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Play Spaces as Heterotopia: Seeking New Ways to Trouble the Discourses and Enactments of Playwork

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Abstract

In 1966 Foucault broadcasted a talk on French radio about “heterotopia.” These, he claimed, were institutional spaces that could be identified as being part of society, but at the same time outside contemporary social and political norms in their structure, discourses and iconography. The discourses and enactments of playwork frequently occur in shared spaces, in which they come up against powerful counter-discourses, particularly those generated by educational institutions. A (re)turning to data collected in three primary schools, their partner nursery and out-of-school provision revealed tensions and opportunities for playwork and playworkers during school play times and before and after school activities.

Key words: play, playwork, heterotopia, social haunting, methodology, spaces, feminist poststructuralism

Introduction

Children’s play occurs in many contexts inside and outside the home: in school playgrounds, adventure playgrounds and parks; in out-of-school or holiday provision, which may be organised in classrooms, churches, church halls, childminders’ homes and many other private or public places (King & Howard, 2014). Whether these spaces where playing is enacted count as playwork settings seems to depend as much (or maybe more) on parameters imposed

by the adult world as it does on the desires and experiences of the children for whom they are said to be created. This paper sets out to interrogate two such spaces. One is an out-of-school club that takes place in the nursery area of a primary school. The other is a corridor space that opens up onto a school playground, where play is overseen by a single on-duty teacher and lunch-time supervisors. The data for the latter was collected through a more classic ethnographic approach (Wall, 2006). I was immersed in the life of the school as helper and researcher positioned outside of the classroom in a shared area that acted as corridor, cloakroom and learning area. My role was to interact (and supervise) children from nursery and reception during lesson times but with the freedom to take notes throughout the day. The ethnography of the out-of-school club was part of a deconstruction of reports I had written as an early years' and playwork local authority consultant.

The original data collection took place in six education settings, including early years' organisations and primary schools, between 2011 and 2015. The schools were selected partly for their differences from one another (Shaw, 2017). The study does not use traditional ethnographic methods, in the sense of extended immersion in an unfamiliar field of social action, although it does draw on British social anthropology and "a rich tradition of urban sociology, heavily dependent on the detailed investigation of local social settings and cultures" (Atkinson et al., 2001, p. 9). The paper takes vignettes from two of the primary schools and re-examines the data in the context of playwork discourses and enactments.

The research uses evocative autoethnography to view play settings through the lens of post-structuralism (O'Byrne, 2007; Ellis & Bochner, 2003). This not only locates me, as researcher, firmly within the contexts that I have observed and analysed, but also allows for a destabilising of what counts as research into play and/or playwork, as well as what it means to be a playwork(er) researcher (Jones et al., 2016). At the time the research was carried out I

was a project worker and latterly an advisor or “early years’ teacher consultant” for a local authority. This brought me into contact with projects and practitioners working across the fields of early years and playwork. Inevitably I bring to my ethnography multiple identities, as an academic, a local authority employee, an educator, a woman and a mother. The desire to better articulate these shifting ontological and epistemological positions, within a praxis such as playwork, is explored further in the methodology section. What emerges as particularly noteworthy is the idea that playwork might be better understood not only by studying the places in which it overtly occurs, but also by paying attention to play spaces in which playwork as a distinct profession, built on its own body of knowledge and practices, is a tangible absence, as in the case of the play time data (King & Newstead, 2018). This absence is conceptualised as playwork becoming a haunting of the social spaces in which play is privileged, a potential social good that is simultaneously present (as a possibility) and missing in relation to the structuring and identities of the social actors, both children and adults (Gordon, 2008).

The idea of social spaces as heterotopia is employed both as a theoretical frame and a methodological tool (Foucault, 1994a). The methodology section, therefore, explores the six principles of heterotopia as spaces that are simultaneously real and utterly unreal, operating within contexts of their own regimes of power and truth and in ways in which this might be related to playwork (Foucault, 1977; Foucault, 1999). Foucault describes heterotopia as connected with “decoupages du temps.” Robert Hurley translates this as “temporal discontinuities” (Foucault, 1994a). Decoupage is also a craft technique that entails pasting cut-outs (typically paper) to an object and then covering them with several coats of varnish or lacquer (Wiki, 2016). A methodology that turns towards “heterotopological research” would acknowledge the coexistence of ideas pasted together from the distant and more recent pasts within playwork practices. It would seek to peer beneath the layers of varnish to identify

individual pictures and examine ways in which they have been stuck together with other incongruous beliefs and enactments (Shaw, 2017). The methodology section also returns to the post-structural metaphor of haunting in relation to discourses of power, identity (or the self) and (professional) language (or the sign), as they manifest as regimes of truth in the context of playwork (Derrida, 2006; Gordon, 2008).

