

The Three Models of Playwork: A Critique of Current Playwork Theory that informs Playwork National Occupational Standards and Professional Practice.

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Keywords

Playwork Theory | National Occupational Standards (NOS) | Evolutionary Playwork | Compound Flexibility | Psycholudics | Evidence-based

Abbreviations

CES – Commission for Employment and Skills
 NOS – National Occupational Standards
 PPSG - Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group
 UKPNOASC – UK Playwork National Occupational Standards Consortium

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What this paper adds: This paper adds an important contribution as the first critique of its kind of current playwork theory that currently supports professional playwork practice. This is particularly relevant as the current National Occupational Standards in playwork are under review. The paper is the first to critique the developing playwork theory that underpins playwork education, training, and professional practice.

Abstract

Playwork knowledge and understanding, as represented within the current Playwork National Occupational Standards (NOS) and within the eight Playwork Principles, are supported by the ‘three models of playwork’. These are (1) Evolutionary Playwork developed by Bob Hughes,

(2) Compound Flexibility developed by Fraser Brown, and (3) Psycholudics proposed by Gordon Sturrock and Perry Else. The current Playwork NOS is under review, and this will include potential revision of the knowledge and understanding playworkers are required to know and have whilst being educated, trained, or in their practice. However, the empirical evidence to support each playwork theory is lacking, and this has implications for how playwork is implemented in professional practice.

This paper is theory-based and offers a critique of the ‘three models of playwork’, an exercise that has not been undertaken before, and considers whether they are playwork theories, or conglomerates of other play theories.

The critique questions how the lack of empirical evidence supports the current playwork theories of Evolutionary Playwork and Compound Flexibility. However, the theory of Psycholudics, more specifically of the Play Cycle, does have more merit to be considered as a theory to support professional playwork practice.

The conclusion from the critique has implications for what is evidence-based to support and develop the revision of the Playwork NOS.

Introduction: Playwork has its roots in the United Kingdom, developed arguably from converging routes. The first from the adventure playground movement from the 1950s (Benjamin, 1961; Chilton, 2018) and the second

from the 19th-century Play Clubs (Trevelyan, 1920; Cranwell, 2003). Playwork 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).

Playwork focuses on the ‘process of play’ (King and Newstead, 2022) and, as an approach (King and Newstead, 2024a), has the purpose to facilitate, support, and advocate for children’s play (Newstead and King, 2021). When considering playwork as an approach, a study including both playworkers and non-playworkers found perceived benefits of a playwork approach were to support life skills (learning and development), exploration (time and space), and empowering (children and adults). However, in addition to perceived benefits, there were also perceived challenges identified such as conflicting agendas, low playwork profile, funding issues, and health and safety (King and Newstead, 2024a). As a playwork approach includes both playworkers and non-playworkers, playwork can be considered as a developing multidisciplinary practice (Cartmel and Worch, 2021).

Playwork involves adults being in the same play space as children and young people. Rather than guiding play to an adult-led outcome, for example, educational attainment targets, the role of the adult is to support children’s play. This can be undertaken by facilitating the space to play, resources to play,

and often joining in with children and young people's play. The key aspect is that the adult does not control or take over the play, or what Sturrock and Else (1998) termed 'adulteration' (p. 93).

Whilst it is not essential for anybody to have a formal playwork qualification to call themselves a playworker (King and Newstead, 2021; 2024a), playwork qualifications do have minimum standards, termed National Occupational Standards (NOS) (UK Commission for Employment and Skills (CES), 2011). The current NOS for playwork qualifications are underpinned by the Playwork Principles (Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group (PPSG), 2005) that were to 'establish the professional and ethical framework for playwork' (Conway, 2008, p. 119). National Occupational Standards (NOS) specify the standard of performance an individual must achieve when carrying out a function in the workplace, together with the knowledge and understanding they need to meet that standard consistently. Essentially, NOS are benchmarks of good practice (Carroll and Boutall, 2011).

The current Playwork NOS is currently being reviewed by the UK Playwork NOS Consortium (Play Wales, 2024), and this will have significance on the 'underpinning knowledge and understanding'. The NOS and the Playwork Principles have been based on the developing Playwork theory, which Lester and Russell (2008) referred to as the 'three models of playwork' (p. 177). These three models

are (1) Evolutionary Playwork (Hughes, 2012), (2) Compound Flexibility (Brown, 2003), and (3) Psycholudics (Sturrock and Else, 1998). The work and contribution to playwork by Sturrock and Hughes were acknowledged in the published Festschrift 'Playwork Voices' (Russell *et al.*, 2007).

