

competencies unique to the play. Such competencies might contribute to the development of autonomous, flexible behavior patterns—competencies that help prepare children for a challenging and unpredictable world.

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Reflective Playwork: For All Who Work with Children

Jacky Kilvington and Ali Wood
 London: Continuum, 2010. Images, index. 169 pp. \$28.84 paper. ISBN: 9780826497642

I am told that playwork, either as a job or as a way of working with children, is not a familiar concept in the United States. It is certainly a contested one in the United Kingdom (U.K.), perhaps because playworkers have to contend with a number of contradictions not faced by others working with children and young people. Playworkers in the U.K. work with school-aged children (approximately from four- or five-years-old to fifteen-years old), and their relationships with children at play aim to be more egalitarian than the standard expert-to-novice relationships within most forms of children's work. Playwork principles call for the playworker to support children and young people in the creation of a space in which they can play. And play, as Jacky Kilvington and Ali Wood point out in the opening pages of their book *Reflective Playwork*, is something that children mostly prefer to do away from the eyes of adults. As if

that does not provide enough of a contradiction, working with the playwork principles' definition of play as a process that is freely chosen, personally directed, and intrinsically motivated raises all sorts of questions about power and control, purpose and benefit, even about childhood itself.

Kilvington and Wood are at pains to point out that although there is a job (perhaps even a profession) called *playwork*, not all playworkers use a playwork approach; conversely, a playwork approach can be used in any adult-child relationship or context. In nine short chapters, the authors outline an approach to working with children that foregrounds: (1) play for its own sake, highlighting the myriad obstacles to such an approach, obstacles that include dominant and entrenched understandings of the value and purpose of play and childhood; (2) the impact of legislation including health and safety, child protection, and inspection; and (3) instrumental outcomes (learning, development, crime reduction, tackling obesity, and so on) of publicly-funded services for children.

The foreword to this informal and accessible book sets the tone as each of the authors recounts her own childhood play experiences and journey into playwork. After a brief introduction to playwork and playwork principles, the first chapter enlarges on their term *reflective practice*, providing a model and illustrating it with their own personal reflections. These personal reflections are sprinkled throughout the book and serve both to illustrate key points in practice and also to show how much the small, idiosyncratic, and personal count in working with children at

play. In addition to their own reflections, the authors provide key questions and points of reflection to encourage readers to think further about the topics under discussion. Following this opening chapter, the book presents theories on play, then playwork practice (bringing together in one volume key thinking from playwork's own authors), then childhood, all followed by a series of chapters on aspects of the policy, legal, and organizational context for playwork in the U.K.

The book is not written for an academic audience: it is aimed at practitioners and its strengths lie in the personal anecdotes of playwork practice and the devices to encourage the reader to do the same. Some of the theoretical sections work quite well (for example the chapter on childhood), but I found the two chapters on play problematic. This may just be the perspective of a pedantic academic, but I felt that in the desire to make the text accessible, academic rigor was lost through the use of unsubstantiated claims and poor referencing. An example appears in the section on play deprivation. In one short paragraph, the authors draw uncritically on popular but contestable assertions that play deprivation is a common feature of children's lives and that therefore playwork may be an antidote to the social ills of contemporary childhood. Elsewhere, the light treatment of theory leads to oversimplification and, sometimes, confusion or even misrepresentation of key concepts. The use of Perry Else's integral play framework to group-play theories shoehorns them into a developmental perspective (unsurprisingly, since the model is adapted

from the work of Ken Wilber) despite the authors' attempts to move beyond a purely developmental understanding of the purpose of play and childhood into what they term a "new paradigm."

A second weakness of the book is one that bedevils all practical textbooks of this nature, and this weakness is recognized by the authors. There has been a change in government in the U.K. since the publication of the book, and the new administration has made a big show of cuts in public expenditure and moves towards deregulation. It is inevitable, therefore, that the book's sections on regulation and other aspects of the policy and legal context for playwork has become outdated. However, broad principles can still be taken from a discussion of these contexts from a specifically playwork perspective. In particular, the point about the problems inherent in asking children to articulate rationally their own play preferences or experiences is very well made. Similarly, the discussion regarding inspection and the differences between child care and playwork are also well presented.

Despite its weaknesses, *Reflective Playwork* will be of interest to those who work with children or who study children's play because it does present a unique approach to adult-child relationships and it navigates the tensions and contradictions in the playwork role with passion, humanity, and a sense of purpose.

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