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Why the playworker’s mind-set is ideal for research with children: Child researchers investigate education rights in Nicaragua

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Introduction

This chapter draws on my experience as a PhD researcher investigating children’s perceptions of human rights in school in Nicaragua’s coffee-growing zone to claim that, for a researcher such as myself, coming from a playwork background, the ability to hold on to a playworker mind-set offers a distinct advantage when it comes to doing research in partnership with children.

To develop this argument, following this introduction, the chapter is structured in four sections. The next section starts with a return to my playwork roots in England in the 1970s and tells how from those roots grew the Article 31 Children’s Consultancy Scheme in the late 1990s, and then how in 2001, I took these ideas with me to Nicaragua, where they gradually developed into the research methodology now known as “Transformative Research by Children and Adolescents” (CESESMA, 2012; Shier, 2015). The second section explains the TRCA approach in more detail, showing how its epistemology, values and methods reflect its playwork-inspired origins, and how it has subsequently developed through practice. This is followed by a section describing my 2012–15 doctoral research project where TCRA was used as the main research methodology, giving rise to striking (and unexpected) findings on children’s perceptions about their right to play. The final section reflects on how the researcher’s ability to hold on to a deeply rooted playworker mind-set may have contributed to the possibility of such findings and, more generally, how this playworker mind-set may be advantageous for other researchers seeking to cut through the preconceptions and prescriptions of the adult professional world to engage more fully with children’s ways of thinking and so get closer to a real understanding of children’s own experiences, perceptions and agendas.

In writing this chapter, I have inevitably drawn heavily on my PhD thesis “Children’s Rights in School: The perception of children in Nicaragua” (Shier, 2016). To avoid multiple self-citing, therefore, it should be understood in what follows that in all mentions of my doctoral research, unless another source is cited, this work has been used as the main reference.

Playwork roots

I worked as an adventure playground worker in South London from 1976–79 and later in Birmingham from 1986–87. During my time in London, I participated in one of the UK’s earliest professional playworker training programmes and received my London Adventure Playground Association Adventure Playground Worker’s Certificate. Though not a long time in career terms, the seeds sown on London’s adventure playgrounds grew into a perennial commitment that guided me through a 20-year career in playwork training, professional development and consultancy, including a number of key national roles in the UK.

When I started in the 1970s, the playwork literature that we know today did not exist; indeed, there was very little to read on the topic of playwork, and this is an important point to bear in mind in relation to what follows. As a playworker, my concept of playwork was not informed by literature and had no explicit theoretical base, evidence base or epistemology. It was formed through critical reflective practice (though this term, too, was unknown at the time), enriched by debate amongst peer practitioners and the politics of radical community action that were current at the time (Lees & Mayo, 1984). Thus, when, in the following sections, I go on to talk about how TRCA has its roots in playwork, it has to be understood that these roots are embedded in the playwork that I practised and reflected on and the discourses that I and my peers developed to explain and justify it, and not in today's 'playwork literature'. Where more recent playwork literature is cited below, these are post hoc explanations, and not in themselves the foundations of my later work.

Indeed, in the 1970s, the concept of playwork itself was only beginning to emerge, to some extent as a rethinking of an older concept of 'playleadership' (Abernethy, 1968). The gradual changeover from 'playleadership' to 'playwork' was more than just a change of nomenclature, but marked a fundamental shift in how we conceived our relationship with the children we worked with. We no longer considered ourselves charged with 'leading' their play activities. As play was understood to be an innate drive within all children (JNCTP, 1985), children at play had no need of adult leadership. Instead, the adult role was reconceived to incorporate a wide range of tasks that together helped enable, resource and make safe the myriad play activities that the children themselves sought to realise. Though the word 'facilitate' had not yet come into fashion, it could be said that we were there to facilitate play rather than to lead it. My first published work, *Adventure Playgrounds: An introduction* (Shier, 1984), can be seen as a discourse on playwork as I then understood it.