The theories put forward by Hughes (2012), Brown (2003), and Sturrock and Else (1998) have been included in both playwork-focused publications to support education, training, and practice (Kilvington Wood, 2018; Wood *et al.*, 2024) and non-playwork publications (e.g., Conn, 2016). However, as theories, Sutton (2017) argues that modern-day playwork in the United Kingdom does not align playwork theory with practice, when compared, for example, with playwork development in the United States or in France (Besse-Patin, 2017). These two examples can be compared to playworkers' and non-playworkers' access to playwork books, where non-playworkers are more likely to read playwork literature (including theory) compared to playworkers (King and Newstead, 2024a).

The three models provide a theoretical basis for playwork where a theory can contribute to an agreed or accepted way of thinking or paradigm (Kuhn, 1971). A paradigm, according to Kuhn (1971), has two essential characteristics: to 'attract an enduring group of adherents wary of competing modes of scientific activity' (p. 10) and 'sufficiently open-ended to leave all sorts of problems for the redefined

group of practitioners to resolve' (p. 10). Playwork theory can still be considered as an emerging paradigm.

The process of developing a new theory involves an element of 'irrationality' and 'creative intuition' (Popper, 1959), which is based on a person's experience, observations, and how they interpret them. However, any testing of a theory must have a practical application, that is, does it 'stand up to the demands of practice' (Popper, 1959, p. 33), or what Popper (1959) termed 'falsification' if the theory does not 'stand up'. The testing of theories, concerning paradigms, allows, as Kuhn (1970) explains, 'determination of significant fact, matching of facts with theory, and articulation of theory' (p. 34). The current review of the Playwork NOS also needs to consider how the theory's three models of playwork are understood. A recent study by King and Newstead (2024a) found that whilst the published texts of Hughes (2012), Brown (2003), and Sturrock and Else (1998) are being accessed, playworkers are less likely to read playwork books compared to non-playworkers who use a playwork approach (King and Newstead, 2022) in their work.

Whilst the playwork theory is being read and currently within the Playwork NOS and Playwork Principles, how have the 'three models of playwork' been theoretically tested? This question forms the basis of this paper to undertake a critique of the 'three models of playwork' concerning how it

relates to being a playwork theory. With the review of the Playwork NOS, which includes 'knowledge and understanding', a critical review of current Playwork theory needs to be included in this. This paper will provide a critique of the 'three models of playwork' firstly outlining the three main playwork theories, considering the relevance to playwork, and reviewing the empirical evidence to support them as theories.

An overview of the three theories of playwork: Table 1 shows a comparison of Evolutionary Playwork, Compound Flexibility, and Psycholudics concerning the domain, focus, playwork role, and scientific background that have been used to develop each theory.

Whilst the three theories have different foci, there are similarities between them concerning the scientific background used to support each one. For example, 'Evolutionary Playwork' and 'Compound Flexibility' refer to combinatorial flexibility (Sylva, 1977) and loose parts (Nicholson, 1971) when considering the play environment. For Hughes (2012), this is important for engagement with the 16 Play Types and the development of the brain. Brown (2003) considers the holistic development using the SPICE acronym. Playworkers and non-playworkers who use a playwork approach in their work agree that development is one of the main purposes of playwork (Newstead and King, 2021) as well as a key benefit (King and Newstead, 2024b).

Playwork Theory	Domain	Focus	Playwork Role	Scientific Background
Evolutionary Playwork (Hughes, 2001; 2006; 2012)	Evolutionary and Developmental Psychology	Brain Development	Facilitate flexible play space for the 16 Play Types to be experienced	Neuroscience (Siviy, 1998) Hermeneutics (Chawla, 2002) Evolutionary Psychology (Hall, 1904) Triune Brain (MacLean, 1985) Combinatory Flexibility (Silva, 1977; Bruner, 1972) Animal Biology (Bekoff and Byrers, 1998) Cortical Mapping (Bednar and Wilson, 2015) Non-Specialisation (Lorenz, 1972) Environment of Evolutionary Adaptedness (EAA) (Bowlby, 1958)
Compound Flexibility (Brown, 2003; 2018)	Biological and Developmental	Holistic Development	Facilitate a play environment for maximum development by identifying and removing barriers	Combinatory Flexibility (Silva, 1977; Bruner, 1972) Loose Parts (Nicholson, 1971) Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978) Maslow (1943)
Psycholudics (Sturrock, 2003; Sturrock and Else, 1998)	Depth Psychologies	Therapeutic Healing Potential	Facilitate both the physical and psychic space (ludic ecology)	Transpersonal Psychology (Grof, 1993; Wilber, 1989) Potential Space (Winnicott, 1971) Jung Psychotherapy (Sidoli and Davies, 1988)

