

JOB DESCRIPTIONS AND PERSONAL SPECIFICATIONS

This paper should be read in conjunction with the 'A Personal List Of Events And Evolving Understanding That Have Led Playwork To Where It Is Today' and 'The playwork matrix'

Introduction:

While we took the brief for this work to be to propose a new set of playwork principles based on what is now known about playwork rather than edit or rewrite the existing occupational standards, we also felt that it was important to attempt some basic reality checks on the relationship between theory and practice development and the actual situation in the field.

It appeared to us that an examination of how playwork is formally described in job descriptions and person specifications would provide some indications of this relationship, how it had developed over the years, and expose the bedrock of playwork as it is described (perhaps as opposed to actually practised) in the field.

We analysed a small sample (fifteen in total) of playwork job descriptions and person specifications from around the country. Most followed a similar pattern with the exception of a job description written by Frank King in around 1985.

The others dated from circa 1982 - 2003, and covered a range of job titles (Play Project Co-ordinator, Joint Play leader, Play Development Officer, Senior Playworker, Assistant Playworker, Playworker, Inclusive Play Development Worker, Out of School Club Leader, Play Organiser). They included both the local authority and voluntary sectors, with more recent examples describing jobs created or funded by Early Years Development & Childcare Partnerships and the Children's Fund.

Job descriptions and person specifications:

Because of the small sample, and the critique which follows, we believe it would be unfair, and indeed not useful to the discussion, to identify the other examples used.

Key points from the JOB DESCRIPTIONS - most were set out in roughly the same order as below, and contained:

- part or all of the SPICE (social, physical, intellectual, creative, emotional) formulation to describe the key elements of the job, with some references to the role of play in child development, the needs and rights of children and the importance of play in children's lives
- descriptions of activities or programmes as needing to be fun, safe, creative, stimulating, varied, with some references to them being based on children's needs, ideas and creativity

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- descriptions of types of activities such as arts and crafts, games, sports, off-site trips and outings, with adventure playgrounds adding construction of climbing and balancing structures, with some references to them being based on children's' ideas
- broader statements such as implementing good practice or imaginative programmes, being aware of current developments
- an emphasis on equal opportunities, with references to the Children Act, with the more recent ones including references to the Disability Discrimination Act, inclusion programmes and diversity issues
- a very strong emphasis on health and safety, usually specifically requiring implementation of the Health & Safety at Work Act, and most had references to a requirement to ensure children's general safety and well-being
- working with the management committee and fundraising (mainly the voluntary sector, though some others also referred to fundraising or income generation)
- attending meetings and making links with parents, youth workers, social services, schools and the community
- administration, report-writing, record-keeping
- generic professional practice e.g. working within or implementing policies, procedures, legal and regulatory requirements, working as a team and attending weekly staff meetings
- taking part in training, with the more recent ones specifically mentioning NVQ 2/3 or equivalent qualification training, compliance with Day care Standards

Key points from the PERSON SPECIFICATIONS - again most were set out in roughly the same order, and contained requirements for:

Essential:

- knowledge and understanding of children's play, 'able to relate to children' or 'ability to communicate with children'
- to be aged over 18 years, and typically with at least one year's paid or unpaid experience of working with 5 - 14/16 year olds and young people
- the more recent examples required NVQ 2/3 qualification or equivalent or a commitment to work towards them

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- ability to use arts, crafts and sports equipment and materials, new ideas 'creatively' with children or to 'develop children's creativity'
- basic administration, finance and (mainly in the voluntary sector) fundraising skills
- knowledge of health & safety legislation - strong emphasis on this in adventure playground examples
- skills in staff and volunteer supervision for senior posts
- team working and interpersonal skills, self-motivating, able to work on own initiative, and in the voluntary sector, ability to take part in recruitment and selection
- commitment to and knowledge of equal opportunities, working in multi-cultural and diverse communities - newer examples required knowledge, understanding or experience of inclusion issues
- ability to develop links with parents, community, schools, other agencies, 'good communication skills'
- behaviour management skills, 'authority with understanding and tact'
- in the more recent examples an ability or commitment to attend or undertake job-related training

Desirable:

- first aid certificate
- clean driving licence
- basic IT skills

The Frank King job description

The Frank King job description (for an adventure playground) was significantly different from both the adventure playground and other playwork examples. Following a section on management, administration and protocols for the relationship between staff and the committee, the job description was divided into three sections:

- working with children and young people
- developing and maintaining the site
- working in the community

A preamble then focussed on:

- the primary responsibility being to the children and young people
- their safety, welfare and happiness
- building relationships on the basis of mutual trust and honesty as opposed to a 'professional to client' relationship
- the possible influence of their attitudes and actions upon the playground and its users
- playworkers receiving a positive emotional reward from their commitment to children and young people

Working with children and young people (underlined words or phrases below indicate where the emphasis was significantly different from the other job descriptions):

- the quality of the play opportunities
- development and maintenance of an environment stimulating physical, social and imaginative play
- provision of materials and equipment to children to extend the range of experiences, develop skills and confidence in using them
- development of an atmosphere to encourage personal and social development
- maintenance of discipline necessary to avoid or avert risk or conflict likely to disrupt users' activities
- developing a facility responsive to changing or varying needs, and involving users in planning, decision-making and implementation of change

Developing and maintaining the site

- design and provision of structures and other physical features
- acquisition of materials and equipment by purchase and "scrounging"
- assume some responsibility for the immediate surroundings of the playground...to minimise unsympathetic response to the presence of the playground by adults and improve its attractiveness to children

Working in the community

- communicate the work and development of the playground and the Association
- explain the purpose and the working of the playground

Conclusion

From our analysis of this admittedly very small-scale sample of job descriptions and person specifications we drew some tentative conclusions.