Methodology

The original PhD from which the data is taken aimed to shine a light on the experiences of early childhood praxis (Shaw, 2017). On the periphery of this focus, the presences of older children's play, and the tensions between professional identities of practitioners who may work in multiple play contexts has become impossible for me, as the ethnographer, to ignore. This paper revisits two specific instances from the field work, which brought into focus principles, values and cultures of playwork more sharply than those of early childhood education or care (Brown, 2014). I hope to test possibilities for (re)conceptualising playwork through the use of a heterotopic lens.

Playwork and the Principles of Heterotopia

In 1966 Foucault broadcast a talk on French radio about "heterotopia." These, he claimed, were institutional spaces that could be identified as being part of society but at the same time outside of contemporary social and political norms in their structure, discourses and iconograph. A key feature of these "different spaces" is that they are "haunted by fantasy" (Shaw, 2017, p. 1). In the case of spaces where playwork takes place, this may be the

fantasies of the children in the play they initiate, or equally of the adults who are striving to provide open-ended (and open access) play within the constraints of current political policies and discourses (Beunderman, 2010). It may be that it is the tensions between these two fantasy worlds — the discursive space in which adult and child articulations converge and diverge, the stress points between play as work and play as an intrinsic human desire — that would be of interest to a heterotopic view of playwork practices.

Writing about heterotopia, Foucault (1994a) identifies six key principles. He separates heterotopia into two major types: crisis heterotopia and heterotopia of deviation. He speculates that crisis heterotopia are a feature of more “primitive societies” and are now being replaced by heterotopia of deviation (Foucault, 1994a, p. 179). In the original research, I conjectured that play within early-years settings is much like the old people’s homes that Foucault uses as an illustration of a space that falls between the two types of heterotopia. Old age is a period of crisis and idleness, a form of deviation from the norm of leisure activity, whilst early childhood is a deviation from the norm of pupilhood (Shaw, 2017). Playwork may fall into the category of crisis heterotopia — for example, playwork in hospitals, or deviation in young offenders’ institutions. I think there is also a case to be made for ‘play schemes’ displaying the characteristics of spaces that fall between the two in their complex positioning between (child)care and youth work. It is in this environment that the ethnographic vignettes analysed below may be of interest to playworkers and playwork researchers.

Foucault’s second principle states that heterotopia exist (they are real spaces) and have not ceased to exist but operate in a very different way (Foucault, 1994a). In other words, they have a distinct history that influences our interpretations of the founding principles — in the case of playwork, often those associated with post-Second World War adventure

playgrounds (Taylor, 2008). This is generative of the third principle, according to which heterotopia are able to juxtapose in a single real place several placements that are incompatible in themselves: the benefits of risk taking with modern constructs of child protection and health and safety legislation; play as a childhood/human freedom; and right juxtaposed with play as evolutionary and development psychology (Foucault, 1994a; Rousseau, 2009; IPA, 2018; Hughes, 2001). Furthermore, playwork may be imposed (and juxtaposed) on spaces designed and used for other purposes, for example the nursery space in the second analysis. This recognition of how the past has an observable effect on contemporary discourses also links with the idea of *decoupage du temps* already discussed.

The final two principles are: heterotopia operate according to systems of opening and closing that isolate them, but at the same time make them penetrable; and heterotopia have a relation to the remaining space in that they are an illusion that denounces all real space or a different real space that is as well arranged as ours is disorganized, badly arranged and muddled (Foucault, 1994a). These are ideas that might be played with, in efforts to understand the complexities of play spaces and playwork. Perhaps in relation to adults, children or objects that are either permitted or excluded from play spaces, privileged or condemned with respect to meaningful play and high-quality playwork.