Table 1: An overview of the three theories of playwork:

Whether these views by playworkers and non-playworkers are influenced by these two theories or not is difficult to ascertain, especially as it is more unlikely for non-playworkers to read playwork texts (King and Newstead, 2024a).

Playwork Theory 1: Evolutionary Playwork

Hughes's (2001; 2012) theory of Evolutionary Playwork, which relates to playwork practice (Hughes, 2003), is based on the premise of Evolutionary Psychology, influenced by their own play experience as a child and their work on adventure playgrounds (Hughes, 1975) and linking this with the published work on brain development, specifically on Mclean's (1985) 'triune brain' where 16 different types of play maybe linked to the different parts of the brain (Hughes, 2003).

The basis of evolutionary theory rests on the following aspects: The child is 'a lone organism, on a hostile planet, in the middle of nowhere' (Hughes, 1996) and is in control of their play (Hughes, 1975); there are potentially 16 different types of play (Hughes, 1996a; 2002; 2006; 2012) which may be derived from different genetic bases and each one is important for survival of the species in what Hughes later proposed a Neuro-evolutionary model (Hughes, 2006). Hughes (2003) argues that children not engaging in the 16 Play Types may result in play deprivation (Hughes, 2003) or focusing on particular Play Types may develop into play bias (Hughes, 2003), which Hughes called

Stereotypical Play Narratives (SPN) (Hughes, 2006). The importance of the 16 Play Types provides a link to their ancestral past as well as their future reflected in Halls' (1904) Recapitulation Theory, and links to the brain growth through combinatorial flexibility (Bruner, 1972, Sylva, 1977), non-specialisation (Lorenz, 1972), cortical mapping (Bednar and Wilson, 2015), and the triune brain (Mclean, 1985).

However, as a play or playwork theory, Hughes (2012) stated that 'as yet it has no agreed theoretical or practical base' (p. 192) and is 'an undeniably subjective and particular view and does not pretend to be anything else' (p. 19). This view is further supported by the title of their book 'Speculations and Possibilities' (Hughes, 2006), which was a 'theoretical speculation' (p. 31) to 'explain what the role of play types is in the development of behaviour' (p. 32). These overall 'speculations and possibilities' have been pieced together from the scientific literature of neuroscience, hermeneutics, evolutionary psychology, genetics, and brain development (see Table 1). As a theory, there needs to be more than speculations and possibilities; there needs to be evidence that it stands up to practice (Popper, 1959), especially as the current NOS for playwork is being reviewed.

The influence of Hall's (1904) Recapitulation Theory is evident in both how children are defined and the need for their play to reflect their ancestral past. For example, Hall (1904) stated 'At birth the child is cast like a

shipwrecked mariner by angry waves on a strange and unknown coast, and finds itself in a new and rigorous climate' (Hall p. 5), which is the 'lone organism, on a hostile planet, in the middle of nowhere' as depicted by Hughes (1996a; 2012). The 16 Play Types listed by Hughes originally consisted of 15 (1996b); however, Recapitulative Play was included when they were revised (Hughes, 2002), which they believed to be 'a vital component of the human evolutionary process' (Hughes, 2006). As a theory, when considering Kuhn (1970) and Popper's (1959) stance, it is not possible to either prove or disprove it, or in other terms, you can believe it or not.

