83, 85–89, 162, 164
Rousseau, Jean-Jacques 163
Ruskin, John 4
Russell, Wendy 17

Sacks, Oliver 159, 165
self-build 26, 42, 152. *See also* playground: adventure
Sexton, Julia 12, 24, 29, 36, 38, 40–41, 45, 47, 141, 145, 148, 150
social change. *See* culture: change
STEAM/STEM 10, 73, 105–107, 109–110, 163, 173
Steel Miners' Strike 3
Streeck, Jürgen 47
sustainability. *See* climate crisis
Sutton-Smith, Brian 14, 16, 49, 51, 70, 72, 101, 157, 159, 166

technology 8–10, 73, 83, 85, 105, 114, 164
  and tools 9, 84, 114, 159
  and toys 9, 114
Thomson, Derek 158
'Three Frees' 23, 47
time constraints 66, 96, 97, 158. *See also* rest
Toelken, Barre 15
Truman, Sarah 26, 31, 44, 46, 135–137, 141, 148
Turner, Julius 28, 46, 138

UNCRC (United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child) 47
UNICEF 8, 16, 164, 166
unmaking 5, 8, 14, 46, 49, 55, 61, 101, 157–158, 162

Vygotsky, Lev 15

Walter, Meynell 49
wellbeing 145
White, Jan 47
Willet, Rebekah 16
Wilson, Penny 17
Winnicott, D.W. 61, 162

Zurn, Perry 69

About the Team

Alessandra Tosi was the managing editor for this book.

Adèle Kreager proof-read this manuscript and compiled the index.

Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal designed the cover. The cover was produced in InDesign using the Fontin font.

Annie Hine typeset the book in InDesign. The main text font is Tex Gyre Pagella and the heading font is Californian FB.

Jeremy Bowman produced the PDF, paperback, and hardback editions and created the EPUB.

The conversion to the HTML edition was performed with epublius, an open-source software which is freely available on our GitHub page at https://github.com/OpenBookPublishers

Lucy Barnes was in charge of marketing.

This book was peer-reviewed by Fraser Brown, Alexandra Long and Carole Scott. Experts in their field, these readers give their time freely to help ensure the academic rigour of our books. We are grateful for their generous and invaluable contributions.

This book need not end here...

Share

All our books — including the one you have just read — are free to access online so that students, researchers and members of the public who can't afford a printed edition will have access to the same ideas. This title will be accessed online by hundreds of readers each month across the globe: why not share the link so that someone you know is one of them?

This book and additional content is available at
https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0511

Donate

Open Book Publishers is an award-winning, scholar-led, not-for-profit press making knowledge freely available one book at a time. We don't charge authors to publish with us: instead, our work is supported by our library members and by donations from people who believe that research shouldn't be locked behind paywalls.

Join the effort to free knowledge by supporting us at
https://www.openbookpublishers.com/support-us

We invite you to connect with us on our socials!

BLUESKY
@openbookpublish
.bsky.social

MASTODON
@OpenBookPublish
@hcommons.social

LINKEDIN
open-book-
publishers

INSTAGRAM
openbookpublishers_

Read more at the Open Book Publishers Blog

https://blogs.openbookpublishers.com

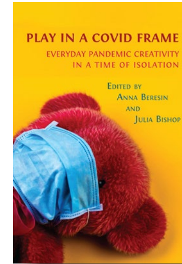
You may also be interested in:

Play in a Covid Frame

Everyday Pandemic Creativity in a Time of Isolation

Anna Beresin and Julia Bishop (eds)

https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0326

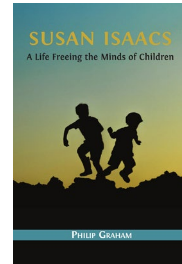


Susan Isaacs

A Life Freeing the Minds of Children

Philip Graham

https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0297

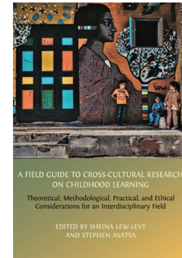


A Field Guide to Cross-Cultural Research on Childhood Learning

Theoretical, Methodological, Practical, and Ethical Considerations for an Interdisciplinary Field

Sheina Lew-Levy and Stephen Asatsa (eds)

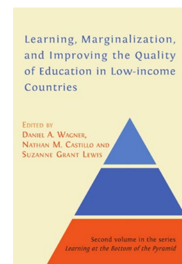
https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0440



Learning, Marginalization, and Improving the Quality of Education in Low-income Countries

Daniel A. Wagner, Nathan M. Castillo and Suzanne Grant Lewis (eds)

https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0256



Make/Unmake
Play at the Centre of Culture Change

Anna Beresin

Beresin writes it so well, with a balance of academic endeavour and cheeky playfulness. Every educator should read it for starters!

Richard Benn, Head of English, Silverdale School, Sheffield

In this very accessible book, Beresin demonstrates her strong commitment to the idea that for children's creativity to reach its full potential it is essential for them to be afforded the opportunity to explore, experiment, destroy, and start again. She is on a crusade to spread the word about adventure play, loose p(arts) and combinatorial flexibility, and the brilliance of that approach when working with children.

Fraser Brown, Leeds Beckett University

Anna Beresin provides an engaging and deeply original exploration of children's play as a powerful cultural force. Drawing on ethnographic research and vivid travel writing, the author journeys to the Midlands region of England to observe three remarkable play-based programs: a mobile makerspace, an adventure playground, and an artist collective. She captures the voices of playworkers and the ingenuity of children improvising with loose materials—turning small objects into tools of imagination and change.

At a moment when children's opportunities for material play are shrinking, this book confronts urgent questions: Who gets to play? Who is left out? The work resonates with UNICEF's recent call to address inequality, climate pressures, and technological shifts shaping children's lives today. By centring under-resourced communities, gender equity, and cultural representation, this volume reframes play as both a process of making and unmaking the world—an act of resilience, creativity, and collective transformation.

This book will appeal to scholars and students in childhood studies, play studies, education, and cultural anthropology, as well as practitioners, teachers, policymakers, and all who are committed to protecting children's right to play.

This is the author-approved edition of this Open Access title. As with all Open Book publications, this entire book is available to download for free on the publisher's website. Printed and digital editions, together with supplementary digital material, can also be found at http://www.openbookpublishers.com.

Cover image: Photo by Anna Beresin. Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal