

# Discovering Playwork: Developing a Knowledge Base for the Playwork Profession.

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## Keywords

Playwork | Playwork Approach | Playwork Theory | Professional Practice | Playwork Qualifications

## Abbreviations

IPC – International Playwork Census  
NOS – National Occupational Standards  
PPSG - Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group

All author(s) made substantive intellectual contributions to this study by making substantial contributions to conception and design, acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data; drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content; and giving final approval of the version to be published.

**Accepted for publication:** March 25th 2024.

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**Chief Editor:** Dr Claire Parkin. Current affiliation: Kent and Medway Medical School, Canterbury, Kent. CT2 7NT. UK.

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<https://journals.kent.ac.uk/index.php/ajpp/index>

**ISSN Number:** Online 2059-3198. Copyright © 2015 by the University of Kent, UK.

**FINANCIAL DISCLOSURE:** The authors have indicated that they have no financial relationships relevant to this article to disclose.



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**What this paper adds:** This paper adds an important contribution to the growing research to support professional playwork practice. How people find out about playwork and the published literature they access provides an insight on the different routes people use to enter the playwork profession.

## Abstract:

**Background:** This study formed part of the International Playwork Census. It provides important data about how playworkers and non-playworkers who use a playwork approach in their work with children were first introduced to playwork and the playwork literature they had read.

**Method:** The data was collected through an online survey the International Playwork Census (IPC) and focuses on two qualitative open-ended questions on how people first heard of playwork and what playwork literature they accessed.

**Results:** How people first heard of playwork was analysed using thematic analysis and three themes were constructed from three sources: provision (being employed); education (studying a playwork course) or promotion (attending a conference). When asked what playwork-related literature participants had accessed, non-playworkers were more likely to access and read published playwork books than playworkers.

**Conclusions:** This difference raises several important questions about the future development of the playwork profession, particularly in the area of sector-specific knowledge development.

#### **Introduction/Background:**

Professional practice is underpinned by many factors (Dyer, 2018). For many vocational professions in the UK, professional knowledge and skills are often linked to National Occupational Standards (NOS) (UK Commission for Employment and Skills (CES), 2011). NOS are developed from a combination of experience working in the field and theory.

New professions need to develop their professional knowledge base which can take time to build up experience, knowledge and research. Playwork is an emerging profession which is still in the process of developing its specific knowledge base. Playwork in the UK has been defined as:

A highly skilled profession that enriches and enhances provision for children's

play. It takes place where adults support children's play, but it is not driven by prescribed education or care outcomes (SkillsActive, 2010, p. 3).

Developed in the adventure playgrounds set up in the UK after the Second World War, the playwork sector has been striving for recognition as a distinct profession for several decades (Newstead, 2018). Currently, playwork is perhaps best described as a quasi-profession (King & Newstead, 2020), as anybody can be employed and call themselves a playworker, despite having no playwork qualification or practice experience. There are still no statutory requirements for anybody to have playwork qualifications to call themselves a playworker. Many adults who work in playwork, whether in practice with children or in education and training with other adults, may have playwork knowledge rather than any playwork qualifications (King & Newstead, 2020). The gaining and passing on of 'playwork knowledge' can take many routes, which may include undertaking playwork qualifications and/or may be directly through practice (King & Newstead, 2019).

The International Playwork Census therefore aimed to collect extensive qualitative and quantitative data on playwork from playworkers and people who use a playwork approach in their work with children anywhere in the world. The International Playwork Census (IPC) was undertaken to find out how much progress has been made in the professionalisation of the playwork sector, as there is still very little known

about the United Kingdom (UK) playwork workforce (King & Newstead, 2019).

Furthermore, playwork is now used in many different countries around the world and there is no comprehensive data available about where playwork is being used and to what extent there is an international playwork workforce.

This paper builds upon the IPC analysis comparing playworkers and non-playworkers who use a playwork approach (King & Newstead, 2022) and their perception on the purpose of playwork (Newstead & King, 2021) and focuses on two specific aspects of the International Playwork Census. The first was to find out how participants first heard of playwork. The second focused on what playwork literature was accessed and which playwork theories had been read.

In the United Kingdom (UK), playwork has a set of National Occupational Standards since 1992 (Bonel & Lindon, 1996) which underpins the knowledge and understanding for playwork practice, education, and training. National Occupational Standards (NOS) are “statements of the standards of performance individuals must achieve to be competent when carrying out functions in the workplace, together with specifications of the underpinning knowledge and understanding” (UK Commission for Employment and Skills (CES), 2011, p. 4).

Although the playwork NOS have been heavily criticised within the playwork

field (Milne 1998; Wood 2006), they have been widely used to qualify the UK playwork workforce in the last thirty years (King & Newstead, 2019). The NOS are currently underpinned by the eight Playwork Principles (Playwork Principle Scrutiny Group (PPSG), 2005), which are also now nearly thirty years old. The eight Playwork Principles were created to develop and “establish the professional and ethical framework for playwork” (Conway, 2008 p. 119) and to “try to describe the underpinning philosophy of playwork” (Conway, 2008, p. 119). The NOS and Playwork Principles only apply to the UK and there is no equivalent outside of the UK, although playwork is practiced in other countries, for example USA (Patte, 2019), Hong Kong (Chan et. al., 2021) and The Netherlands (van Rooijen, 2021).

To date, the professional knowledge which underpins playwork has been based on what Lester and Russell (2008) refer to as the “three models of playwork” (p. 177) of ‘Evolutionary Playwork’ (Hughes, 2012), ‘Compound Flexibility’ (Brown, 2003) and ‘Psycholudics’ (Sturrock & Else, 1998). These ‘three models of playwork’ have been central to the development of playwork education, training and practice. Evolutionary Playwork is what Hughes termed “an Aladdin’s Cave of concepts, ideas, outcomes and mechanisms” (Hughes, 2012, p. 4) derived from the scientific / academic / political literature. Brown (2003) put forward a developmental playwork theory Compound Flexibility where the interaction of the playing child and the

play environment supports children's development. The more flexible the environment, the more flexible the child can be in their play. The third playwork theory is that of psycholudics or the study of the mind at play" which "re-inscribes play and the play process as the locus of healing functionally" (Sturrock, 2003, p. 82). The NOS for Playwork include Hughes's (2002) 'Play Types' and elements of Sturrock and Else's (1998) the 'Play Cycle'. The 'Playwork Principles' (PPSG, 2005) refer to children's holistic development which is central to Brown's (2002) 'Compound Flexibility' and reflect how playworkers and non-playworkers who use a playwork approach in their work perceive the purpose of playwork (King & Newstead, 2021). The eight Playwork Principles (PPSG, 2005) which underpin playwork education, training and practice (King & Newstead, 2019) have also been influenced by the playwork-related theories of Sturrock & Else (1998), Hughes (2012) and Brown (2003).

Whilst the published playwork literature is increasing (King & Newstead 2019; 2021; Cartmel & Worch, 2021), current literature to support playwork education, training and practice is still steeped in these 'three models of playwork' (Lester & Russell, 2008). How people are introduced to playwork and what playwork literature is read, will influence individual understandings of playwork and how it relates to their work. There is considerable variation in how these playwork models are interpreted (King & Newstead, 2019; King & Newstead 2020). These factors

all have a considerable impact on the development of a professional knowledge base for playwork. This paper focuses on two of the questions included in the broader International Playwork Census:

1. *How do people first hear of playwork?*
2. *What published playwork literature do people access?*

These questions provide important data about how people are introduced to playwork and what playwork theory is being read. Both factors have implications for future developments in playwork education, training and practice, as will be discussed later in this paper.

**Methods:** The International Playwork Census (IPC) was an on-line survey for anybody who considers that they use playwork in their work with children. It was divided into three sections: Section A: Demographic Data; Section B: Respondents who are not playworkers but use a playwork approach in their work with children; and Section C: Respondents who are playworkers.