Haunting and the Sociological Imagination in a Playwork Context

In his most influential work, *The Sociological Imagination*, Mills (1967) argues for a sociology that bridges the divide between private troubles and public issues. In more recent times, sociologists, drawing on post-modernism and post-structuralism, have turned their attention to what might lie underneath the bridge, to social issues or interpretations that are

hidden or ignored. More attention is paid to the generative nature of power relations and whether the subaltern (the least powerful in a society) has a voice (Spivak, 2010). Gordon (2008), deriving theory from Foucault and Derrida, draws a line between the sociological imagination and social haunting. Here the ‘ghost’ represents social injustices both large and small. These are the everyday hidden injustices that stir a desire for things to be changed at a local level — what Gordon refers to as “the something to be done” that is just out of reach — slightly outside of peripheral vision, or seemingly in the hands of others. Derrida, for me, is an incitement to see and think differently. He presents the subject (the self) as self-constructed through the stories we tell about ourselves and others: “What is presented is therefore not an ‘authentic’ self in the Enlightenment sense but, literally, a fictional self- one that is capable of many meanings” (Usher and Edwards, 1994, p. 147). This is particularly useful in reconceptualising an area as problematic as play, which may or may not be endorsed as playwork, depending on where, why and how it is taking place and who is involved with the play. This permits a decentring of notions of the expert, be that the researcher, the playworker or a text. Thus, the ethnographic excerpts that follow pay attention to heterotopic traits, words and terminologies, hauntings by hidden, ignored or forgotten theories, possibilities and missing or silenced perspectives. The first focuses on an after-school play scheme on a school site through the lens of a text (a report written by me in the role of a local authority quality liaison consultant). The second reflects on school playgrounds as spaces in which playwork is a missing possibility.

Analysis

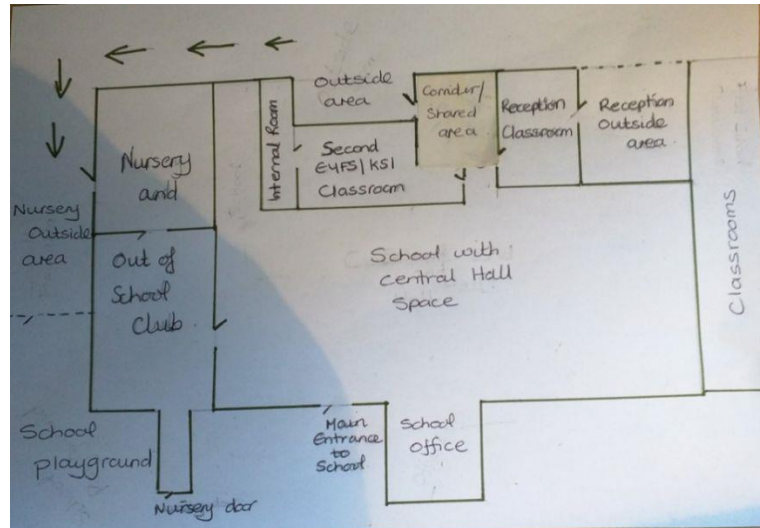
1. Out-of-School Provision

Site 1- Primary School is a village first school, providing for children aged 3 to 9. Cohort size varies considerably from year to year so that take-up of the before- and after-school provision

is unpredictable, causing ongoing concerns around finances and sustainability. A governor-run breakfast club, nursery and after-school/holiday play scheme was established in September 2013. The manager and two other staff members (all female) work as nursery practitioners and playworkers. At one point during the research, an additional male playworker was employed in the after-school club. The manager regularly reports to school governors' meetings about 'progress' in relation to financial stability, occupancy, advertising and quality issues. It might be suggested that there is an illusion of independence juxtaposed with oversight by school authorities. The head teacher is also head at the middle school, situated in a small town, 4.5 miles away. Previously, children wishing to attend the out-of-school clubs were bused to the middle school and mixed with the 10- to 13-year-olds. The systems of opening and closing are unstable, children from the middle school are not permitted to revisit their first school and there is a rupture in which younger and older children, siblings and possible friendships are separated, not only during the school day, but on either side of it as well.

The nursery space, on the other hand, is closed to stage 1 and 2 pupils during the day but opened to them, along with the outside play areas, whenever the play provision is in operation. The plan below (re)presents the way in which the play scheme area is simultaneously part of the school but cut off from other areas. In a discontinuity of time, the space carries the values and artefacts of nursery play while the older children inhabit it, but out-of-school equipment and principles are banished to a cupboard during nursery hours.