Hughes (2006) considers the 16 Play Types to be genetically programmed, in what they call a 'neuroludic-evolutionary construct' (p. 11) where 'recapitulation is a key component' (p. 28). The importance of the play space, and that of the playworker, was to offer and facilitate children the potential to experience these 16 Play Types within the critical period of development (0-8 years) for maximum synaptic brain development (Hughes, 2006, 2010). Hughes (2001; 2012) refers to the Playwork Menu that involved the four elements (wind, rain, fire, and earth) that enable children to play using their five senses, that will allow them to develop and test out concepts, and to develop their own identity, and the which the 16 Play Types have the potential to take place within the play environment, or what Hughes (2012) considers it to be a 'pseudo-palaeolithic

space' (p. 215). The four elements enable recapitulation, for example, play involving fire, and to try and out and develop concepts through combinatorial flexibility (Garvey, 1977). Hughes (2006) makes the point that 'if play types were the result of the evolutionary process, natural selection would not tolerate the existence of two different play types that did the same thing: one would have been selected out' (p. 26).

Following on from this, is it evolutionarily viable for 16 Play Types to exist? If we look at how Deoxyribose Nucleic Acid (DNA) is made to form genes, the construction is based on four bases: adenine, cytosine, guanine, and thymine. Within the double helix of the DNA, adenine pairs with thymine, and cytosine with guanine, and this combination of 4 bases enables around 20,000 genes (Amaral *et al.*, 2023). On this basis, it would make more 'evolutionary sense' if play types are genetically coded, to have a small number of 'play type bases' to potentially form as many play types as needed.

Hughes's (2012) Evolutionary Playwork theory is still, to quote their book 'possibilities and speculations', and whilst they continued to develop their ideas within the realms of quantum physics (Hughes, 2018), there is no empirical evidence to support or reject it as a theory. The question is also raised: Is it a playwork theory? Whilst Hughes does engage with the play scientific theory, when it is broken down, it is a conglomerate of play theory, both from the human and non-human species, to

support playwork practice focusing on the need for a play space (with much reference to adventure playgrounds) to enable the 16 Play Types to be experienced for maximum brain development during the critical period. Whilst there is no disagreement on the principles of this, it is not unique to playwork for it to be a theory.

Playwork Theory 2: Compound Flexibility

Brown's (2003; 2014) concept of Compound Flexibility is a biological theory and focuses more on the developmental potential of play. Brown's theory is based very much on the aspect of combinatory flexibility (Bruner, 1972; Sylva, 1977) and aligns with Gross's (1901) theory of play. Brown's (2003) main points of Compound Flexibility are the notion of 'compound' being taken from banking in relation to compound interest (Brown, 2014) and refers to growth or development (Brown, 2003). The ideal development of a child is a positive spiral of the interaction of a flexible environment and a flexible mind, where 'the flexibility of the environment leads to increased flexibility in the child' (Brown, 2003, p. 56).

Brown (2003) considers play to involve the three Fs (Fun, Freedom and Flexibility) and developed the theory of compound flexibility into 5 propositions: social interaction, physical activity, intellectual stimulation, creative achievement, and emotional stability (Brown, 2014), and was abbreviated to SPICE (Brown, 2003). Each of the 5 propositions is linked to other theories

and concepts (see Table 1). Brown (2014) considers play as both process and outcome and charts potential developmental benefits. However, as Whitebread *et al.* (2017) state clearly in their extensive review of the potential developmental benefits of play based on studies from evolutionary psychology, developmental psychology, anthropology, neuroscience, and educational studies, it is clear that 'much of this evidence merely establishes associations rather than firm, causal relationships. In fact, there is little or no conclusive evidence regarding possible explanatory mechanisms' (p. 4).

This point of 'associations' rather than cause and effect' was also considered by Lillard *et al.* (2013) when they reviewed 150 research articles on the impact of pretend play on development. Rather than being crucial or casual, pretend play was considered a byproduct of other factors, or what is termed an epiphenomenon. The same situation for Brown's (2003) compound flexibility theory exists, as with Hughes's (2001; 2012) evolutionary playwork; there is no empirical evidence to either prove or disprove it as a playwork theory.

Brown's (2003; 2018) Fun, Freedom, and Flexibility was initially considered by Bruner (1972), who stated that play 'given its concomitant freedom from reinforcement and its setting in a relatively pressure less environment, can produce the flexibility that makes tool using possible' (p. 42), particularly in problem-solving (Silva *et al.*, 1976).