This paper focuses on Section B and Section C of the International Playwork Census on the qualitative open-ended questions on how participants first heard of playwork, and what playwork literature they had read. The survey was open to anybody aged 18 years or over who were playworkers or used a playwork approach in their work. Anybody who

took part in the survey had to state that they use playwork in their work in order to access the survey. If they did not, then they were re-directed to the end of survey response. This study had ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the College of Human and Health Science at Swansea University (Ethics application 1680819b).

The IPC survey was piloted with seven respondents from the UK, Australia, Hong Kong and the USA to ensure that the questions could be understood from an international perspective. Feedback was positive and no amendments were required, except for clarity on some wording (for example, more details were provided to differentiate statutory, third and business sectors).

The survey was developed on the Qualtrics® platform and available from October 2019 to March 2020 by respondents clicking on an anonymous link. This meant that no information about the participants is collected (name, IP address). The survey was distributed through social media of Twitter® (now known as X) and playwork specific Facebook® groups, as well as through play and playwork local and national organisations.

**Sample:** In total 273 responses stated they used playwork in their work. From the 273 responses, 102 responses described themselves as playworkers and 171 as non-playworkers. For more detail information about the demographic distribution of the sample (gender, ethnicity, disability, and age) see King & Newstead (2022).

**Analysis:** For the question ‘How did you first hear of playwork?’, the data was analysed individually using the thematic framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Their six-stage process to analyse narrative text into themes, termed thematic analysis, involves: 1. Familiarising yourself with your data; 2. Generating initial codes; 3. Searching for themes; 4. Reviewing themes; 5. Defining and naming themes and 6. Producing the report. When coding qualitative data, the aim is to reach a point where no new code, theme or sub-theme is identified. This is termed saturation point (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Saunders *et al.* (2017) have identified four models of saturation, one being inductive thematic saturation which they explain where “saturation focuses on the identification of new codes or themes and is based on the number of such codes or themes” (p. 1869). This was the model of saturation used in this study as the themes were constructed from the data for the research question ‘how do people first hear of playwork’.

The thematic analysis was undertaken separately for both ‘playworker’ and ‘non-playworkers’ and the themes and sub-themes generated from the data were coded initially by one researcher (steps 1 to 3) and then sent to the second independent coder along with all the responses for review (steps 4). Both coders are experienced playworkers and have used this approach in other qualitative studies (e.g. King & Newstead, 2019; King & Newstead, 2021). When constructing the themes for both the benefits and challenges



there were no differences between non-playworkers and playworkers constructed themes. It was decided to combine the data as one set for first heard of playwork.

The process of constructing the themes from the initial coding is a process in qualitative research termed 'collapsing the data' (Elliot, 2018). This approach was used firstly with the initial coding and drafting undertaken by one of the researchers. This constructed draft themes and sub-themes on first heard of playwork. The two data sets and draft themes and sub-themes were then sent to the second researcher. They independently coded the responses of each data set using the draft themes and sub-themes for first heard of playwork. The rationale for each coder to code independently enables a test for inter-rater reliability (O'Connor *et al.*, 2020) which supports the credibility of the analysis (Shenton, 2004).

The question about what playwork literature participants had read was analysed using content analysis (Elo & Kyngas, 2008) using three headings: Playwork Book; Playwork Theory or Related Concept; and Playwork Author. These headings were chosen to compare participants who completed the survey as 'playworkers' and those who did so as 'non-playworkers' on the The Pearson's Chi Square test for association tests for independence of two nominal (categorical) variables or whether there is a pattern of dependence between them. For each Pearson's Chi Square test for association, a Cramer V test was also

undertaken to find out effect size where a value of up to 0.2 is a small effect, 0.3 is a medium effect and 0.5 and above is a large effect.

In addition, post-hoc adjusted residue analysis was also undertaken. Residue analysis 'identifies those specific cells making the greatest contribution to the chi-square test result' (Sharpe, 2015) where 'A residual is the difference between the observed and expected values for a cell. The larger the residual, the greater the contribution of the cell to the magnitude of the resulting Chi-Square obtained value' (Sharpe, 2015). A residual value above 2.0 or below -2.0 indicated which nominal (categorical) variables have the strongest relationship.

### Results:

*First heard of playwork:* When asked where participants first heard of playwork, three themes were developed through provision (where they were working), education (undertaking a course) or where playwork was being promoted (for example a conference). Table 1 shows the themes and subthemes on how they were first introduced to playwork.