Crucial to this way of thinking was our understanding of the *purpose* of play. Though scientists have puzzled over this for centuries (Ellis, 1973), to me it became obvious, simply by reflecting on the question, 'Why do human beings take so long to grow up?', and coming to the conclusion that:

The reason is that the human is a learning animal. Unlike other species, we need this time to learn all the things we need to learn in order to function as adult human beings in the complex societies we have developed . . . In other words, children have evolved as natural learners. That is their sole function in life. And the important thing is that this evolution of children as natural learners took place over many thousands of years, during which there were *no* schools, *no* teachers, *no* education authorities, *no* . . . tests, in fact not even a word for 'education' (which was invented much later by the Greeks). Children learn all the time, regardless of whether we teach them or not. And what we nowadays call 'play' is one of the fundamental mechanisms that our species has evolved to enable that learning to take place. We don't have to make children learn. Indeed, I sometimes feel our clumsy adult interventions largely serve to get in the way or stop them learning. Our role as adults is not to *make* children learn, but simply to do the best we can to provide a fertile environment for that learning, and maybe to guide and facilitate it along its many pathways. (Shier, 2001, p. 2)

This is important for the argument I hope to develop in the final section of this chapter about why playworkers make ideal researchers with children. As a playworker, I knew my work facilitated children's learning, but I also understood it was not for me to decide *what* they should be learning or how (and also, significantly, it was not up to me to test or measure such learning, and indeed, it would have been impossible, as I had not specified what was to be learnt). Although at the time, we did not have the concept of 'play cues' (Sturrock & Else, 1998), they were already part of our practice. We resisted all talk of a playwork curriculum and sought instead to respond to the cues provided by the children about what kinds of play experiences they had in mind on a particular day (taking it for granted that learning and development would be happening anyway and so did not need to be programmed in).

A fundamental shift in my thinking occurred in the mid-1990s, when I 'discovered' the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989), and specifically Article 31, which establishes play as a human right of all children. I realised that for years my playwork practice had been all about defending children's right to play, though until that epiphany (which occurred at the World Play Summit in Melbourne, Australia in 1993), I had not been fully aware of it. The rights-based approach now became my new guiding paradigm, not replacing, but underpinning and so strengthening my earlier thinking about the importance of play in children's lives and the potential role of adults in facilitating it. The espousal of a rights-based approach brings with it a radical change in how adult roles are conceived in relation to the facilitation of children's play. Formerly, the law (in the UK) enabled authorities to provide for play, but did not oblige them to do so. With human rights treaties, such as the UNCRC, comes the role of *duty-bearer*, meaning that the state, as party to the treaty, and those who act for it such as local authorities, now have defined obligations in relation to the human rights guaranteed in the treaty. Asbjørn Eide (1987) notably defined three types of states' obligations: to respect rights, to protect rights and to fulfil rights. In the case of children's play and Article 31, this means that all public authorities are *legally obliged* to refrain from any activity that infringes children's right to play; to act decisively to prevent others from infringing children's right to play; and, where circumstances prevent the realisation of children's right to play, to ensure that this right is fulfilled either by direct provision (e.g., council-run playgrounds/playcentres) or by facilitating such provision by others (e.g., funding for community-run playgrounds/playcentres). Unfortunately, however, in the over 25 years since the ratification of the UNCRC, successive UK governments have failed to legislate to incorporate these treaty obligations into domestic law.¹ While this means compliance cannot be enforced directly through domestic courts, the state has obligations under international law which lend strong legal and moral force to demands for the realisation of the right to play, particularly for children whose equal access to play is limited through social exclusion, discrimination or disadvantage.

In anticipation of what follows, it is worth noting here that, while in my professional life the 'discovery' of children's rights was a permanent paradigm shift leading to a change of direction, this was not true of playwork in general. Though modern playwork literature repeatedly refers to Article 31 and the right to play, the rights-based approach as outlined above has not become 'mainstream' as a guiding paradigm for playwork. Whilst I have come to see playwork as part of a broad range of adult responses to the realisation of every child's right to play (a small part in global terms, but still important), a more common view in the playwork literature is to see the right to play as part of a broader argument for the importance of playwork (see, for example, Beunderman, 2010; Wragg, 2011).