This eventually formed into the concept of combinatorial flexibility first coined by Silvey (1977) and is core to both Hughes's (2012) 'Evolutionary Psychology' and Brown's (2003; 2018) 'Compound Flexibility'. However, as Hughes (2012) also acknowledged in their book regarding combinatorial flexibility, 'evidence for the role of play in promoting flexibility is sketchy' (Silvey, 1977, p. 61). This statement still holds that 'participating in play willingly, willingly, and wholeheartedly affects both the child's developmental areas and the brain's development. Due to ethical concerns, brain development studies are not at the desired level. The majority of these studies are conducted on animals, and inferences are made about humans from these studies' (Ezmeçi, 2023, p. 26).

This is of particular importance as Brown (2014) considers 'compound' concerning banking as this implies some form of measurement, an increase from one level to another. How is development being measured? The distinction between play theory and playwork theory, for which Brown (2014) states 'compound flexibility' is not clear. If the focus of 'compound flexibility' is about the adult, the playworker facilitates the environment for play, which may include providing resources, loose parts (Nicholson, 1971), or removing barriers (Webb and Brown, 2003) to enable children to play. That can be argued to be their professional role, and as with Hughes (2012), it is more about using play to support playwork practice. This would indicate that the 'compound flexibility'

aspect is the benefit children get from an enriched play environment, which would reflect the epiphenomenal nature of play, that being a byproduct to support development. The question, as with Hughes's (2012) 'Evolutionary Playwork', is whether 'Compound Flexibility' is a unique playwork theory?

Playwork Theory 3: Psycholudics

Psycholudics is based on play being healing practice in the playground setting as an essential function of playwork within the depth psychologies (psychoanalysis and analytical psychology) and the 'acute observations of the playing child and the adult attending to that child within the ludic ecology, the environment that contains the child's play meaning (the essence of playwork as I see it) – that goes to form a new field of study I describe as psycholudics. (Sturrock, 2003, p. 81). Psycholudics, or the 'study of the mind and psyche at play' (Sturrock and Else, 1998, p. 76), 're-inscribes play and the play process as the locus of healing' (Sturrock, 2003, p. 82).

The theory developed by Sturrock and Else (1998) is based on 'the process of play as it happens' within the depth psychologies (psychoanalysis and analytical psychology). This includes the work of Stanislav Grof, Donald W. Winnicott, Ken Wilber, and Carl Gustav Jung (King and Sturrock, 2019; Sturrock and Else, 1998). The main points of 'psycholudics' proposed by Sturrock and Else (1998) are that play has a natural healing potential for

children where there is an instinct to play, termed the Play Drive or Ludido. The focus is on the process of play with a Ludic Cycle, or Play Cycle, consisting of six elements: meta-lude; play cue, play return; play frame; loop and flow, and annihilation (these have been revised by King and Newstead, 2019b). The internal world and external world of the child make up the Ludic Ecology, the interface of the subjective internal world of the child and the objective outer world. The main elements of the Play Cycle have been derived from two studies with playworkers (King and Newstead, 2019b) and childcare workers (King and Newstead, 2019a) on their understanding of the Play Cycle. This enabled a revision of the six elements to pre-cue, play cue, play return, play frame, flow, and annihilation based on practitioner agreement on how they understood each element (King and Newstead, 2019b). In addition, playworkers and childcare workers' understanding of the adult role within the four hierarchical levels of intervention has been studied (King and Newstead, 2019c). The Play Cycle has also been used to develop an observational tool to quantitatively record the Play Cycle (King, 2020, King, Atkins and Burr, 2021).

The playworker has a role in supporting the Play Cycle with a 'holding function' of the play frame, termed 'Containment'. If the Play Cycle is taken over by an adult for their own purposes (their own unworked out play), or play used for an adult-based outcome, for example, learning, this is termed 'Adulteration'. The playworker supports

the Play Cycle by four levels of hierarchical intervention: play maintenance, simple involvement, medial intervention, and complex intervention (Sturrock *et al.*, 2004).

The therapeutic nature of play is grounded within play therapy (Axline, 1947), where children can be observed to play out experiences (King and Temple, 2018). However, whether adults use play to express their own 'unworked out play material' (Sturrock and Else, 1998, p. 93) is still open to debate, as is the very psychoanalytical focus of the psycholudic theory.

