

Research Report

Shared ground: Examining the alignment of playwork and youth work practice in Wales

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and youth work practice in Wales

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Executive summary

This research report, commissioned by Play Wales, explores the alignment of playwork and youth work practices across Wales. It highlights examples of aligned practice within local authorities and third sector organisations, emphasising the benefits and challenges of such an approach. The research aims to inform further discussions on the strategic alignment of these two sectors to enhance service delivery for children.

The findings reveal that aligned practices can lead to improved service delivery, better understanding of children's needs and stronger relationships between practitioners and the communities they serve. However, challenges such as differing principles, training requirements and external factors like funding and policy alignment need to be addressed to maximise the benefits of this approach.

The report concludes with the researchers' recommendations for strategic leaders, training providers and policymakers to support the development of aligned practices and enhance the overall effectiveness of playwork and youth work in Wales.

Introduction and context

There is a growing number of organisations across Wales that have some level of alignment in their planning or delivery of playwork and youth work. These aligned services are found both in local authorities and in third sector organisations. There are examples ranging from organisations where playworkers and youth workers have shared managers and/or shared training plans to organisations with a dual qualified workforce delivering seamless provision at shared locations.

This report has been commissioned by Play Wales, and undertaken by researchers at Wrexham University and Play Wales, to examine and share some examples of how and where this alignment happens. It also aims to highlight some of the benefits and challenges of an aligned approach and to understand the experiences of practitioners working in this way. In documenting these examples, we hope they inform further discussion on the strategic alignment of playwork and youth work in Wales.

This report also aims to be of benefit to practitioners in both youth work and playwork as they reflect on the context of their practice. We envisage that service managers, strategic leaders and policy makers, in

Wales and beyond, will also find this report of benefit in maintaining an understanding of current practice in Wales.

Background

Playwork is defined by Play Wales as 'the art of working with playing children'.¹ The Playwork Principles² set out children's intrinsic need to play, the freely chosen nature of play, the role of the playworker in advocating for, and extending, children's play as well as understanding and prioritising the play process. Playwork recognises children's right to access rich opportunities to play, as defined in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)³ and the explicit clarification in General Comment no. 17.⁴ The playwork approach focuses on children as they are now, not what they may later become.

Youth work in Wales is also defined by an agreed set of principles – Youth Work in Wales: Principles and Purposes⁵ – that focus the empowerment and development of young people, through a voluntary relationship that starts where young people are at in their lives and recognises their potential.⁶ Youth work seeks to support young people to exercise their

rights and responsibilities and aims to be educative, expressive, participative, inclusive and empowering. As with playwork, youth work engages with the young person in the here and now but is also concerned with the young person of the future and how they can be supported to fulfill their potential.

In 2021, The Interim Youth Work Board for Wales, in its final report,⁷ identified the need for a more sustainable and equitable model for youth work in Wales. In response to recommendation 2 of this report (that the Welsh Government should establish a legislative basis for youth work in Wales), the Welsh Government has recently published a draft statutory framework for youth work which specifically defines young people as those aged between 11 and 25 and includes a definition of youth work as:

‘services provided within the youth support service using a distinct educational approach based on voluntary engagement of young persons delivered by persons holding a youth worker or youth support worker qualification’.⁸

This definition was provided in response to calls for clarity as compared to services ‘working with young people’ and to ensure that youth work’s ‘distinctiveness is better understood and protected’.⁹

Playwork and youth work are both services that have not been well understood, particularly when working alongside other professions, and are often confused with other work with children and young people.¹⁰

The uniqueness of each is proudly defended and the two professions follow their own National Occupational Standards (NOS), and yet there is also overlap in their key principles and areas of shared interest for both.

The Ministerial Review of Play¹¹ specifically recognises youth workers as part of the wider play workforce, acknowledging that it is a profession that impacts on children’s opportunities to play, and encourages engagement across the professions. The review also calls for more legislative alignment and ‘better collaboration across the youth work and playwork sectors at national, regional and local levels’.¹²

It specifically mentions the Interim Youth Work Board for Wales Final Report¹³ as an important document with potential to impact children’s right to play and refers to some key areas of shared interest between the professions, such as spatial justice in communities. This issue ‘becomes increasingly important as children get older’¹⁴ and the play needs of older children¹⁵ are particularly relevant to both professions.

Wales a Play Friendly Country,¹⁶ is the statutory guidance setting out the requirements on local authorities to secure sufficient play opportunities for children in their area, and, in doing so, to take into account ‘The extent to which... The Local Authority Youth Service provides for children’s opportunities for leisure and association’.