On returning to the UK from Australia, I founded the 'Article 31 Action Network' as a vehicle to make the UK playwork scene aware of the child's right to play embodied in Article 31 (Shier, 1995). As Article 31 also includes the right to participate freely in cultural life and the arts, we joined forces with like-minded professionals in the children's arts and media sector so that the new network could embrace all aspects of Article 31 (and attract arts funding). Promoting awareness of Article 31, however, required it to be understood in the context of the UNCRC as a whole, particularly its guiding principles: rights without discrimination (Article 2); decision-making in the child's best interests (Article 3); and the child's right to be heard and for her or his views to be given due weight by decision-makers (Article 12). This last was seen as particularly radical at the time (Lansdown, 2011) and was taken on board by the Network as an essential corollary of the child's right to play.

In launching the Article 31 Action Network, we needed to demonstrate in a concrete and attention-grabbing way what this might mean in practice; in other words, what difference would a child-rights-based approach make in play and the arts? Our answer was a pilot project that went on to become the 'Article 31 Children's Consultancy Scheme'. The initial idea was that teams of children (aged around 8–12) would be supported in taking on the role of expert consultants to the senior management of cultural and recreational institutions, and, after investigating their current provision, advise them on how to make projects, programmes and facilities more child-friendly. The pilots were

run in 1997 at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and Walsall Museum and Art Gallery in the English West Midlands. The approach was seen to be effective and was then further developed, tested and replicated over 30 times throughout the UK, with child consultants offering expert advice to some of the most prestigious cultural institutions in the land. For example: in 1998, child consultants were commissioned by the British Waterways Board to research the potential of the English canal network for children's recreation; in 1999, child consultants from the New-Age Traveller community were commissioned by the Children's Society to advise on play and recreation opportunities for Traveller children; and in 2000, child consultants advised the management of the Tower of London on how to make it less boring for younger visitors. This phase culminated in the UK Heritage Lottery Fund, providing funding for 20 further children's consultancy projects to be run in museums and art galleries throughout the UK. Although not written up in the academic literature at the time, some of these early experiences have been described in the practitioner literature (Shier, 1999a; 1999b; 2015).

Though the majority of these projects were in the arts and heritage sector, the thinking behind them was still rooted in playwork. This is not to say that the Children's Consultancy Scheme was an instance of playwork in practice, as it involved adult facilitators directing a series of carefully structured activities in order to ensure that specific outputs could be achieved within a given time-scale (which may occasionally occur in a playwork setting, but is not in keeping with its ethos). However, it treated children as the leading experts on what is child-friendly and what isn't, what's fun and what's boring, and what makes them feel included or excluded. What it drew from playwork was its belief in following the children's ideas (PPSG, 2005) and letting children present these ideas directly to decision-makers with minimal adult interference. Just as playworkers must learn to trust children's sense of the value of their chosen play activities, so managers and decision-makers were encouraged to trust children's sense of what worked for them and what didn't in a cultural or recreational facility.

Transformative Research by Children and Adolescents: a research methodology with roots in playwork

In 2001, I moved to Nicaragua, in Central America, where I worked with a local NGO called CESESMA,² which supported child workers on coffee plantations in promoting and defending their rights, including, of course, the right to play (Shier, 2010; 2011).

Starting in 2007, CESESMA adapted the Children's Consultancy approach to a very different local context and began to apply it in its work with young coffee plantation workers. In that year, a team of child consultants from Santa Martha coffee plantation researched the problem of violence on the plantation and made the keynote presentation at a national forum on prevention of violence to children (Young Consultants of Santa Martha, 2009). Two years later, the same team was commissioned by Trócaire, the Irish Catholic Development Agency, to produce a report on the relationship between business and human rights in the coffee sector (Young Consultants of Santa Martha, 2011). These experiences shaped the development of the 'Children and Young People Defending our Right to Play' campaign, sponsored by the UK-based *PlayWords* magazine (Shier, 2011), in which three teams of child researchers carried out appraisals of play opportunities in their communities and assessed the factors that prevented them exercising their right to play. The children's research was published in the Mexican journal *Rayuela* (CESESMA, 2013) and also cited as evidence in the report 'Children's Right to Play' (Lester & Russell, 2010), which was influential in persuading the UNCRC to produce a General Comment on the right to play (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013).