Figure 1: Plan of Site 1 Primary School and Out-of-School Club



Playwork in this space is a deviation from the norms of both the nursery — whose play is disciplined by the Early Years’ Foundation Stage (EYFS) — and the school — where play is the ‘more serious’ work of learning through a formal curriculum (Department for Education, 2014). Regimes of the self, in relation to identity and power locations, between adults and children shift. Although the children have not left the school site, they have turned (or maybe run) away from their identity as pupils (or students, which is an alternative term creeping into the lexicon of English schools). The regimes of power, which rule over the indoor spaces, become hauntings in the playground. They are still present, but less visible, as new expectations of enactment, of being and becoming a child player or adult playworker, manifest themselves. Some of the staff must also grapple with turning away from their nursery practitioner personas (they are not formally awarded the status of teacher even if they hold a qualification at the appropriate level) in order to privilege the discourses of playwork. A male staff member is brought in to organise opportunities for outside play (or games or sports). This might be read as a type of compensation for the femaleness of the nursery staff, associated as they are at other times with care for the very young or perhaps with care for

other bodies in general. For further discussion of feminist perspectives on Foucault's work see McNay (1992).

The nursery has not ceased to exist, it is merely operating in a different way (Foucault, 1994a). The ethos of playwork contests some of the historical assumptions and iconography of play in early childhood, but the utopian illusion of open-ended play for its own sake is constrained by the physical and social space of the nursery. This haunting by the nursery manifests itself through the smallness of the furniture and the activities that cannot be packed away (such as sand trays and role play corners), which in their turn influence the alternative equipment that can be provided. The space is closed off from the neighbouring school hall and some parts of the outside area of the school, which might shape playwork possibilities in other ways. There is a tangible juxtaposition of the incompatibilities of playwork and early years education and care. At this time, playwork staff had to demonstrate adherence to the EYFS in relation to any children in attendance under age 6. This is both reflected, and to some extent challenged, by the extract from the deconstructed Early Years' Quality Liaison (EYQL) report below:

Observed a mixed age range of children participating in the after-school club. A good variety of activities to suit all age groups ensured that all children were engaged and there was a friendly, relaxed atmosphere with plenty of peer-to-peer and adult-child interaction. (EYQL report, Site 1 Primary School, 20.3.15)

At one time an out-of-school club would have merited a report of its own, but by 2015 the observations and discussions with playworkers had become an addendum to the EYFS

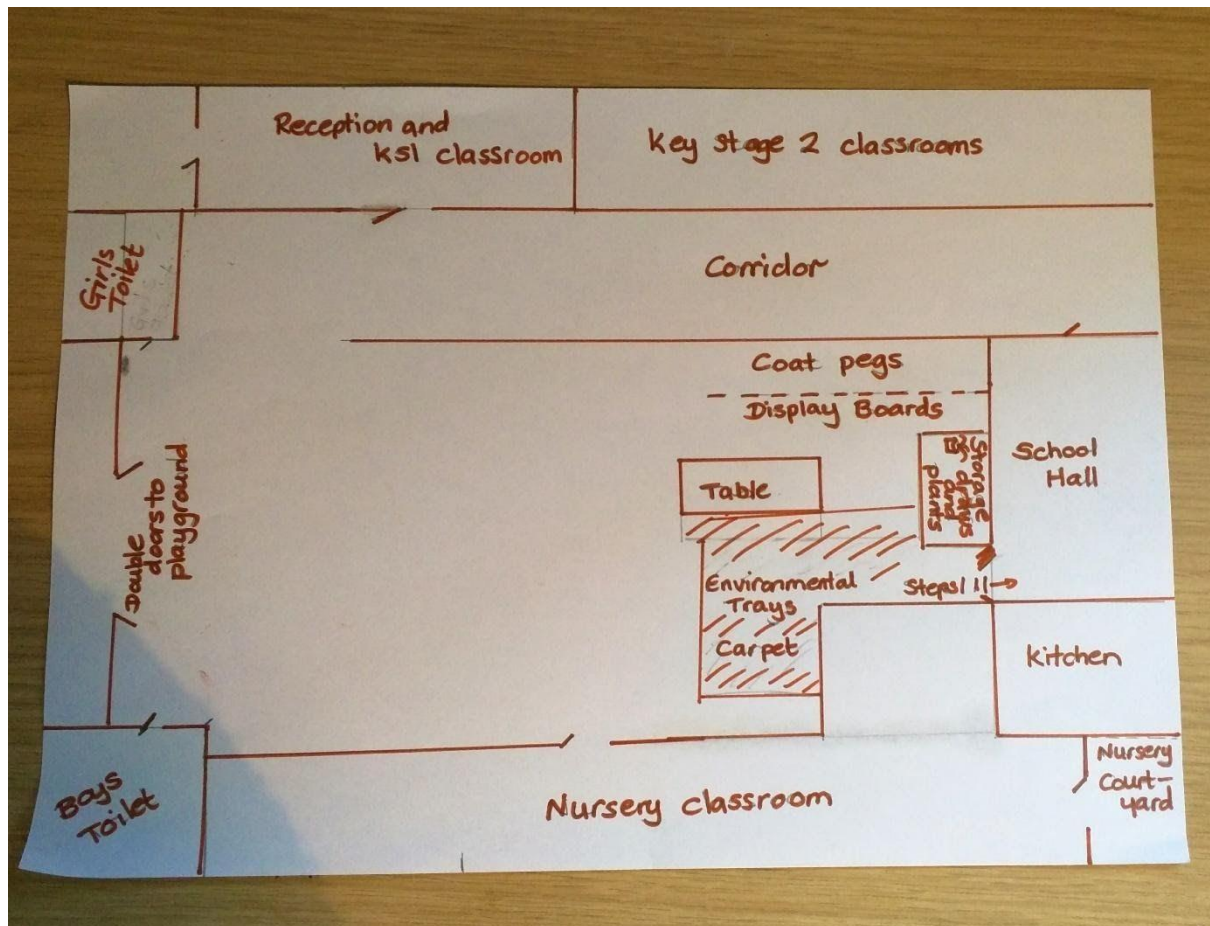
quality visit. At this point, my (researcher/advisor/practitioner/teacher) professional self suffers a form of crisis, or postmodern rupture (Foucault, 1994b; Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983; Payne, 1993). In my role as early years' teacher consultant there is a tension between the disciplining regimes of education, with its culture of testing and measuring performance, and a commitment to play-based learning and development. This is magnified in my involvement with the out-of-school club, since past jobs have entailed training playworkers and working with them to establish playscheme provision. I also hold dear the belief that much learning and development takes place outside the context of formal schooling and that teachers are not the only (or even the best placed) adults to lead/research/articulate these experiences (Sedgwick, 2012).