Recommendation 5 of the Interim Youth Work Board for Wales Final Report called for the Welsh Government to ‘establish a national body for youth work services in Wales’¹⁷ and, in 2025, the Cabinet Secretary for Education announced plans to do this, stating hopes that this would support collaboration.¹⁸

This context has created an opportune time to examine examples of aligned practice in Wales. The aim is to understand the features of existing aligned practice and the experience of the practitioners involved in the delivery.

Methodology

To elicit the in-depth and contextual information required for this report, a qualitative research approach was taken.¹⁹ This approach provided the opportunity for our participants to express, in their own words, their experience of alignment in playwork and youth work delivery within their own contexts providing a richness of understanding. We undertook semi-structured interviews with individual practitioners, service managers, and strategic leaders in the youth work and playwork sectors to give a breadth of experience and understanding of the current context for this report.

The research involved a purposive/selective sampling approach.²⁰ This means that the organisations that we approached to take part were based on examples that we, the researchers and Play Wales, were aware of from existing sector knowledge. It sought to include organisations that could serve as examples of aligned practice with as much variety as possible in the types of alignment and their context. Organisations with no alignment were not selected. However, four non-delivery strategic level partners were also interviewed to provide a strategic perspective to the research. These four individuals represented three non-governmental bodies: Play Wales, Education Training Standards Cymru Wales (ETS Cymru Wales) and the Council for Wales of Voluntary Youth Services (CWVYS).

Organisation type	Number of organisations	Number of participants
Strategic	3	4
Operational	6	8
Total	9	12

Table 1a: Sample by organisation type: strategic or operational

Organisation type	Number of organisations	Number of participants
Local authority	2	4
Third sector	4	4
Non-governmental body	3	4
Total	9	12

Table 1b: Sample by organisation type: local authority/third sector/non-governmental body

We spoke to eight participants from six operational youth work and playwork organisations that served as examples of some level of aligned practice. These were:

- Boys and Girls Clubs Wales
- Newport City Council Youth and Play Service
- RAY Ceredigion
- Seren in the Community
- Valleys Kids
- Wrexham County Borough Council Play and Youth Support Team.

The researchers are aware of other examples of aligned practice in Wales. However, this research did not intend to capture an exhaustive list, but to present some illustrative examples, including key contextual information and practitioner experiences.

Self-reported professional background	Number of participants
Youth work only	3
Playwork only	2
Both youth work and playwork	6
Neither	1

Table 2: Self-reported professional background

A note on terminology

While youth work takes place in many contexts, this report focuses on community-based, universal youth work provision, because this is usually where youth workers and playworkers interact the most and consequently where examples of aligned practice can be found.

We have used the term ‘older children’ rather than ‘young people’ to describe those aged roughly 11 to 16. Lots of the participants, especially those with a youth work background, have used the term ‘young people’, and we have presented their accounts as they were spoken to us. This distinction gets right to the heart of the different philosophical underpinnings of the two professions. For a more detailed rationale see *Older children play too*.²¹

The interviews were undertaken by two members of the research team using Microsoft Teams video conferencing. Following the interviews, the transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis to look for common themes and patterns in what participants said.²² The third member of the research team, who took no part in the interview process, was involved in the collaborative thematic analysis process. We adopted this approach to enhance and challenge the data analysis, reducing potential bias and enabling the provision of a different perspective on the analytical process.²³

As part of the analysis, we developed a report card for each of the six playwork and youth work delivery organisations that took part in the research. These report cards provide a summary of each organisation and the ways in which they have aligned their playwork and youth work practice as well as the benefits and challenges that they have experienced.

We have chosen to describe the examples we encountered as aligned practice. They could be, and were, also described as joined up, linked, inter-connected and even sometimes blended practice.

They were not ever examples of amalgamated or merged practice as the integrity of each distinct profession was maintained. This is an important distinction, given the existing concerns about the ability of youth work and playwork to each remain distinct from other professions working with children.

Findings

We found several examples of youth work and playwork practice that are aligned in different ways. Sometimes, this involved youth work staff that undertook play training to help them understand the play needs of older children. At other times, this involved having youth workers in play clubs, having playworkers deliver junior youth clubs or having staff that are dual qualified deliver seamless provision in one location. Often, this took place in joint teams with single line management.

Each of these examples had developed in a specific context, following a unique journey that was often dependent on the contributions of individuals driving alignment in their organisation, based on the benefits that they had seen from their own practice.

The following section presents a report card for each example organisation that we spoke to, detailing some of their unique contexts and key features, as well as the advantages and challenges that these organisations have faced with their approach. This section goes on to present the thematic analysis of the 12 interviews that we completed, exploring common themes and issues that were reported by participants, including the strategic leaders.

Newport City Council Play and Youth Service

– local authority

Report card

Structure and background

Playwork and youthwork services were aligned by the local authority in a re-structure in 2022. This was a strategic decision, recognising some successful collaboration taking place under a previous local multi-disciplinary hub model of service delivery.

