Play: Fostering relationships that inspire positive change in young people’s meaningful participation

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Abstract

Despite play’s recognition in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and evidence that play is beneficial to children’s development as well as a vehicle to support realization of other children’s rights, it is arguably one of the most neglected rights of the child. An overarching devaluation of play has implications on its relationship with children’s participation rights and correspondingly the realization of young people’s meaningful participation. This article explores the interplay between the right to play and children’s participation rights. Drawing upon a participatory play-based qualitative study with young people at a youth-driven child rights workshop entitled Shaking the Movers and interviews with adults, the article considers the role of play in relational development for meaningful participation, as well as the devaluation of play across young people and adults. Findings suggest that play contributes to relational development with self, others, and nature which is critical for young people to engage in decision-making processes collectively with adults. Additionally findings point to the devaluing of play in society for adults and older youth, which has negative implications on its use. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of findings and provides recommendations for the role of play to co-create transformative participatory environments in research, policy, and programs.

Key Words: play, child participation, children’s rights, leadership, relationships, nature
Introduction

Despite play’s recognition in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) and evidence that play is beneficial to children’s development as well as a vehicle to support the realization of other children’s rights, a child’s right to play and leisure (UNCRC, Art. 31), is one of the most neglected rights of the child (Shackel, 2015). This overarching devaluation of play has implications for its relationship with children’s participation rights and, correspondingly, for the realisation of young people’s meaningful participation. Recognizing rights as relational, this article explores the interplay between the right to play and children’s right to participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives through participatory play-based research with children and youth. This research took place at two youth-led workshops called “Shaking the Movers” (STM) designed to enable young people to consider the UNCRC. The STM workshop model was designed by the Landon Pearson Resource Centre for the Study of Childhood and Children’s Rights in 2007 and held in Ottawa as a national workshop until 2011. Since 2011, the workshop has been convened and led collaboratively by facilitators who are students and young professionals in restorative justice and children’s rights in various locations in Canada. The article begins with a theoretical and conceptual overview of the literature on play and meaningful child participation, as well as play’s role in meaningful participation. It then introduces the Shaking the Movers model and its participatory play-based research methodology as well as participants in the study. It reports findings from the study to highlight the role of play in establishing relationships with nature, self, and others and the implications of these relationships for the meaningful participation of young people. Findings reinforce how a devaluation of play still exists in different contexts. The article concludes with recommendations for incorporating children’s right to play in research, policy and programs for young people and adults in order to co-create transformative participatory environments.

Play

In understanding how children’s right to play relates to young people’s meaningful participation, defining play proves to be a difficult task. The concept of play is used in a range of diverse forms across theories and disciplines, with an even wider array of perspectives on its purpose, form, and value for young people (Hyder, 2005, IPA, 2010). Huizinga, for example, posits that play is difficult to define as it is a function of [human life] but is “not susceptible of
exact definition…. logically, biologically or aesthetically” (1949, p.213). Efforts to define play are critiqued for their assumptions of universality and developmental models that rely on minority world perceptions and that do not recognize play’s variations and cultural influences for children across diverse societies (Goncii, Tuerner, Jain, & Johnson, 1999; Göncü & Gaskins, 2007; Nsamenang, 2013; Roopnarine & Johnson, 2011). The following theories and perspectives offer an overview rather than categorization or explicit definition of play.

Unlike classical theories that use philosophical reasoning, a focus on play for development was formed in the age of scientific method and positivism, particularly within the psychological sciences. Play in human development has focused on emotional, social and cognitive development. Erikson and Freud sought to relate play to emotional development (Ellis, 1973; Erikson 1972) focusing on how individuals process play experiences in their minds and make meaning of these experiences. Similarly, an emphasis on cognitive development became recognized through Piaget and Vygotsky (Göncü & Gaskins, S., 2011; Johnson, Christie & Wardle, 2005). Since the 1960s, play’s role in children’s acquisition of life skills has been increasingly well recognized. Scholars argue that play can increase children’s ability to regulate their emotions and behaviour; it can enhance children’s self-efficacy, self-esteem, confidence, and feelings of mastery and well-being; help in coping with distress and can foster hope, optimism, and social cohesion; and play can help teach honesty, teamwork, fair play, and respect for oneself and others (Duncan & Lockwood, 2008; Fiorelli, 2011; Hammer & Baluja, 2012; Hirsh-Pasek & Michnick Golinkoff, 2008; Farné, 2005; Marantz Henig, 2008; Miller & Almon, 2009; Ratey, 2008). While play is recognized as critical for development in early childhood, research on the potential for play across all life cycles remains limited. This dearth of literature has implications for play with older children and adults that will be explored in this article.