For the theme of provision, 86 responses first heard of playwork through paid employment, 15 as a volunteer, 5 as an initial child-user, 8 were setting owners and 5 had visited a playwork setting. In relation to the theme of education, 30 heard of playwork through undertaking a qualification, 25 through a training event, 15 through research and 13 as part of

their teacher training. The final theme of Promotion, 20 heard of playwork through an organization, 11 had attended a conference or workshop and 30 through word of mouth. The themes of Provision, Education and Promotion are reflected in the following three responses:

Theme	
<i>Provision</i>	Employed Volunteer Child User Owner Visit
<i>Education</i>	Course Training (trainee attending) Researching or Searching Teacher/Trainer (delivering)
<i>Promotion</i>	Organisation Workshop/Conference Word of Mouth

**Table 1: How playworkers and non-playworkers first heard of playwork**

*“Age 25 I applied for an assistant playworker post with Southampton City Council”*

*“An after school club was set up locally and I began to work there. I was then offered a place on a Scottish Vocational Qualification in Playwork”*

*“I attended a playwork conference when I started working as a childminder 18 years ago”*

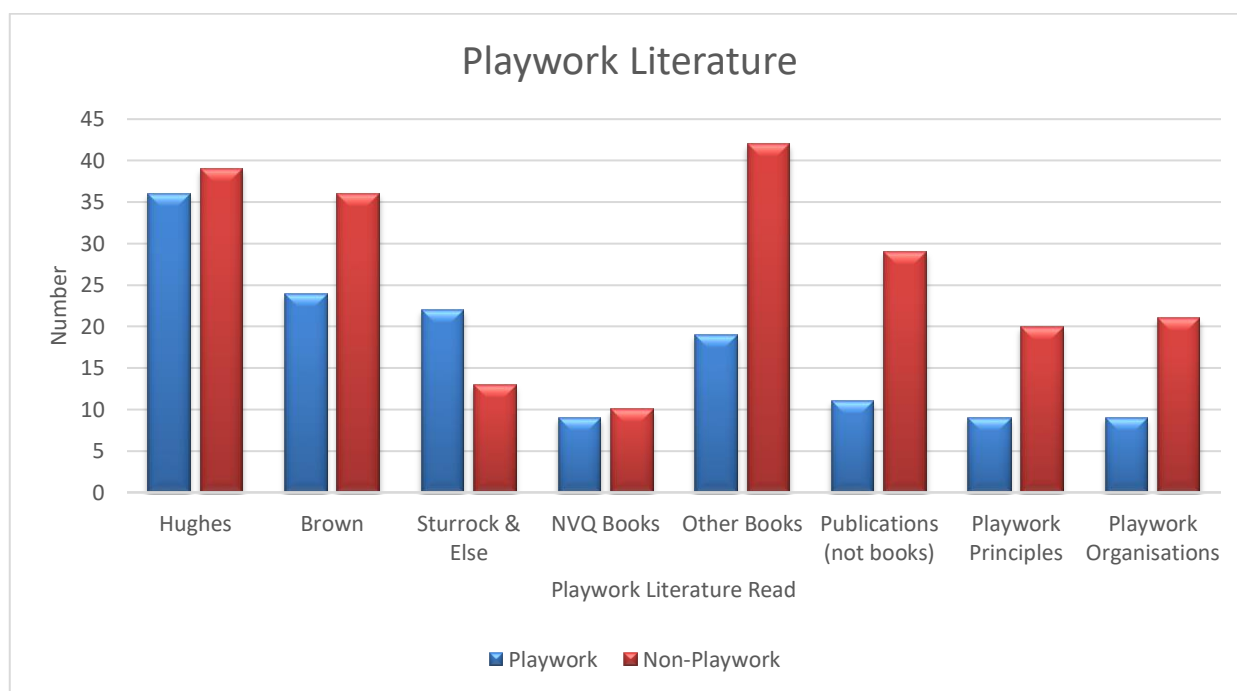
For this question, participants provided one response to the question. This enabled a Cohens Kappa (k) inter-rater reliability test to be undertaken between the two coders for the three themes.