The service sits within Prevention and Inclusion in the local authority and delivers play clubs (ages five to twelve), junior youth clubs (ages ten to thirteen) and senior youth clubs (ages thirteen and over) across the Newport area. The team also delivers a supported play service for children with additional needs, a supported youth club, youth work in secondary schools and play sessions in primary schools. Playworkers and youth workers are alongside each other in some settings and are, in many cases, dual qualified.

Key features

- Strategic decision to align services informed by local good practice.
- A good number of highly experienced and dual qualified staff.
- Capacity, expertise and delivery of in-house introductory play training has built understanding of play across the service.

Benefits

- Service design has helped youth workers to recognise play behaviours and to bring a playful approach, even into more targeted interventions.
- Staff developing longer and stronger relationships, leading to older children being more responsive and engaged.
- Inclusive practice of playworkers has ‘transformed’ the way the youth workers are able to support children with additional needs.
- Aligned service is effective at supporting children through transitions.

Challenges and learning

- There is occasional tension in approaches, particularly around measuring of outcomes and planning sessions.
- Transitioning the delivery style from playwork to youth work can sometimes be difficult, particularly for staff that deliver multiple sessions per day.
- The service employs more youth workers than playworkers due to the availability and focus of funding, which has the potential to lead to imbalance in provision.

Wrexham County Borough Council Play and Youth Support Team – local authority

Report card

Structure and background

The Play and Youth Support Team came together in 2018 as a result of a strategic decision by the local authority. The service delivers open access play sessions and community youth work sessions in multiple locations across the county, often with funding from the community councils. The service also has a strong focus on development outside of provision. Several sessional staff are dual qualified (or working towards), and all staff are offered shared continuing professional development (CPD).

Some community councils fund both play and youth sessions for their area. For example, in Coedpoeth this is delivered as a back-to-back session with shared consistent staff. In Broughton, playwork and youth work are run as separate sessions, on different nights of the week, based on different needs in that community, but still with shared staff.

Key features

- High proportion of delivery is funded from community councils – possibility of play and youth sessions commissioned by the same funder and delivered by the same provider, making alignment and adjustments possible.
- Experienced staff team with robust theoretical underpinnings and staff structure focused on development as well as provision.
- Development of *Shared Values for the Play Workforce* information booklet and training, that focuses on common values and approaches to childhood across different professions.

Benefits

- Enables service to be responsive to the needs of children in each community.
- Allows staff to build relationships from an early age and provide consistency.
- Fosters a stronger relationship with the wider community – advocating for children's right to play at all ages and supporting conditions in communities beyond staffed provision, for example developing spaces and building shelters.
- More internal partnership opportunities.

Challenges and learning

- Strong professional identities and different approaches can create tensions among staff occasionally, particularly in the early days after re-structure.
- Lack of existing training that specifically supports playworkers and youth workers' shared understanding.

Valleys Kids, Rhondda Cynon Taf

– small third sector organisation

Report card

Structure and background

Playworkers and youth workers are all sessional and are part of one team, managed by one full-time member of staff. The team provides various services across the community including open access play sessions, youth work sessions and a 'middle club'. The middle club is attended by children aged ten to thirteen (but the age range is flexible based on need). It is staffed by two playworkers and two youth workers. At least half of the staff are dual qualified or working towards this, and CPD training is offered equally to all staff.

The middle club restarted in 2022 (after it previously ceased due to loss of Communities First funding). New funding was secured in response to an identified need – children in this age range had often ceased attending play sessions but did not feel they belonged in the youth club. There was also tension reported between children in this age group and the wider community.

Key features

- Management with experience in both playwork and youth work, recognising the value of working alongside each other, as well as the distinct nature of each.
- Willingness of funders to support blended practice and the organisation's ability to build the case and demonstrate the need.
- Strong culture of observation, reflection and shared planning, and an embedded community development approach of adapting and responding to needs.
- Staff deliberately working in close proximity to allow for shared understanding of practice.

Benefits

- Enables relationships between children and the community.
- Allows the organisation to respond to children's play needs at different ages and reduces the impact of some play behaviors on other age groups.
- Improved practice, including stronger reflection, better understanding of teenagers' play needs and a more successful, playful approach to informal learning.

Challenges and learning

- Finding flexible longer-term funding that allows the organisation to adapt to the needs of children and the community in this way is always a challenge.
- Finding staff time for shared training – staff are sessional with day jobs and funding the additional time is an issue.

RAY Ceredigion

– small third sector organisation

Report card

Structure and background

Delivering various services in the community, including open access play sessions for ages five and over in multiple locations, since 2009, as well as play sessions in primary schools and a youth club for eleven to eighteen-year-olds. The organisation also runs a junior youth club that is referral only for ages six to eleven. This provision is play-based and is delivered by staff with playwork training.

