The dialectics of playwork: A conceptual and ethnographic study of playwork using Cultural Historical Activity Theory

Abstract

This study offers an original analysis of contradictions inherent in playwork practice. It is ethnographic and political, using Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), and taking an interpretivist and (post-)Marxist epistemological stance. Playwork’s fundamental contradiction is that between understanding children’s play as autotelic and self-organising on the one hand, and on the other seeking and accounting for public funding that requires services to address policy agendas. In CHAT terms, this is the dialectic between playwork’s use value and exchange value. Fieldwork data comprise participant observation in an urban open access Play Centre and semi-structured interviews both with the Play Centre playworkers and playworkers practising before the introduction of the 1989 Children Act. Such services were historically funded in deprived areas to keep children off the streets and on the straight and narrow. The Children’s Fund, operational at the time of the fieldwork, was a contemporary equivalent within the totalising, future-focused ‘risk and prevention’ policy paradigm. Playwork spaces were co-produced through a dialectical triad (Lefebvre, 1991) of adult planning (assuming outcomes), spatial practices (interventions) and lived moments of playfulness that both resisted adult intentions and gave rise to a hope that temporarily made life better. Open access playwork spaces were emotionally highly charged, both because of the nature of play itself – its exuberances and tragedies – and the children. This highlighted tensions between ideals of play as inherently good and the reality of adaptation to interpersonal, structural and symbolic violence characterising the children’s lives. Play frames frequently fell apart as raw emotions seeped through, and settings operated on the edge of violence. Playwork subjectivities are performative and emotive. In particular three forms of dialectically interrelated hope were discernible: a far hope of policy projects, a revolutionary hope of emancipatory ideals, and a near, everyday hope in moments of playfulness. An ethics of playwork dispositions is proposed that moves beyond rational, universal rules or outcomes towards relational ethics, acknowledging the particularity of situations, emotions and the alterity of others (children and adults).
It is ethnographic and political, using Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), and taking an interpretivist and (post-) Marxist epistemological stance. Playwork's fundamental contradiction is that between understanding children's play as autotelic and self-organising on the one hand, and on the other seeking and accounting for public funding that requires services to address policy agendas. In CHAT terms, this is the dialectic between playwork's use value and exchange value. Fieldwork data comprise participant observation in an urban open access Play Centre and semi-structured interviews. This paper offers an analysis of playwork using the triadic spatial analyses of French Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre. It explores the way UK playworkers talk about the purpose of their work and how they navigate the dialectics of use more. This paper offers an analysis of playwork using the triadic spatial analyses of French Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre. Russell, W. (2013) The dialectics of playwork: A conceptual and ethnographic study of playwork using Cultural-historical activity theory more. by Wendy Russell. This study offers an original analysis of contradictions inherent in playwork practice. Cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) is a theoretical framework which helps to understand and analyse the relationship between the human mind (what people think and feel) and activity (what people do). It traces its origins to the founders of the cultural-historical school of Russian psychology L. S. Vygotsky and Aleksei N. Leontiev. Vygotsky's important insight into the dynamics of consciousness was that it is essentially subjective and shaped by the history of each individual's social and