Initial inter-rater reliability (Shenton (2004) is a like for like statistical test comparing a like for like score and therefore enables a like for like comparison between two independent raters. McHugh’s (2012) account of Cohen’s Kappa (k) describes a score from -1 to +1 is obtained, where +1 is a perfect agreement between each rater (McHugh, 2012). Landis and Koch (1977) provide a guide to the Cohen’s Kappa value where < 0 is a poor agreement, 0.0 – 0.20 is a slight agreement, 0.21 – 0.40 is a fair agreement, 0.41 – 0.60 is a moderate agreement, 0.61 – 0.80 is a substantial agreement and 0.81 – 1.00 is an almost perfect agreement. The Cohen Kappa (k) result was 0.829 (p<0.00, 95% CI 0.838, 0.820) which indicates an almost perfect agreement.

### *Playwork Literature*

The “three models of playwork” (Lester & Russell, 2008, p. 177) were used to categorise the responses shown in Figure 1.

For the ‘playworker’ responses, Hughes had 36 references (23 related to books, 7 by name and 6 referring to play types), Brown had 24 references (13 related to books they had written, 7 by name and 4 by their proposed theory), and Sturrock and Else had 22 references (7 related to conference papers, 12 to playwork theory of the Play Cycle, 3 specifically by



**Figure 1: Number of playwork literature read**

name each). In addition, there were 9 references to NVQ playwork related books, 19 to other playwork specific books, and 11 to playwork publications (not books). Other sources cited were the Playwork Principles (9 responses) and specific playwork organisations (9 responses).

Turning to the 'non-playworker' responses, the playwork literature for Hughes was 39 related to books written, 3 to Play Types and 8 specifically by name; for Brown 36 references related to books and book chapters written, 8 by name and 3 related to specific theory; for Sturrock and Else 13 referred to conference papers, 14 to the playwork theory of the Play Cycle and 2 specifically referring to Else, 3 to Sturrock, and 3 to the Play Cycle book. There were an additional

10 references to NVQ Playwork books, 42 to playwork specific books, and 29 to playwork publications (no books). There were 20 references to the Playwork Principles (2005) and 21 references to playwork organisations. Table 2 shows the playwork literature cited by the 'playworker' and 'non-playworker' responses. The responses were grouped in relation to specific playwork book, playwork concept of theory, and citing a specific playwork author. For playworkers, 76 of the 102 responses (75%) stated a specific playwork book, 39 (38%) had engaged with a playwork theory or concept, and 36 (35%) cited a playwork author. For non-playworkers, 158 (92%) of the 171 responses stated a playwork book, 45 (26%) stated a playwork theory or concept, and 52 (30%) cited a playwork author.



Playwork	Book	Theory or Concept	Author
<i>Playworker</i>	76 (75%)	39 (38%)	36 (35%)
<i>Non-playworker</i>	158 (92%)	45 (26%)	52 (30%)

**Table 2: Playwork literature cited by both playworkers and non-playworkers who use a playwork approach in their work**

A Pearson's Chi Square analysis was undertaken between playwork and non-playwork and playwork literature where  $\chi^2(2, N = 318) = 6.06, p < .05$ . Cramer V has a value of 0.14 which has a small size effect. Post-hoc analysis shows playworkers are less likely to read playwork books (adjusted residue -2.3) whilst non-playworkers are more likely to read playwork books (adjusted residue 2.3).

**Discussion:** This paper which forms part of the International Play Census (IPC) considers how people were first introduced into playwork and what playwork-related literature they had read. The specific focus on these two aspects of the IPC has significance implications to practice in relation to the knowledge and understanding of playwork. A playwork understanding of play focuses more on the process rather than an outcome (King & Newstead, 2019) and this is considered to be one of the unique features by those who described themselves as playworkers and those who used a playwork approach in other job roles (King, 2015). However, how playworkers and non-playworkers are introduced, trained or qualified in playwork has been found to vary within this study and others (King & Newstead, 2022; King & Howard,

2022). This may mean that what is generally considered to be a playwork perspective on play is not shared by everybody who uses playwork in their job role.