There is a project lead for each aspect of the organisation's delivery, the majority of the staff are casual. Lots of staff that started out doing playwork have moved to other roles in the organisation, as funding has come and gone. Consequently, there are staff with playwork training throughout the organisation.

Key features

- Well-trained workforce due to competency in the organisation to deliver playwork training in-house.
- Deep understanding of playwork across the whole organisation which creates a strong culture of reflection, advocacy for children's rights and a person-centered needs-based approach to all services.
- The dual qualification of the service manager has ensured adherence to distinct principles and purposes of each profession.

Benefits

- Improved practice across the organisation from an embedded culture of reflection.
- A playful approach and intervention style in the youth club respects young people's right to be themselves, play with identities and express themselves.
- Dual qualifications and understanding of both professions has allowed staff more flexibility in practice to better respond to the needs of children.

Challenges and learning

- Barriers to delivery include two sets of training requirements and registration requirements of Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW).
- Competitive nature of funding in the voluntary sector limits the potential for collaboration.
- Limited funding available to pay staff time for attending training, which can be significantly more than their weekly contracted hours for sessional staff.

Seren in the Community, Cardiff

– small third sector organisation

Report card

Structure and background

A small, local community organisation delivering open access play sessions in parks and public spaces since 2016. All staff have experience of working with younger and older age groups, all are playwork qualified, and in the past, there have been staff qualified in both youth work and playwork.

In general, play sessions are accessed by children aged five to fourteen (and children under five accompanied by an adult) and everyone from toddlers to teenagers all mix and play together. A good proportion of children attending are in the nine to thirteen age range, and lots of these children have grown up with the organisation, attending since they were toddlers. Occasionally, the organisation delivers some specific sessions for children over eleven, with a more focused activity but still play-based. These are a direct response to the observed needs of older children to play without younger children present (often younger siblings).

Key features

- A culture that is responsive to the needs of older children – their need for specific support with issues and transitions as well as their need to play.
- Part of a strong multi-disciplinary third sector partnership in the locality, with a culture of collaboration and signposting.

Benefits

- Supports the needs of older children to play.
- Provision that can grow with children and meet their changing needs.
- Shared learning and practice from working together, for example youth work staff have been able to engage with older children, including experience of de-escalation in that age group.
- Improved offer for children who want to engage with more structured activities, develop skills or access specific support.

Challenges and learning

- Insufficiency and insecurity of funding to meet the needs identified.
- Finding and funding staff time to access further training, for example youth work qualifications.
- Lack of information for children about other services that they can move on to.
- Reflection that there is a need, across the sector, to support transitions at an earlier age, for example from eight years old.

Boys and Girls Clubs

– national third sector organisation

Report card

Structure and background

Boys and Girls Clubs is a national organisation with a long history in Wales. It is made up of 140 membership clubs that deliver youth work and sport and are mostly run by volunteers. The national organisation also delivers specific strategic youth work programmes, with funding from the Welsh Government and elsewhere, such as engaging young people in politics and Taith (Wales' international learning exchange programme). There are strong pathways for young leaders and 'home-grown' youth workers. The national organisation works with eleven to twenty-five-year-olds, but each local club is unique to the community it serves and, often, they have lower age ranges.

Leaders in the organisation have undertaken play training and are striving to embed an understanding of play across its services. Lots of training is delivered in-house, but this is often informal training to accommodate the needs of community volunteers.

Key features

- Leadership that understands the play behaviours of older children and strives to embed this understanding across the organisation.
- Ability of the organisation to accommodate the learning needs of a diverse group of volunteers.
- Strategic position of the organisation in Wales and a strong understanding of the sector as a whole.

Benefits

- Play training means managers have better understanding of older children's play.
- Improved approach to risk and challenge.
- A wider, more diverse offer for children to better meet their needs.
- More opportunities for collaboration in communities.

Challenges and learning

- Lack of capacity of volunteers to be able to attend additional formal training – training burden is already high.
- Lack of staff capacity in general across the third sector reducing ability to embed learning across the organisation.
- Lack of alignment in training structures, for example content on play and playwork in youth work courses.

Thematic analysis

Following the thematic analysis, two broad overarching themes emerged. The first theme is benefits and is supported by three sub-themes:

- Responding to needs
- Consistency
- Cross-pollination.

The second theme is challenges and is supported by three sub-themes:

- Philosophical underpinning
- Training
- External factors.

Benefits

During the interviews, participants were, overall, supportive of an aligned approach to the delivery of playwork and youth work. Indeed, many participants were strong advocates of this approach:

‘I can see the absolute benefits for children by having a blended approach of playwork and youth work... I would have a playscheme and a youth club in every community with the same members of staff taking it through. That’s what I would aspire to have.’