Play can also be viewed through a child rights-based framework. The right to play is enshrined in Article 31 of the UNCRC. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child adopted General Comment 17 (GC17) on Article 31 to further explain its value and meaning (UNCRC Committee, 2013). GC No. 17 recognizes that play is found in all cultures and is increasingly seen as a cornerstone of children’s wellbeing, and full and healthy development (cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and spiritual). It acknowledges and advances how play:
Supports the quality of childhood, to children’s entitlement to optimum development, to the promotion of resilience and to the realization of other rights. Indeed, environments in which play and recreational opportunities are available to all children provide the conditions for creativity; opportunities to exercise competence through self-initiated play enhances motivation, physical activity, and skills development (GC No.17, 2013).

David (2006) asserts that a UNICEF analysis of the 98 country-based concluding observations adopted by the Committee between 2000 and 2004 shows that “in only 15 countries the CRC Committee addressed the contents of Article 31 (less than 15%), often in a very brief and scattered manner” (p.17). Too often rest, play, leisure and culture are disparaged and regarded “as a luxury in comparison to other rights whose violations bear [crueller], visible, and spectacular consequences” (David, 2006, p.13). A global consultation on children’s right to play referred to the fact that Article 31 is often considered as “the forgotten article of the UN Convention” (IPA, 2010, p. 4). General Comment 17 brings “play from the margins to the middle of considering what might constitute a good environment for children” (Lester, 2016). Further, it provides a foundation for exploring new ways of thinking about child development, space, and child-adult relationships. It also identifies a gap of emphasis and support for play that poses critical challenges to young people’s leadership and holistic healthy development process.

Jones and Walker (2011) suggest skills acquired through play contribute to children’s meaningful participation (child-led, collaborative, and consultative) in decision-making processes and has had a significant impact on children to be active social agents in their own development. Further, in the literature, play is seen to contribute to critical social and emotional life skills development, such as collaboration, cooperation, problem-solving, and communication skills (Miller & Almon, 2011, Ratey, 2008). Learning through play can foster opportunities for children to be able to recognize themselves as agents of change (Freire, 1970), increasing their likelihood to take action due to increased sense of personal agency (Bandura, 2004). This strengthened sense of “personal agency is essential not only to achieving change in one’s own life, but also to the process of achieving broader social change” (Colucci & Wright, 2015, p. 7). Thus it can be argued that through play, “children are able to acquire core life skills to strengthen their leadership competencies, and use play itself as a tool to communicate critical issues pertaining to children in their communities” (Collins & Wright, 2018, p.20). Play is a domain where the normal patterns of adult power are able to suspend for some time (Hart, 2004). Lester (2013) demands we think about play differently and “revitalise the very notion of participation”
Additionally, he critiques the individualized notions of participation that can “merely ratify adult decisions and give credibility to paternalistic actions rather than contribute to any transformation of provision and spaces” (Lester, 2013, p.27). Play as an expression of children’s own political agency can expand our understanding of participation to value participation in daily lives of young people and “construction of their own worlds” (Lester, 2013, p.34).

**Meaningful Participation and Agency**

Despite best intentions for meaningful child participation across organizations, government, and society, there are limitations in institutional structures and for adult decision makers to engage in a paradigm shift to involve children meaningfully, effectively, and sustainably (Hallet & Prout, 2003; Tisdall et al., 2014). Child participation is defined by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (in GC 12) as an “ongoing processes, which include information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes” (2009, p. 5). The UNCRC includes a set of participation clauses (art.12.1, art 13.1, art 14.1, art. 15.1) that require adults to recognize children as partners in planning for their own well-being (Hart, 1997). Children’s voices are central to the debate on children’s rights as social actors and co-producers of knowledge (Tisdall et al., 2012). The study presented in this article uses Lundy’s model as a framework recognizing that children require a safe space to be enabled to express their views, an audience to listen, and to have their views have an influence on decision-making processes (Lundy, 2007). Lundy asserts that the audience needs to acquire skills for actively listening and acknowledging young people’s perspective as credible contributions (Lundy, 2007). The model expands on the typically used concepts “voice of the children” and “right to be heard” to convey the full extent of article 12 (Lundy, 2007).

Meaningful participation can support young people to have the opportunity to engage in critical leadership roles with their peers and community. Additionally, children can build critical thinking skills and generate ideas of their own while exercising imagination through play (Colucci 2012; Hirsh-Pasek & Michnick Golinkoff, 2008). Academic literature is limited by universalistic and normative assumptions of children that often generalize children as identical across time and space, and fail to reflect the multiple ways of knowing of young people (Graham, 2011). A growing body of literature has identified barriers to young people’s
participation, emphasizing negative conceptualizations of childhood, false presumptions about who has an interest in planning, lack of political power, and practices (Adams & Ingham 1998; Checkoway, Pothukuchi, & Finn 1995; Knowles-Yanez 2005; Matthews, Limb, & Taylor 1999; Landsdown, 2001; Simpson 1997). Barriers to participation exist at an ethical, legal, political, and practical level. Participation theorists emphasize the importance of context and change (Johnson, 2011), relationality (Tisdall & Punch, 2012), and institutional realities (Hart, 2008).