Sturrock and Else (1998) put forward a theoretical model of the process of play, termed the Play Cycle. Although focusing on the process of play, the main concept of the Play Cycle can be compared with von Uexküll's (2010) Functional Cycle (King, 2022). In addition, the components of the Play Cycle can be linked to other concepts and theories, for example, the meta-lude with personal causation (deCharms, 1968), the play cue and play return with metacommunication (Bateson, 1972), the play frame with frame analysis (Goffman, 1974), and the loop and flow with flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). As with the theories of 'Evolutionary Playwork' and 'Compound Flexibility', 'Psycholudics' is also a conglomerate of other theories and concepts, although it does provide a model of play that has been empirically studied.

The application of the Play Cycle has also been empirically studied using

both video (King, 2020) and in real time (King, Atkins and Burr, 2021). For both studies, the recording of play cues and play returns to form Play Cycles has shown strong agreement, providing empirical evidence to support the Play Cycle as a theoretical model. As a theory on play, there is empirical evidence to support it as a theory (King and Newstead, 2019a; 2019b; 2019c; 2020). However, as with 'Evolutionary Playwork' and 'Compound Flexibility', how it is specifically a playwork theory is still questionable as the process of play will take place where, and whenever children play (King, 2025), and as Sturrock and Else (1998) stated in the 'Colorado Paper', all adults included playworkers, parents, and other people who work with children in play.

The initial concept of psycholudics was further developed by Else (2009; 2014) in their Integrated Play Framework, based on the work of Wilber (1989), that incorporated varied views of play into one holistic framework. Sturrock (2003), based on the work of Winnicott (1971), considered the interaction of the playing child and the adult in what they termed the Ludic Third (King and Temple, 2018). In addition, the theoretical aspect of the Play Cycle has been further developed concerning external perceptual cues (King, 2022), flow (King, 2023), and play-based learning (King, 2025). The latter, indicating, as Sturrock and Else (1998) stated, that the concept of the Play Cycle applies to any adult working with children in a play context, thus it is not confined to being just a 'playwork

theory'.

Comparing the Three Models of Playwork:

Brown (2003) ascertains that playwork involves enriching the play environment and identifying and removing any barriers that may prevent children's development in their play. For Hughes, over time, moved from 'In general, playworkers work directly with children in the play environment they create together' (Hughes, 1996, p. 4) to 'playwork first and foremost is about the creation of good play spaces in which children can play – not for children to create or co-create a play space it is the playworkers job to create spaces, not children, children 'modify' the space when playing' (Hughes, 2013, p. 66-70).

Hughes (2012) refers to children experiencing 'adult free space' (p. 108), which implies that whilst the adult will be present, children should be able to play as if the adult were not there. This, for Hughes (2012), requires the adult to facilitate the play space for the potential of all 16 Play Types to be engaged in for children to reflect on their ancestral past and engage in their future existence. Brown (2003; 2018) considers this facilitation of the play space to maximise a child's developmental potential, whilst Sturrock and Else (1998) suggest this enables children to consider the play space for their therapeutic needs, an aspect that Brown (2018b) also considers. Both Hughes (2012) and Brown (2003) emphasise the need for a flexible environment to enable flexible combinations to occur in children's play,

and the adult role is to facilitate this. Whilst playwork is a quasi-profession (King and Newstead, 2021) in its own right, the interaction of the adult and the facilitation of the space for children to play does not necessarily develop into a playwork theory, but rather an adaptation of existing theories around play. Sturrock and Else (1998) allude to this in the opening of the 'Colorado Paper': 'Throughout this paper, we use the term playwork to describe adults active in play work with children. Of course, these descriptions intended to include parents and other adults active in playing with children' (p. 73).

When comparing the three models of playwork, both Hughes (2012) and Brown's (2003) proposed theories lacks the empirical evidence to support them as a theory (Khun, 1971). However, the empirical research undertaken on Sturrock and Else's (1998) theory of psycholudics, more specifically on the Play Cycle (King and Newstead, 2020), does stand up more to be considered as a theory.

The Three Models of Playwork, the National Occupational Standards (NOS) and the Playwork Principles:

Playwork education, training, and professional practice are currently underpinned by the 8 Playwork Principles (Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group (PPSG), 2005). The 8 Playwork Principles were developed to 'establish a professional and ethical framework for playwork and must be seen as a whole' (Play Wales, 2023, p.1). The Playwork Principles are:

1. All children and young people need to play. The impulse to play is innate. Play is a biological, psychological and social necessity, and is fundamental to the healthy development and wellbeing of individuals and communities.
2. Play is a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. That is, 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.
3. The prime focus and essence of playwork is to support and facilitate the play process and this should inform the development of play policy, strategy, training and education.
4. For playworkers, the play process takes precedence and playworkers act as advocates for play when engaging with adult-led agendas.
5. The role of the playworker is to support all children and young people in the creation of a space in which they can play.
6. The playworker's response to children and young people playing is based on a sound up-to-date knowledge of the play process, and reflective practice.