Local authority

This enthusiasm was based on the benefits they had witnessed from an aligned approach to youth work and playwork – benefits for children, families and communities as well as for practitioners, organisations and the sector as a whole.

Responding to needs

Most significantly of all, the needs of older children to play was cited by all participants, whether they had a youth work background or a playwork background:

‘I would argue young people always need access to be as daft as possible.’

Strategic leader

Those we interviewed told us that their aligned practice allowed staff to better understand and respond to these play needs and behaviours. Aligned services were more flexible and engaging for older children as a result of this understanding.

One participant, from a third sector organisation, told us this approach allowed youth clubs to be a space where older children can ‘play with their identities’. For many participants, aligned services were also particularly good at responding to the needs of children aged around 10 to 13:

‘[It’s being able to] have that middle ground covered. I feel it is probably the most beneficial part of having a kind of blended approach.’

Third sector organisation

For this age group, the concept of transitions came up regularly in our interviews – transition from primary to secondary school, from play provision to youth club, from childhood to adolescence. In many cases, we were told that this age group, themselves, report feeling too old for play services and too young for youth club. Some services recalled ‘losing’ children, even if temporarily, during this period:

‘they went from play to nothing ... and then you’d see him two years later walking into youth club.’

Third sector organisation

Many of the people in organisations we spoke to were flexible with their age ranges (in both playwork and youth work) to ensure they were able to respond to the needs of this age group. Others had a mix of playwork and youth work staff at each provision and some had developed a junior youth club or middle club. These were often a direct response to address, what they saw as, a significant unmet need in existing provision:

‘communities have come to me and say, can we develop a youth club? They weren’t talking about a youth club. They’d be talking about a junior youth club. And the focus was children. Interestingly, children who were transitioning from primary school into secondary school, because there’s clearly a need there.’

Strategic leader

Being able to meet the needs of this age group was found to be a significant benefit of an aligned approach and, often, its primary driver.

Related to this, there were mixed discussions around the observed impact of older children’s play on those who are younger and reports of older children (particularly those aged around 14 to 16) not wanting to attend provision alongside 10-year-olds, for example. However, there were also examples of this age group specifically attending playschemes, even if sometimes, they were ‘pretending to look after siblings,’ or playing ‘ironically’.

One local authority also reflected that in community youth work provision there has been ‘...a shift since COVID. The age range is a lot younger’ and 15- and 16-year-olds were no longer regularly attending. This was attributed to a lack of consistency as a result of the pandemic.

Consistency (as trusted adults)

Participants reported that both playworkers and youth workers are key trusted adults in children’s lives and, as such, consistency was cited as a major benefit of an aligned approach to playwork and youth work. This is particularly true where these services were delivered by the same members of staff, either as a mixed team or with staff that are dual qualified.

‘That’s when we really see that blend of playwork and youth work working.’

Local authority

The significance of this approach is that it allows for a much longer and deeper relationship with children in their community:

‘[A continuation of] provision can kind of grow with children and young people.’

Third sector organisation

For playworkers, this means that they are able to maintain a relationship with children right through – to be a valuable trusted adult, and playful advocate – from early childhood well into teenage years. For youth workers, it means having an existing prior relationship with children before they even start attending youth provision:

‘The two services coming together means that some of those young people we already know because they’ve transitioned from play to youth, we have a relationship with their parents ... we might know that they have interventions from other services. It’s much more beneficial for the families, the children, the young person.’

Local authority

Participants described how valuable these relationships can be to children, but also for practitioners when more challenging conversations may be needed (for example around use of vapes or sexual health):

‘[a] trusted adult can be anyone, but you know, being in communities, being able to work with children at a younger age, you have that relationship ... they’ll engage with you if they know you. If they don’t know you, they’re not going to have those conversations with you. They’re not going to listen to you, are they?’

Local authority

These longer-term relationships also support development further into volunteering and, later, employment roles as well. For example:

‘We put on a Level 1 playworker course, and we did have teenagers coming along ... putting that back into practice in their own community. So that was youth work age children delivering playwork.’

Third sector organisation

And there was another example from a local authority:

‘We’ve got a young girl, a young person who is a member of staff now, but she started with us when she was five, within our play setting. And she started as a supported child. She had a one to one. And now she is one of our best sessional playworkers.’

Local authority

Cross-pollination

Another significant benefit described by participants was the ability to improve practice and learn from each other, that came from playworkers and youth workers working in communities alongside each other. This was neatly described as cross-pollination by one organisation where playworkers and youth workers work together to deliver a middle club, arranging themselves physically in the space to ensure they can each observe the practice and interventions of the other. There is a strong culture of shared reflection to enable those moments to create learning for everyone.