In 2011, recognising the potential of the Children's Consultancy approach to contribute to the empowerment of children and adolescents, CESESMA tested a modified version, now renamed '*Transformative Research by Children and Adolescents*' (CESESMA, 2012). The term 'consultancy' (*consultoría* in Spanish) was dropped, and the young participants became 'researchers' rather than 'consultants'. While in the original UK context, the term 'consultant' gave weight to the children's

advisory role and reflected their status as external experts, in Nicaragua their role became more that of *insider* investigators, researching and analysing aspects of their own reality, without the need for a commissioning client.

Influenced by the Latin American concept of popular education (*educación popular*) (Kane, 2001) and the work of Paolo Freire (2001), two aspects of the previous approach were seen as limiting the young consultants' empowerment. First, an adult always told them what topic they were going to research, instead of supporting them in deciding this for themselves. Second, once they handed in their report, there was no commitment to follow up or further action to support them in getting their recommendations implemented. To overcome these limitations, two changes were made to the original model. At the beginning of each project, the teams of young researchers decided for themselves what topics they wanted to research. They were encouraged to reflect on the problems that affected their communities and identify areas where they felt there were possibilities for change driven by research evidence. Through this process of reflection, they reached a consensus on the topics they wanted to research. The other new element was that, after completing their research reports, each team of young researchers was supported in developing an action plan to disseminate their findings and follow up their recommendations. These included actions that the young researchers could undertake without adult help, such as discussing their findings with other people in their villages, and also actions that required adult support, such as requesting a hearing before the Municipal Children and Youth Committee or contacting the media to undertake interviews. The supporting organisation made a commitment to accompany and facilitate the young researchers in implementing their action plans. It is in this phase that the children and adolescents start to contribute to the transformation of their lives and their communities. They do not do research for its own sake, but instead undertake 'transformative research' with a significant impact for themselves, their families and communities (Shier, 2015).

Although the TRCA approach grew out of earlier practice through a process of critical reflection and was not built on any existing methodological paradigm in the research literature, in retrospect, it has been found to have a good fit with Donna Mertens's *Transformational Paradigm* (Mertens, 2007), a conceptual fit that goes beyond the convenient synchronicity of names. A detailed account of the Transformative Paradigm as it relates to other paradigms in the literature and to TRCA as a methodology can be found in Shier (2016). In brief, however, Mertens (2010) describes its five defining characteristics as: (1) primacy of qualitative methods, (2) interactive link between researcher and participants, (3) accommodating cultural complexity, (4) explicitly addressing power issues and (5) acknowledging contextual and historical factors linked to discrimination and oppression.

Though it is unlikely that Mertens was thinking of playwork when she drew up this definition, it is an interesting exercise to identify the parallels. With very little editing, all five of Mertens's key factors can be applied to the practice of playwork as follows: (1) playwork relies on qualitative indicators rather than score-keeping to evaluate its effectiveness, (2) there is an interactive link between playworker and children, (3) good playwork recognises and embraces the (complex) cultural mix of the community in which it takes place, (4) reflective playwork explicitly addresses power issues: between playworker and children, amongst children and between both of these and society's decision-makers and (5) playwork not only acknowledges contextual factors leading to discrimination and oppression, but seeks to tackle them in striving to ensure equal play opportunities for all children.

To test the updated TCRA approach, four teams of child researchers were formed and supported in planning and carrying out research projects. For the first time in CESESMA's work, the children themselves chose their research topics. The team from El Plomo decided to look at the concept of 'Respect' and how lack of respect in families and communities leads to violence; the Yasica Sur team decided to research 'The violence that children suffer in the home'; the Samulalí team chose 'Parents who hit their children: Why do they do it and what are the alternatives?'; and, finally, the Yúcul team chose the topic of alcohol and its relation to violence in the community. As well as producing research findings and recommendations, the teams drew up action plans to publicise their research and push

for the implementation of their recommendations from local community up to national level. They presented their reports first in their home villages and subsequently in municipal, and in some cases national, forums. The four reports were compiled and published in book form by CESESMA in Nicaragua in March 2012, and an English translation, 'Learn to live without violence', was published in the UK (CESESMA, 2012). All four teams used their research to advocate for change, but the team that made the most impact was the one from Yúcul. They presented their findings to the government's newly formed 'Family Life and Security Commission', which decided to make the alcohol problem a priority for local action. Local government and party officials admitted they had been aware of the issue for years, but it wasn't till the children came forward with their research that they felt forced to act on it. The local police also took action, confiscating illegal liquor and closing at least two unlicensed cantinas (bars). A popular national television channel then featured the young researchers on the evening news, and since then, the local authority and police have ensured no new liquor licenses are granted in the Yúcul area.