As opposed to other professions where qualifications are required to enter the profession, most playworkers first hear about playwork through getting involved in playwork in some way. Playworkers and non-playworkers first heard about playwork through provision, education or promotion – i.e., by being employed in a playwork-related role, undertaking some sort of playwork training or event, such as conferences. When people experience playwork for the first time through employment (paid or voluntary) or through a conference, the content and interpretation of playwork may vary depending on the knowledge, training and experience of the employed staff member or who is speaking at a conference. For example, managers undertake induction for new staff, as indicated by King & Newstead (2020); “how experienced playworkers pass on playwork-specific knowledge to less experienced playworkers” (p. 10) where “playwork understanding and knowledge is being ‘passed down’ through work settings, making them reliant on their managers’ interpretations of what playwork is and

what it is for” (p. 11).

For those who first heard of playwork through education or training, the playwork knowledge being passed down will vary depending on the qualification and experience of the person delivering the playwork course or training. Whilst people working in Management and Development are more likely to have a playwork qualification in both playwork roles and non-playwork roles (King & Newstead, 2022), the prevalence of playworkers with no playwork qualification is not uncommon (King & Newstead, 2021; King & Newstead 2022). A recent study has also found that playworkers and non-playworkers who use a playwork approach have not undertaken any playwork training (King & Newstead, 2022). Reasons for the reduction in both playwork qualifications and training being undertaken have been attributed to austerity (King & Newstead, 2020) as well as time, cost and distance to travel (King & Howard, 2022).

This patchiness of playwork qualifications and training suggests an inconsistency in playwork knowledge across an emerging profession. How people first hear about playwork and what they read will influence their approach to using playwork in their work and how they apply theory and knowledge to their practice. This study found that people in non-playwork roles were more likely to read a published playwork book, and each of the main playwork theorists (Brown, 2003; Hughes, 2012; Sturrock & Else, 1998)

were cited by participants in this study in equal measures. This indicates that the ‘three models of playwork’ (Lester & Russell, 2008) are being accessed to support participants in their understanding and potentially application of playwork in their practice.

However, there is a question of how playwork theory is interpreted as this study indicates non-playworkers are more likely to read the published texts, but less likely to undertake a playwork qualification. This study found those who don’t call themselves a playworker are more likely to have read about playwork theory than playworkers who have not undertaken a playwork qualification. This raises questions about the role of playwork qualifications in enabling practitioners to engage with playwork theory and to develop their knowledge of the literature of their chosen profession.

One of the purposes of having National Occupational Standards (NOS) for Playwork is to ensure consistency of understanding and practice across the playwork profession. However, as found by the International Playwork Census (IPC) study and other studies, not all playworkers and very few non-playworkers have a playwork qualification (King & Newstead, 2020; 2022) and the knowledge base of the playwork workforce is patchy. The last revision of the NOS for playwork was undertaken by SkillsActive (SkillsActive, 2016) and the possibility of a new revision is currently under discussion by the various Playwork Education Training Councils (PETC) across the

UK. The results of this part of the International Playwork Census provides important data to inform the future development of the playwork knowledge base which underpins the playwork NOS.

There are limitations to this study. Whilst the type of playwork literature has been compared between playworkers and non-playworkers, this was not undertaken with the thematic analysis on first hearing about playwork. No links between how people were introduced to playwork and playwork literature were possible, and this may be useful in relation to what type of playwork literature relates to the themes of provision, education, and promotion. The study also did not differentiate between demographic differences in relation to gender or age.

**Conclusion:** This study which formed part of the International Playwork Census provides important results on how both playworkers and non-playworkers who use a playwork approach in their work with children were first introduced to playwork and the playwork literature they had accessed and read. Whilst the published playwork literature is growing, at present the ‘three playwork models’ (Lester & Russell, 2008) are still dominant. However, there is variation in what published playwork literature is accessed between playworkers and non-playworkers and this should be taken into account in future planning for workforce development to ensure consistency of understanding and practice by adults

who are called playworkers or use playwork as an approach to working with children in other job roles.

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