There were many specific areas of practice that were seen to be improved when using an aligned approach. This included deeper shared reflection, stronger risk-benefit assessment, more strategic working with communities and better engagement across different age groups.

One playworker described a former youth work colleague:

‘We learnt a lot from her when it came to sort of communicating with young people, rather than the kind of pre-teenagers we were more used to.’

Third sector organisation

Inclusivity was another area of improved practice. One participant from a local authority, with a youth work background, told us that working alongside playworkers ‘really made us think a lot about how we ensure we are an inclusive service, for children with additional needs’.

One participant also pointed out that this cross-pollination can only happen when playworkers and youth workers are regularly in contact with each other. The prevalence of this across the sector is patchy and this affects the levels of shared understanding across the professions:

‘if you’re not seeing playworkers, you’re not seeing it, you might not understand it. So, I think there’s more work that can be done there.’

Third sector organisation

The findings from this theme demonstrate that there are many benefits from taking an aligned approach to playwork and youth work delivery, such as:

- responding to children’s needs and their right to play through transition and into teenage years
- developing longer term and more consistent relationships with children in their communities
- improving practice through shared learning including observation, reflection, risk and inclusive practice.

Challenges

The organisations we spoke to told us that operating using a blended or aligned approach is not without its challenges. Some of these challenges were common to the different organisations and can be grouped into two sub-themes: philosophical underpinning and training. In addition, there were other challenges highlighted that represent external factors.

Philosophical underpinning

Playwork and youth work are separate professions, with different theoretical bases. The people in organisations that we spoke to delivered services that were *aligned* but not *amalgamated* and all expressed respect for the integrity of each profession and the unique principles that underpin them. Many had a strong sense of professional identity. The most important distinction being drawn was between a youth worker as an informal educator, more focused on children's personal and social development, and a playworker being more focused on the playing child, the play process and the child as they are 'in the moment'. As a result, there was, sometimes, the perception that youth workers are more focused on outcomes and planned activities.

There were examples of tensions between staff, often as a result of different interpretations of, and responses to, children's behaviour. However, often, the perceived tensions seemed to be less among frontline staff and more at a strategic level:

'I think a lot of people are working across all of these disciplines, so you know, they're doing what the needs are and delivering what is needed in that time and space ... whereas people [at a strategic level] can get very defensive about their specialism which is yeah, isn't helpful.'

Third sector organisation

One participant did express concerns that alignment could impact on the distinctiveness of each profession but felt that a shared understanding of the significant differences was key.

Most participants described a wider lack of understanding of each profession – of their purposes and of their benefits to children and communities. Both professions were seen as being often 'underrated' or 'misunderstood'. This impacted external perceptions, community relationships and available funding but also the views of each other and potential for smooth alignment. One participant felt that both sectors need to:

'get our act together to ensure that more people know what play is and what youth work is and how it operates in their local area.'

Strategic leader

Despite this, all participants were able to describe significant overlaps in the two professions, specifically around:

- the principle of voluntary engagement
- being child led
- advocacy for children's rights
- working with children in their communities, near where they live
- being a trusted adult for children
- using an approach that respects children for who they are and where they are.

In addition,

'Playwork and youth work have got significant commonality not as a service that is focused on the pathology of dysfunctional childhood ... what we're talking about is it is a "relational capability approach". That we create an environment that enables children and young people to become capable.'

Strategic leader²⁴

One participant pointed out that, while there are important distinctions between the two professions, they are not distinctions that are recognised by children themselves:

‘Children and young people who access or don’t access play and youth work opportunities – they see absolutely no distinction at all, in my experience ... They really don’t see the world as adults do. So, the overlaps between play and youth work from a child’s perspective I think should be seamless.’

Strategic leader

This participant reflected that playwork and youth work are seen, by children as being *both* distinct from other professions as the focus is on them, the children themselves. This overlap led one participant to suggest:

‘What if there was a fundamental common understanding ... of what we are trying to achieve. Overall, you are trying to support children to have better opportunities.’

Third sector organisation

It was often suggested that, whether staff can navigate these distinctions and overlaps in their practice is:

‘fundamentally down to the training ... and the messages they get.’

Local authority

Training

Most participants felt that training is key to successful alignment. However, most also felt that there is room for improvement in the current training structures because they do not foster mutual understanding across the two professions. During interviews participants with either a youth work background or a playwork background told us that they saw significant value in youth workers understanding children’s play and undertaking playwork qualifications:

‘I think there definitely needs to be a bit better alignment with the training ... you need your level 2 and level 3 and degree qualified youth workers to understand playwork.’

Third sector organisation

Some participants with a youth work background had undertaken playwork training and felt it had improved their practice. As discussed under the theme of cross-pollination, the practice areas of improvement included, in particular, understanding of play needs and behaviors, risk, observation and reflection.