The TRCA research approach

Based on these experiences, CESESMA has set out the guiding principles that characterise its 'Transformative Research' approach:

1. It is founded on human rights.
2. It recognises that the foremost experts on children's everyday lives are children themselves, but also that, as researchers, they can learn more about a topic, expanding and deepening their existing knowledge.
3. CESESMA's experience suggests that children readily take on board and identify with the idea of themselves as researchers and understand what this role implies. The role of the adult is therefore seen as facilitating and accompanying the research process.
4. Children and adolescents are supported in planning, organising and carrying out their own research, and provided with technical support and resources similar to those which adult researchers would typically expect. The way in which this support is provided must be appropriate to the age and experience of the children and adolescents involved.
5. Children and adolescents produce their own research report in their own words, and also control how it will be designed and presented (for example, selecting drawings and photographs to illustrate their findings). If a formal report prepared by adults is required as part of a project, this is prepared and presented separately, and the two reports must not be confused.
6. The organisation that supports the young researchers must make a commitment to continue to accompany and support them in drawing up and carrying out an action plan to disseminate their findings, and promote the implementation of their recommendations.

(Summarised from CESESMA, 2012, p. 52)

Though the TCRA model has developed over the years, its roots in playwork, and more specifically in my own playwork practice, have underpinned this development and can still be seen behind these principles. As a playworker, I learned to recognise children as play experts who did not need to be led or instructed in playing. This was then extended in the Children's Consultancy model to recognise children as experts in what makes a facility or service child-friendly. TRCA now goes a step further by recognising them as experts in just about every area of their lived experience.

Although most of my own playwork experience was garnered decades before the advent of today's Playwork Principles (PPSG, 2005), the way these principles seek to distil the essence of playwork in a few words makes them an excellent point of comparison to highlight the similarities and differences between playwork and TRCA. Considering Point 2 above, for example, just as playworkers' interventions seek to enable children to extend their play and recognise the developmental benefit of

doing so (Playwork Principle no. 8), so TRCA supports children in expanding and deepening their existing knowledge on the issues that concern them. Point 3 above defines the adult role in TRCA as facilitating and accompanying the children's own research process, and Point 4 talks about how children are supported in planning, organising and carrying out their own research, and provided with the necessary resources. Again, there are obvious parallels with the Playwork Principles, which speak of how children determine and control the content and intent of their play (Playwork Principle no. 2) and how the essential adult role is to support and facilitate the play process (Playwork Principle no. 3). Similarly, Point 5 of the TCRA guidelines talks of children producing reports in their own words, where they also control the design and presentation, another parallel with Playwork Principle no. 2's insistence on children controlling both the content and intent of their play.

There are also, of course, differences. As discussed earlier, the rights-based approach that became my own guiding paradigm, though recognised by most playworkers, has not become essential to playwork in the same way. Playwork Principle no. 1 describes play as an 'impulse', a 'necessity', and 'fundamental . . . to wellbeing', but does not describe it as a human right. The first principle of TRCA, then, "[i]t is founded on human rights", while not inconsistent or at odds with a playwork approach, is not part of its essence either, though it is the essence of my own practice.

The other area of divergence is Point 6, which highlights the importance in TRCA of an action plan with objectives for the future. In children's play, a follow-up plan with set outcomes, while not impossible, would be the exception. This has to do with the definition of play as activity that is 'intrinsically motivated' (Playwork Principle no. 1), meaning that whatever motivations the players have exist within the frame of the play itself and are not external to it. Children engaging in TRCA, on the other hand, are encouraged from the start to think of their research project not as an end in itself, but as a way to address problems in their schools or communities and push for change at different levels. Thus, while TRCA has its roots in playwork experience, and many parallels with playwork in concept, it is not, and never can be, an instance of playwork in practice.