The first distinct value expressed in the extract is that children of different chronological ages participate in something together. This is very different to the regimes of the school day, in which children are grouped together by age for most of the time. The second is the emphasis placed on the "friendly relaxed atmosphere," perhaps a nod towards contesting the symbolic violence experienced by some children in education settings (Bourdieu, 1999). The types of activity and exact nature of the "peer-to-peer and adult-child interaction" are vague, leaving a potential gap for further heterotopic research into playwork spaces. It is difficult to ignore the fact that this is undoubtedly playwork but is far from the open access ideal. Parents pay for their children to attend and staff must ensure that the club is self-sustaining financially. There is an element of compensation (for the fact that parents are out working) and the play experiences on offer are therefore open to some children but not all the children within either the school or the local community. This might represent, for playwork, an additional haunting of absence worthwhile investigating and reflecting upon.

2. The School Playground

The second extract from the ethnography is not strictly speaking playwork, but the playground is undoubtedly a heterotopic play space in its own right, and as such worthy of consideration in relation to play spaces and understandings of and by playworkers. The observation took place in Site 2 (See Figure 2 – Plan of Site 2 Primary School) during an early phase of the research, before my researcher identity became entangled with that of a teacher consultant and report writer. My position as an insider or outsider, ethnographer or professional/practitioner, is often blurred. I have been awarded access as a researcher in exchange for helping to staff the corridor area — important to the autoethnography in the original project (Shaw, 2017). The space, which also houses toilets and coat pegs, has been transformed into a Problem-Solving, Reasoning and Numeracy (PRSN) area for EYFS children. However, at play time it becomes an extension of the playground constructed by children (aged 4 to 11) as an additional play space. It might be conjectured that the outside space is too empty of physical equipment (but not the hauntings that Foucault points to as a feature of all heterotopia) and sparsely staffed to satisfy all the children's desires for play opportunities. It generates questions and tensions over the ownership of play by children or adults, and the contributions that playwork(ers) might make to troubling the regimes of power and truth that haunt play spaces on school sites.