However, lots of the third sector organisations referred to the unattainable capacity required for level 3 qualified playworkers, for example to access level 2 and level 3 youth work courses and for qualified youth workers to access playwork courses. These staff are often sessional, with other commitments, and may be employed for as little as three hours a week:

‘A lot of it is free. But then we have to find the hours like this level 3 youth work ... one day a week, I have to find all that money to pay the staff to attend that training.’

Third sector organisation

Finding the funding required for this, whilst maintaining service delivery is often not possible, and as a result:

‘A lot of the time in this sector [third sector], we’re sending people on courses and expecting them to do it in their own time and not be paid, not be paid at all.’

Third sector organisation

We encountered a broad range of perspectives on the best approach to training. At one margin, were those who felt youth work and playwork (and even childcare and other qualifications) should be specialisms within a broader, common approach to training that could include child development and safeguarding as core learning and reduce repetition and mixed messages. At the other margin, were those who felt that anyone qualified in playwork, for example, (even at level 6) should, if they wish to deliver youth work, start from the beginning (at level 2), to ensure they understand the foundations of what is a distinct and different profession.

However, almost all the participants we spoke to expressed a view that falls somewhere in-between these two ends of the spectrum. Most described something of a 'middle ground' or a pragmatic view, that recognises the clear distinctions and different philosophical underpinnings, but that also recognises the potential benefits of some alignment in training:

'I think the main issue is about the distinctive nature of both approaches, but that doesn't mean to say that, for example, there couldn't be a module on play within the youth work degree.'

Strategic leader

Some proposed various forms of transition qualifications and training that would specifically draw out the distinctions as well as the overlaps in the two professions:

'I think it's really important, you know, if there are kind of people who work across that, they do understand the differences.'

Strategic leader

One participant pointed out that the current system of training does not address alignment or intersections of practice at all:

'[The current training structure] requires [the] learner to join the dots themselves rather than somebody telling them "this is how they blend together".'

Local authority

External factors

Interviewees from both the third sector and local authorities told us of various external factors that impact their practice and that make delivery of aligned services more challenging.

Funding was cited as an issue for both professions and for the consistency of provision in communities. The priorities of available funding 'does dictate, to a large extent, the work that you do' (strategic leader) and the extent to which services are outcomes led. Whilst some participants perceived there may be issues with seeking funding for aligned services, none of the delivery organisations that we interviewed reported any issues specific to funding for aligned services. For them, the process involved 'making the case' to funders, as with any other service.

Some participants in the third sector did suggest variation in the priorities attached to local authority funding, how they involve third sector partners and their commissioning processes:

'We have now convinced them [the local authority] that they should do a play and youth forum rather than a youth forum and a play forum, [with only recipients of respective local authority funding welcome to each] so we have managed to bring that together because obviously I think even if you don't get funding, it's important to be in the arena to be having conversations.'

Third sector organisation

In this case, the third sector organisation delivers playwork and youth work in an aligned way but in their commissioning local authority these services sit in two different departments. This lack of alignment at local authority level was cited as a challenge by several participants. However, some local authorities are aligning playwork and youth work services, including the two that we spoke to, where playwork and youth work sit in the same department. Some participants suggested other local authorities are considering a similar model in the future.

Playwork and youth work fall under different Welsh Government departments due to their distinct focuses, like youth work's emphasis on informal education. However, there are still opportunities to promote greater coherence in policy and strategy, even with this separation:

'You need a playwork offer for children and you need a youth work offer for children. And at a policy level, those things need to make sense. It needs to be a coherent offer.'

Strategic leader

For example:

'at a national level, surely it would make some sense to look at the ministerial review of play recommendations and the youth work recommendations [in the Interim Youth Work Board for Wales Final Report²⁵] and bring them together.'

Strategic leader

Having two separate policy areas also results in two separate sets of regulations, for example, employees may need to meet two sets of minimum qualification standards and registration with the Education Workforce Council (EWC) as well as Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW). Related to this, there were also differences in staff pay scales and contracts, meaning staff were not always able to provide cover across teams, despite this being a useful way of observing each other's approach in practice and supporting alignment:

'Whenever we employ a youth worker, we always employ them as well on a relief playwork contract [subject to their consent]. Now it doesn't work the same way for playwork ... we can't put them on a relief youth worker contract.'

Local authority

There were also some participants that reported a sense of imbalance between the two professions, although this was not always going in the same direction. For example, one organisation reported that youth work staff were on significantly higher rates of pay.

On the other hand, some participants reflected that playwork had a legal basis in the Play Sufficiency Duty,²⁶ whereas youth work did not, although there is now draft statutory guidance for youth work²⁷:

'Even if you think there are links between the two and it would be beneficial for them to come together more often than not; legally where we stand, we're poles apart.'