Using TRCA in a doctoral research study: playwork roots influencing research practice

In writing a proposal for my own doctoral research, I took the unusual and risky step of proposing the 'Transformative Research by Children and Adolescents' approach as my main research methodology. It was risky in that I would be relinquishing control over much of the research process. If I was to be true to my own values and renounce all manipulation of the children, this meant trusting them to make important decisions for themselves, such as selection of the interview sample and the questions to be asked in child-to-child interviews. I would also have to accept whatever came back as the primary data for analysis. I was able to do this because, as an ex-playworker, I had no problem with trusting the children's thinking and following their ideas.

I therefore worked to support, facilitate and resource a research team consisting of eight boys and nine girls aged nine to 15, all of whom attended local primary schools in four neighbouring villages in the coffee-growing area of La Dalia. All were also involved in agricultural and/or domestic work after school. They travelled from their home villages to CESESMA's Community Learning Centre once a week for a total of six half-day workshops (their teachers and school heads having granted them time off school for this), and between the second and third workshops, they collectively interviewed 150 other children in their villages to gather data on their experiences and perceptions of, and opinions about, human rights in their schools.

The general principles of TRCA were set out in the previous section, where their close – but not too close – relationship to the Playwork Principles was discussed. Here, I want to look more closely at the specifics of my research project and again show how the playwork roots of my approach influenced the fieldwork practice and the findings. However, before looking at the ways I was able to bring a playwork approach to bear, it is important to recognise one significant way in which I could not do so.

This is that when I approached the children to discuss their potential involvement, I had already chosen the research topic. Thus, rather than facilitating a process whereby they chose a topic to research, as the TRCA method requires, I was inviting them to engage in a research project on a topic I had already decided on, which could be seen as a backward step. The issue, however, is more complicated and nuanced. A first point to note is that adult researchers do not always get to choose their own research topics, as research agendas are often set by research funders and research projects developed accordingly. Should child researchers have a more privileged position, or might it be beneficial for them sometimes to work within this larger reality? Another factor to consider here is the potential research impact. Where research has been commissioned and paid for, this means that someone is interested in hearing the results, so an audience can be guaranteed for the presentation of the findings, thus increasing its likely influence (Lundy, 2007). Conversely, if research is motivated by child researchers' own concerns, it may be harder work to get the message across to those who can make a difference, although it is never impossible (see, for instance, the work by Manasa Patil on getting around as the child of a wheelchair user described by Kellett [2010, p. 201] and the work of the Young Researchers of Yúcul on alcohol and violence in Shier [2015, p. 212]). There are value and validity in both approaches.

The research topic having been thus established in advance, TRCA's playwork roots continued to be visible in the subsequent development of the project. As I worked with this team of child researchers, facilitating the development of their research project and putting together an interview format, I became aware that not only did they consider play and recreation to be rights to which they were entitled, but that they also gave a high priority to these rights. It was agreed to restrict their questionnaire to six or seven questions to keep the interviews and subsequent data analysis manageable and child-friendly. Most of the questions the team decided on were therefore about rights in general ("How does your teacher treat you?", "What rights have you learnt about in school?" "What rights are most violated in your school?" etc.). However, they also proposed a question on whether the right to play was respected or violated at school and how. It was striking that this was the only specific right they wished to address in this way: they did not, for example, propose equivalent questions on participation rights, the right to live without violence or the right to a quality education. Given the need to restrict the overall number of questions, I therefore asked them directly if they were sure they wanted to single out the right to play for this special treatment. They considered my question and confirmed their decision, so the question about the right to play stayed in.

The playwork roots of TRCA also helped to minimise the mediating effects of adult influence on the child interviewees and therefore ensure that their answers came as close as possible to representing their authentic perceptions and opinions. The following are some specific examples of how this approach sought to maximise the *trustworthiness* and in particular the *credibility* of the findings (Guba, 1981) and how this relates to playwork in theory or in practice:

- Although the topic of the research was children's rights in school, the entire research process took place away from school, in a purpose-built community learning centre that the children knew and felt comfortable in, thus creating a safe space where children were more likely to feel able to express themselves freely, which is typical of the spaces created through playwork practice.
- Child interview subjects were interviewed by child researchers (child-to-child interviewing). Unlike more typical data-gathering interviews which involve dialogue between a (usually adult) researcher and a research subject, the interview situation here was an unmediated (or minimally mediated) interaction between children, as in children's peer play.
- Child-to-child interviews also took place away from school premises, with no teachers or school staff anywhere near, once again creating a space where children could express themselves freely, as is typical of the best kind of playwork space.