Figure 2: Plan of Site 2 Primary School



At break time, a complex social interaction takes place in the PRSN area, with children of all ages coming and going, firstly using the environment trays, comparing the weight of rocks and how many big ones they can pick up. An older girl counts out loud the frogs in the (artificial) grass tray. One younger child imitates. Children move on to ‘linking elephants’ and an older child reminisces about when they were in her classroom. A 10-year-old girl asks if younger children want to help her find a whistle, but they don’t, which she accepts — “no???” in a teacher sort of voice. The Year 5/6 teacher comes in from the yard asking what the linking elephants are and wanting them to be put away (they have moved from the table to the corridor floor, with a group of approximately eight children of various ages). One says: “They’re linking elephants. It’s a maths area.” (Observation notes from Site 2 Primary School, 26.5.11)

The playground is a deviant space, in the sense that enactments within it may appear (to the adult eye) to free the children from the disciplining expectations of classrooms (Foucault, 1977, 2005; Ball, 2013; Foucault, 1999). This is not an eye in a specific human face. It is the systems of “hierarchical observation, normalisation judgements and examination” identified by Foucault (1977) in other social institutions, such as prisons and hospitals, which seek to reproduce dominant discourses in order to marginalise other ways of seeing and doing, playing and learning. The two sets of unspoken norms juxtapose upon one another throughout the extract. Playground (and school) rules seep into the corridor space as children explore the equipment within their own time frame, without externally imposed planning or outcomes. This is challenged by the girl who imagines herself as the teacher taking control over the younger children and conjuring the image of the whistle, which will end the freedom of play. This is possibly an internalisation of the haunting of school in the children’s play that speaks of the impossibilities of freedom from the powerful disciplining of educational discourses and regimes of power and truth of the school. Something similar might be said of the teacher who desires the interlinking elephants to be put away and presumably for the children to stop playing on the corridor floor when they should be in the playground. There is a counter challenge from children who protest that it is a maths area, and therefore the elephants should legitimately belong to the ghostly space between school learning and play. Through all this, a social construction of learning and knowledge occurs (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978; Vygotsky, 2016; Bruner, 1961; Bruner, 1986). Frogs are counted, relationships are assembled, language use is rich and inclusive, problems are set and solutions are tested. None of it is observed for the purpose of authoritative examination or normalising judgement (Foucault, 1977). However, through the observation as research, interesting questions are generated around the learning that takes place during play: the interactions

between children of different ages; the extent to which play should take place in the natural world or use representations of reality in the form of environmental trays and interlinking elephants; and the possible purposes and possibilities of the periods of time we specify as ‘play times,’ as well as the multidisciplinary nature of exchanges between theory, practice and policy making. I would venture to suggest that these are issues of interest to playwork as much as education, and in which playworkers have an important stake.

An additional heterotopic reflection that occurs is around the iconography of break time as compared to lunch time in the same playground space. The term “break” suggests a short rupture between the much more important rhythms and content of lesson times. Even when referred to as “play time” it would seem to devalue the notion of children’s play, being usually no more than twenty minutes, in which children must also manage going to the toilet, having a snack and/or drink and putting on/taking off appropriate clothing. Furthermore, it is seen as a privilege, not a right, which teachers have the power to withhold for bad behaviour or incomplete schoolwork.

Lunch time is a much longer period, for which some children, in my experience, rush or leave their food in order to get outside to make the most of the time for play. It is also a time at which teachers withdraw their authority (and disciplining) of the space, leaving this responsibility to lunch-time supervisors. While there is a small body of research that includes play in the school playground (for example, King & Howard, 2014), there is much that has not been researched in relation to the power, position and undocumented understandings of dinner ladies or lunch-time supervisors. A search of the literature reveals a focus on behaviour from the perspective of the regimes of truth constructed by school management, for example a set of worksheets designed to monitor and correct (or (re)discipline) children’s behaviour during play times at school. In my sociological imagination, the ontology and

epistemes of playwork, turning lunch-time staff into playworkers, could be a far healthier and effective way of addressing problematic behaviours in school playgrounds. While I am not saying that this sort of project has not been undertaken, I am claiming that there is potential for further theorisation that would add to the richness and diversity of research into play and playwork.

Concluding Remarks

The intention of this paper has been to test the theory of heterotopic space and the possibility of a heterotopic methodology in relation to playwork. It is limited by the fact that the original data sought to trouble the spaces and artefacts of early childhood education and care. Even so, playwork imposed and juxtaposed itself onto the ethnography and incited a (re)visiting of the data related to play and playwork. My hope is that it will speak to others interested in playwork as a profession and a field of research, not least to playworkers. I have detected interesting and significant tensions between maintaining playwork as a distinct set of values and skills and constructing artificial boundaries between what and who might be envisioned as playwork and playworkers. It is my belief that research, using a range of methodologies and positions, is an important aspect of developing professional playwork, which takes into account the voices of children, young people and playworkers. The concept and praxology of heterotopic research are possibilities for widening the repertoire of available methodologies for researching playwork.

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