Strategic leader

The findings from this theme demonstrate that there are several shared challenges that come with an aligned approach to playwork and youth work. This includes the challenges for staff of having to navigate the overlaps, intersections and, importantly, the distinctions between playwork and youth work and how these look in everyday practice.

Training is seen as the key to overcoming these challenges, allowing for alignment without dilution. Current training structures were not seen as adequate to meet these challenges and foster shared understanding.

However, participants were divided about the best approach. There are issues with sessional staff accessing multiple training courses and there is no current training that draws out, specifically, the overlaps and distinctions of the two professions.

There are also other challenges for aligned services, which mainly arise from a lack of strategic and policy alignment in both the local authorities and in the Welsh Government. For example, two sets of registration requirements and two separate government ministers or local government officers. Whilst this may be a function of having two distinct professions, there were calls for this to at least be more coherent.



Conclusion

This research has demonstrated that there are examples of alignment in youth work and playwork practice across Wales, both in third sector organisations and local authorities. They are each the result of organisations responding to the needs of the children with whom they are working. There are many professionals working across these sectors with qualifications and experience in both, from sessional staff up to strategic leaders. The practitioners we spoke to were passionate advocates for the benefits that this aligned approach can create, namely:

- improved practice, specifically in reflection, risk, wider community relationships and inclusive practice
- longer term trusted relationships with children and communities
- being more responsive to children's needs, particularly older children and those going through transitions.

Despite the levels of aligned practice taking place, this is not supported by corresponding levels of alignment in training or workforce development structures and there are significant barriers to frontline staff undertaking dual qualifications. The lack of 'profile' and widespread understanding of each profession is, itself, a barrier to collaboration and alignment. There is also lack of alignment at strategic or policy level, where more coherence is needed as a minimum to support the kind of practice described in these examples.

There are overlaps in the philosophical underpinnings of playwork and youth work, but there are also significant distinctions to be made. The integrity of each profession was widely respected and the understanding of their overlaps and distinctions was key to successful alignment. This understanding does not currently feature in training for either profession despite many examples of the professionals working alongside each other in this way.

Youth workers told us that an understanding of play and of playwork has made them a better youth worker and that there is significant learning from observing each other's practice, but there is currently no means of widely sharing the learning that takes place in these intersections of practice.

These factors are, of course, impacted by wider developments across both sectors and to improve practice, several opportunities currently exist, including:

- the work of the Youth Work Strategy Workforce Development Implementation Participation Group (and ETS around the development of a Workforce Development Plan for Youth Work in Wales and related annual Action Plans).²⁸
- the publication of a new draft statutory framework for youth work in Wales which requires local authorities to produce 'a youth work strategic plan ... developed in consultation with young persons in its area, other local authorities, statutory partners and voluntary organisations'.²⁹
- the work of an advisory group being set up to look at the role of the new national body for youth work, including how this can foster greater collaboration and increase the profile and understanding of youth work as a distinct profession.³⁰
- the Welsh Government's commitment to recommendation 1 of the Ministerial Review of Play, to 'Take a strategic approach to play sufficiency across all Welsh Government policy areas'³¹ – accepting the need for 'better collaboration across the youth work and playwork sectors at national, regional and local levels' and to ensure that 'Policy alignment at local level is better supported'.³²
- the Welsh Government's plans to commission a review of progress against play sufficiency statutory duties, 'This will help inform exploration on the potential development of a Play Charter and the Ministerial Review of Play Report suggestion of widening the scope of the statutory duty'.³³

These all represent opportunities to create coherence at strategic and policy level as well as in training. The participants of this research have called for these opportunities to be seized as soon as possible to create an 'environment that allows play[work] and youth work ... to flourish together' (strategic leader) and for 'people to recognise the synergies really work' (strategic leader).

Recommendations

Following this research we, the researchers, recommend that:

- strategic leaders in the sector produce a joint position statement on the benefits of aligning playwork and youth work practice and consider developing a joint strategy to support good practice.
- all youth work and playwork organisations consider the benefits of aligned practice, shared training and dual qualification of staff, for the children that they work with.
- training providers, Playwork Education and Training Council for Wales (PETC Wales) and ETS Cymru Wales consider ways to incorporate a basic understanding of play and playwork into youth work qualifications and a basic understanding of youth work into playwork qualifications.
- training providers, PETC Wales, ETS Cymru Wales and the Youth Work Strategy Workforce Development Implementation Participation Group should consider the development of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for playworkers and youth workers that specifically looks at the overlaps and distinctions between the professions and examples of alignment in practice.
- the Welsh Government and the advisory group being set up to look at the role of the new national body for youth work, should consider the potential role for that body in working with the playwork sector to further develop shared understanding and good practice.

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