Akin to diversity of participation models highlighted above, diverse perspectives exist on the role of adults in the participation process. While some scholars advocate for child-led participation, others suggest adult-child participation is the most effective approach. Camino (2005) argues that it is a fallacy to conceive “power” as a zero-sum equation exists, where the only access point for young people to acquire power is the relinquishment of adult power. She suggests an adult role, when constructed effectively, can help to establish spaces for young people to thrive. Similarly, Chawla, and Driskell (2006) assert that the most effective change involves children, youth, and adults working together.

The relationship between individual and collective agency is of critical importance in the child participation dialogue. Bandura (2001) introduces human agency as a core dimension of human development. Blanchet-Cohen (2009) suggests that at the foundation of agency is self-efficacy, with a belief in exercising some measure of control over oneself and environment. In recognizing agency, children’s power (or lack thereof) to influence and engage in structures that impact their lives is critical (Blanchet-Cohen, 2008). ‘Voice’ is not sufficient; “an enabling environment is necessary to materialize participation” (Blanchet-Cohen, 2008, p.80). Achieving meaningful change requires not only adults working in partnership with young people, but also “that they work together to develop a network of adult allies who have the necessary resources, political clout, and commitment” to support to create space where young people can put their ideas into concrete action and collectively make them a reality (Chawla & Driskell, 2006, p. 17).

Child, youth and adult relationships can play an important role in shared leadership and young people’s decision-making (Dawes & Larson, 2011). Recognizing leadership is a multi-dimensional contested concept layered with cultural interpretation (Coughlin, Wingard, & Hollihan, 2005; Yukl, 2006), varying levels of emphasis, and diverse definitions, themes, and forms, leadership throughout this article will focus on team based leadership models. This form of leadership critiques hierarchical constructs (Laszlo, 2006), explores webs of relationships, and
positions leadership as a process to support one another to grow in an interconnected system (Allen et al., 1998). Youth advocates argue that youth thrive when they have adequate opportunities for leadership, responsibility, initiative, and agency (Lerner et al, 2005; Wood, Larson & Brown, 2009). Power-sharing opportunities between young people and adults can contribute to leadership development and meaningful participation. These opportunities can create space for children to develop/strengthen life skills that are valuable for leadership such as teamwork, collaboration, self-confidence, problem-solving, and decision-making, and for adults to strengthen their life skills concurrently. Zeldin and colleagues (2013) identify natural mentors, reciprocal activity, authentic decision-making, and community connectedness as central elements of successful collaboration between young people and adults. For meaningful participation and adult-youth allied relationships, goals and activities must be co-created with young people in order for projects to succeed and for both parties to be active in the decision-making process (Blanchet-Cohen & Brunson, 2014). This “enabling environment [that] is necessary to [support] participation” young people’s perspective and the role of play in this process (Blanchet-Cohen & Bedeaux, 2014, p.80). The remainder of this article explores relationships and tensions between individual and collective agency, and instrumental and intrinsic play to move away from binary dichotomies and to embrace play’s complexity and holistic value respecting its diverse forms that children choose to engage in and its impact on their lives (Collins and Wright 2018).

**Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

Drawing upon a participatory play-based qualitative research study with young people at a youth-driven child rights workshop entitled Shaking the Movers and interviews with adults, the research aimed to explore the role of play in children’s meaningful participation and engagement in decision-making. The research drew on an interdisciplinary sociology of childhood, child-rights, social ecological and systems thinking, and an anticolonial research paradigm (Brofenbrenner, 1979; Dei & Kempf, 2006; James & Prout, 2015; Wilson, 2008). It employs a qualitative play-based participatory method drawing on participatory action research (PAR) (Reason & Bradbury, 2006). The research sought to support relationship development between young people and adults, and to aid children to critically analyse, reflect, co-construct meaning, and identify actions and solutions (Christensen & Prout, 2002; Clark, 2010). This methodology is consistent with the ontological framework that recognizes children as social actors with rights
and agency expressed in relationships and context (Boyden & Ennew, 1997). Similar to Creative Action Research (CAR) methodology, which combines participatory action research, visual and other arts-based research and social innovation, the CAR play-based model seeks to create space for children, youth, and adults to acquire life skills and competencies through enjoyable engagement in the research process (ResilienceByDesign Research Innovation Lab, 2017).