- Adults (who were known to the children but not connected with the schools) were present at arm's length to ensure protection but did not interfere in data collection activities, another similarity with the best of playwork practice.
- Data analysis was carried out by the child researchers themselves. This process was done in small groups facilitated by adults whose role was to help the children's analyses and conclusions to emerge from discussion, rather than pushing their own preferences. This point will be returned to in the concluding section, where it will be suggested that this is something it is often hard for adult professionals without a grounding in playwork to do.
- A report on the findings was written and designed by the young researchers themselves and subsequently published in an international journal under their own names (Niñas y Niños Investigadores, 2014). Another playwork parallel can be seen here: on those few occasions where playwork practice leads to specific products (such as a work of art or a construction), this would always be seen as belonging to the children and not presented as the achievement of the playworker.
- The adult facilitator returned to the young researchers' team on a second field trip to discuss issues arising from the initial data analysis. Although for logistical reasons, these final discussions took place on school premises, in every case, a separate space was found, and no teachers were present.
- A second, more detailed analysis of the young researchers' data was later carried out by the adult researcher (after the young researchers had given their express permission and approval). This second analysis was done in the original language (Spanish), and the data did not have to be translated into English. This meant that the analysis carried out by an adult researcher was also based on the children's actual words, thus avoiding the risk of misinterpretation of children's thinking and intentions by adults during translation. This sustained effort to be as true as possible to the children's own communicative intent relates to how effective playworkers strive to minimise the 'adulteration' of play (Sturrock & Else, 1998; Thomson, 2014; see also the concluding section for a fuller discussion of 'adulteration').

What the above account shows is that, while TRCA is not a form of playwork and in practice uses different mechanisms to achieve its ends, there are clear parallels to be seen, whose existence owes a lot to TRCA's evolution from its playwork roots.

A final question to ask, however, is: what effect did this have on the findings of the research? This chapter is not the place to set out the full findings, and these can be consulted in my thesis (Shier, 2016). However, it is relevant here to note certain aspects of the findings where the methodology used may have influenced what was found. Foremost of these was the unexpected primacy of the right to play, as both one of the rights children were most aware of and as one of the rights most violated in school, by both teachers and fellow students. Another relevant finding was that, in contrast, children's participation rights, in particular the rights to be heard and have a say in decision-making (Article 12 of the UNCRC), were almost invisible in the research data. Whilst the right to play was by a long way the right most frequently referred to by interviewees, the right to participate or have a say in decisions at school was barely mentioned; a finding strikingly at odds with previous reports of children's views on rights at school (e.g. GRFG Drafting Committee, 2008; NGO Network for the Rights of the Child, 2004). Whilst the absence of data gives no clues as to possible explanations, my own hypothesis is that the findings of previous studies, where children appear to prioritise participation rights, may be more a reflection of a hidden agenda promoted (perhaps unconsciously) by adult researchers, than of the concerns of the children themselves. In other words, when research with children is guided by the interests of adult researchers, the resulting findings are likely to reflect those. When research is not guided by such an adult agenda – other than finding out what children really think – and a methodology such as TRCA is used that lets children foreground their own concerns, the findings are more likely to prioritise the right to play.

Why the playworker's mind-set is ideal for research with children

In this concluding section, I will argue that such findings were only possible because the children carried out the research themselves and in doing so were freed from any pressure to fulfil adult expectations regarding children's rights, and that, as well as being characteristic of the TRCA approach described in the previous sections, in a broader sense, this is also typical of the underlying 'playworker mind-set'. Even where a playwork-based approach is not made explicit in research methodology, the researcher who is able to maintain such a mind-set may be able to engage more fully with children's own experiences, perceptions and agendas.