7. Playworkers recognise their own impact on the play space and also the impact of children and young people's play on the playworker.
8. Playworkers choose an intervention style that enables children and young people to extend their play. All playworker intervention must balance risk with the Developmental benefit and wellbeing of children.

The background work and research of the Playwork Principles involved Bob Hughes and Gordon Sturrock (Conway, 2008), and whilst direct links to their theories, psycholudics, and evolutionary playwork are evident, there is also an indirect connection to compound flexibility, that is, the aspect of holistic development. For example, Playwork Principle 1 refers to play being a biological and psychological necessity for health development and can be inferred in each of the three playwork theories. Playwork Principles 2, 3, and 4 refer to play being a process, and Playwork Principle 8 considers adult support for this process (intervention style), and this relates to the Play Cycle and the four adult intervention styles (Sturrock and Else, 1998). The playwork principles have also been considered within professional practice outside of the UK (Worch, 2021), aligning with Sutton's (2017) view of playwork theory being incorporated in other countries.

The playwork National Occupational Standards (NOS) that underpin

vocational and higher education playwork qualifications are currently under review and being revised by the UK Playwork National Occupational Standards Consortium (UKPNOASC, 2025). The UKPNOASC includes Play Wales, Play England, Play Scotland, PlayBoard (Northern Ireland), and the Playwork Foundation. Whilst the current NOS is based on the 8 Playwork Principles, concerning Playwork Principle 6, it is stated that a 'sound up-to-date knowledge of the play process' (PPSG, 2005, p.1). This statement was first proposed by Sturrock and Else (1998), where they stated the lack of Playwork flourishing was 'the inability of the field itself to take on and advance the movement through meaningful research and development' (p. 74).

What is important for the current revision of the playwork NOS is how robust the inclusion of current playwork theory is which currently underpins playwork education, training, and practice. This is of particular importance as one of the key principles for the functional mapping is the 'integration of the Playwork Principles' (UKPNOASC, 2025, p. 1). Whilst the final approved and published playwork NOS are still to be officially published, the review needs to take seriously the theoretical base being used (which underpins the Playwork Principles) concerning empirical research and justification of using any theory (Khun, 1971).

The 'three models of playwork' (Evolutionary Playwork, Compound Flexibility and Psycholudics) have been the theoretical basis for playwork over

the last 30 years since Hughes (1996) published the 'Taxonomy of Play Types', Sturrock and Else's (1998) conference paper at the International Play Association Conference (IPA) in Colorado, USA (now known as the 'Colorado Paper') and Brown's (2003) publication of 'Playwork: theory and practice'. However, as they sit currently within the National Occupational Standards (NOS) for Playwork and are integral within the eight Playwork Principles (PPSG, 2005), the inclusion needs to be carefully considered for the current review of the playwork NOS. This point also relates to publications that currently cite these theories. This includes the 'Factsheets', for example, the National Children's Bureau's (NCB) 'factsheet NO. 14: What is Playwork?' (NCB, 2009) and more recent practice-based publications (Play Wales, 2021). They are also referred to in more recent playwork practice-based books (Wood *et al.*, 2025; Wilson, 2024). However, when returning to the basic premise regarding whether a theory can 'stand up or not' (Kuhn, 1970; Popper, 1959), for continued inclusion with both the NOS and Playwork Principles, more evidence-based research is needed if for example Hughes' (2012) Evolutionary Playwork or Brown's (2003) Compound Flexibility are to be still included in any review.

Conclusion: Whilst theory is important to support professional practice, the use and application of it needs to be justified. Whilst the theory supporting the Play Cycle has been researched (King and Newstead, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c) and developed (King, 2023;

2024; 2025), this is lacking for the theories of Evolutionary Playwork and Compound Flexibility. There have been no further developments or empirical studies for these other two playwork theories when compared to the Play Cycle. How each of the three models of playwork theory is being interpreted and incorporated into the revised playwork NOS needs to be clearly justified and reflect up-to-date knowledge and empirical evidence.

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