There appears to be little change in the elements describing the nature of playwork (which we call the latent content) in twenty or more years, in spite of many significant developments in theory and practice over that time.

In comparison there appears to be much more change and growth in the operational requirement elements (by which we mean health and safety, equality of opportunity, training and education etc, which we call the manifest content).

This may be because the practicalities of changing and developing the latent job description elements not directly required by changes in legislation, regulation, public policy, funding agendas were more difficult or contentious than the manifest elements.

It may be that theory and practice developments have not impacted on the development of the latent content elements because employers or the staff responsible for drawing up job descriptions and person specifications were not aware of them, or perhaps didn't think that they were relevant to the job on the ground. Bob Hughes' linked paper on the chronology of playwork development examines the changing and sometimes competing articulations over the years which may well have contributed to the latter possibility.

It may also be that there was an assumption that playworkers should already have knowledge of the latent content or could access it through training or education, or that it was included in background information provided as part of the recruitment or induction process, or that more recently they could access it through publications such as *Best Play* and *The First Claim*.

A final possibility is that many job descriptions and person specifications were mostly copied from existing examples, and in this context it is interesting to see how many adventure playground and indeed other examples resemble a model developed by the London Adventure Playground Association (LAPA, the precursor to PLAYLINK) in the early eighties.

Whatever the reasons, we were surprised at the paucity of elements describing the latent content of playwork in most examples, though they were comparatively richer in Frank King's example. We were struck by the fact that about three-quarters of the content of most examples was about work which would be carried out when children weren't present.

However, we concluded that the manifest content was necessary, not just to comply with legislation and other requirements, but also for children's well being in the play space. But the way it has been formulated could mean that playworkers, their managers, employers, funders and regulators might well prioritise the manifest content over the latent content.

In other words, we felt that we needed to propose that the playing child, and the content and intent of their play, should inform the operational requirements

rather than the other way round. This is what we mean by the playwork task moving from the latent to the manifest, and not vice versa. An example using risk assessment is explored below.

The child needs to assess risk through their play, and while expert in their playing, may not (yet) be expert in risk assessment of a particular behaviour at a particular time. While the play space needs to assess risk in relation to the operational requirements (e.g. health and safety legislation, insurance etc) this must be in service of the playing child.

The play space risk assessment should be informed by how this or that child, in the context of their human development, is enabled to carry out their own risk assessment. (Peter Heseltine¹ has queried whether play spaces which have been designed with safety as the priority are likely to increase the danger to children because 'no self-respecting child' would want to use them, and are thus more likely to play where they are exposed to real danger. Developing this, Professor Ball in the same publication posits that the occurrence of accidents on playgrounds may be low only because they are actually occurring elsewhere).

It seems a truism that anyone would accept that the wellbeing of this or that child should come before the 'well-being' of the play space, but if we're honest we often take the opposite approach through the operational manifest requirements. The child's response to the adult's attempt to control the level of danger to which the child is exposed, may well be to wrest control back by playing where they can experience risk and challenge.

In conclusion, there seems to be a discontinuity between developing playwork theory, research and practice (for example the concepts of play types, play cues and play frames, low intervention styles and reflective analytic practice, the evolutionary biology perspective) and the actual job descriptions which playworkers are working to and the person specifications used to recruit them.

Equally, in spite of the development of degree-level courses, where the latent content is no doubt well explored, and some improvement in the content of the playwork NVQ, there does not seem to have been much resulting impact on the description of the work on the ground.

If this is correct (and we are mindful of the very small sample) then playworkers, managers and employers are using job descriptions which bear little relation to what play trainers, educators, theorists and researchers have been working on for over a quarter of a century.

As part of the re-working of the assumptions and values through the consultation exercise, it seems clear to us that there needs to be a debate about how to make a better fit between the playwork recruitment process, descriptions of the task, induction and professional development on the one hand and playwork theory and research on the other.

We are not in any way advocating a 'one size fits all' model job description, but rather asking everyone concerned to think about what ought to be contained in what we call the latent content of playwork i.e. the sections of descriptions and

¹ Cited in Ball, D. (2002) Playgrounds - risks, benefits and choices, Contract Research Report No 426/2002, Health and Safety Executive

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specifications which address understandings about the nature of playwork, and then what this would mean in relation to the manifest content i.e. the operational requirement sections.