The suggestion that there exists a single mind-set embraced by all playworkers is clearly an oversimplification, as can be seen, for example, in Russell's (2013) discussion of how playwork's central ideas have been formulated and reformulated over decades, all the while confronting and absorbing various inherent contradictions. However, the development, dissemination, broad acceptance and continuing discussion of the Playwork Principles (PPSG, 2005) provide a compass-bearing which points to some components that are widely accepted as making up such a mind-set (Brown, 2009). The Playwork Principles tell us that, "children and young people determine and control the content and intent of their play, by following their own instincts, ideas and interests in their own way for their own reasons" (Playwork Principle no.2), and that, "For playworkers, the play process takes precedence" (Playwork Principle no.4). Whilst it seems that only a small part of what is commonly described as 'play' (and indeed, what is described as 'playwork') fully meets these criteria, they stand for an ideal, or an aspiration, that many playworkers would endorse and as such are at the heart of my proposed 'playworker mind-set'.

Adherence to the playworker mind-set therefore means seeking to minimise the 'adulteration' of play. The term 'adulteration' is familiar in contemporary playwork literature (Sturrock & Else, 1998) but has different meanings for different authors. At its simplest, it is just the imposition of adult constraints, rules and limitations on children's play processes (Thomson, 2014), but it can also include the way a particular (adult-imposed) socio-political context limits or distorts play experience (Hughes, 2000) or the way that playworkers' own unresolved psychic needs get played out in their playwork practice, interfering with and corrupting the children's self-directed processes (Sturrock & Else, 1998). For any and all of these understandings, a fundamental task of playwork will always be to strive to minimise such adulterations in the way we work with children. These ideas together form the essence of what I am calling the 'playworker mind-set', as summed up here by Penny Wilson:

One of the most basic underpinnings of the craft of the playworker is to understand that the play of children within the boundaries of a play setting must remain unadulterated by external agendas. This means that playworkers do not try to educate, train, tame, or therapeutically treat children in their time and space for play. (Wilson, 2010, p. 9)

My argument, then, is that (a) the playworker mind-set as described here differentiates playworkers from all the other kinds of professionals who work with children, (b) this difference gives us a clear advantage in conducting research with children in a way that is fully open to their way of understanding their world, and (c) this creates the possibility of different findings and new knowledge that cannot be accessed in other ways (not necessarily better or truer knowledge, but different and therefore valuable in itself).

As a rule, adult researchers, whether they approach their work from an academic or a practitioner standpoint, bring a wealth of professional knowledge and experience to bear on the problems they seek to investigate. This knowledge is organised in systems developed within the professions they belong to and, particularly in the case of academics, in the disciplines they identify with. Such professional knowledge systems tend to inculcate ways of thinking including pre-set lists of 'oughts', 'shoulds' and 'needs'. For example, educationalists have ideas about what children ought to learn, psychologists tend to impose professional concepts of 'normality' and childcare specialists often feel constrained in allowing children to experience risk etc.

This adult knowledge and experience fills our heads and determines our approach to every research question or issue. When adults set out to do research in partnership with children, these pre-set agendas cause problems. It is all but impossible for adult professionals to set aside, even for a minute, their strongly held professional self-belief founded in their professional knowledge and expertise.

Playworkers, by contrast, are the only professionals working with children who (if they are good at their job) seek to follow the children's agenda (PPSG, 2005) and do not impose their own professional programme. My experience as a doctoral researcher, and my critical reflection on that experience, has led me to believe that my background as a playworker gives me an advantage when it comes to working with children in a way that does not seek to control or manipulate their positions and purposes. Unless adult researchers can learn to leave aside their agendas and preconceptions and work with children in a way that goes beyond collecting data, seeking instead to understand children's way of thinking about the world they live in – in other words, become more like playworkers – we will never be able to access the valuable knowledge that children themselves can generate.

Transformative Research by Children and Adolescents, as practised by CESESMA in Nicaragua, is plainly not playwork. And yet, with its roots reaching back to the history and philosophy of playwork in the UK, it is firmly aligned with this playworker mind-set. In enabling us to clear away the remnants of adult professional agendas, positions and prescriptions, it helps us to hear and understand what children are concerned about and how they themselves experience and analyse these issues in their lives.

Notes

- i. The Welsh Assembly has made significant progress in aligning law and policy in Wales with the provisions of the UNCRC, but its current devolved powers do not permit it to fully incorporate the Convention into Welsh law".
- ii. CESESMA stands for "Centro de Servicios Educativos en Salud y Medio Ambiente" (Centre for Education in Health and Environment).

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