Playful research techniques can create rich information in unexpected ways and support relationships between children and adults (Atkinson, 2006). Akin to Blanchet-Cohen (2009), my research did not fit into a single tradition (Kincheloe, 2001); rather, it sought to use a variety of tools to fit the process including qualitative methods such as participant observation, semi-structured interviews, community mapping, play-based energizers and activities, and circle dialogue. The design of the workshop created space for fluidity, adaptability, and a responsive process (Peek et al, 2016). This approach valued the needs, desires, and wisdom of the young people, facilitators, and organizers. The group-based creative activities supported learning through individual and shared acts of creation (McNiff, 2004) and aimed to break down barriers between the research and researched (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995) as well as to forefront research as reciprocity (Minkler, 2004).

Participant observations were used to garner an understanding of the daily actions of the child and youth research participants (Cardoza & May, 2009). Semi-structured interviews with young people were critical to create space for “[young people’s] own interpretations and thoughts rather than focusing solely on ... adult interpretations of [young people’s] lives” (Eder & Fingerson, 2002, p.181). A unity circle (IICRD, 2012) and circle processes (Pranis, Stuart & Wedge, 2003) were employed to build trust, establish unity, share perspective, emotions, and ideas, and build equal respect for one another in the space. Energizers and playfulness were integrated throughout the data collection process intentionally and organically, contributing to the energy, dynamic, and dialogue of the young people. Play-based activities use an experiential learning model that supports participants to reflect on the experience, connect it with previous life experiences, and explore actions they will take going forward. Play-based activities supported young people to strengthen knowledge and understanding of children’s rights, as well as to support young people to gain confidence to build recommendations on children’s rights to a healthy environment for themselves, their peers, policy makers, and civil society. They were also modified and used as research tools to explore the role of play in children’s meaningful
participation. For example, community mapping with children explored their perspectives on where they participated in different areas in their communities.

The research sample included 39 young people aged 10 to 17 years (19F, 20M) who attended Shaking the Movers (STM) workshops in Vancouver and Montreal over two weekends in Vancouver and one in Montreal with three different cohorts of young people. Participants were recruited through dissemination of public posters and announcements to various child-centered community-based organizations and service providers in Vancouver and Montreal that were focused on climate/environment and/or child rights. In addition, nine adult key informants ages 32-60 (academics and practitioners focused on children’s rights, play, and/or participation) (6F, 3M), and 4 (1F, 3M) young people participated in semi-structured interviews using two different interview question templates. Key informants were recruited based upon their expertise and experience in play, participation, and/or leadership. Young adults between the ages of 19 and 32 facilitated the Shaking the Movers workshops. In Vancouver and Montreal, facilitators were invited to apply through University partners for the research and were thus primarily current and past undergraduate students taking restorative justice and child and youth focused courses. The workshops and meetings took place in Vancouver and Montreal while the interviews with experts in Canada and the UK occurred remotely via phone, Skype, and GoToMeeting.

The workshops in Vancouver and Montreal also included a few members of the Children’s Rights Academic Network (CRAN)/civil society as partners to support the facilitators in this youth-driven dialogue. As a CRAN member, my role was to support the lead organizers and aid the youth facilitators to prepare for the workshop as well as the project lead researcher. While there may be an assumption that researchers are either “insiders” or “outsiders,” or that one needs to maintain a traditional researcher identity, the reality is far more complex in that arguably one can be both an insider and an outsider at the same time (Denov, Blanchet-Cohen, Bah, Uwababyeyi, & Kagame, 2018 forthcoming). In this research, I held an insider role as a CRAN member and STM support, and as an outsider in my role as adult researcher. Being involved in the planning with facilitators supported reciprocity that is pertinent for any quality research process to take place. This also allowed for me to introduce the research to the workshop facilitators and support them to feel comfortable with me collecting data throughout their facilitated workshop. The young participants were informed of my role as researcher prior to and during the STM workshops. As research with human subjects does not act in a vacuum, it
is critical to engage collaboratively in processes of mutual respect and development. Through collective planning the team practiced the spirit of collaboration as adults, and as adults in partnership with young people in the workshop itself. The theme of the STM workshop in 2016/2017 focused on the right to environment; this theme was pre-determined by young people from the previous year’s STMs. The workshops in Vancouver and Montreal included circle and a series of play-based activities that supported young people to learn about their rights, strengthen knowledge on environment and climate change adaptation, and build recommendations for actions they, their peers, their community, and government could take to realize children’s environmental rights and to more effectively engage young people in decision-making processes. The activities sought to create space for building trust and diffuse the inherent power differential between the researcher, facilitators and the young participants. The activities supported participants and facilitators in a space of “imagination, collective decision-making and willingness to take risk being silly and awkward” (Fletcher et al, 2016, p. 151). The use of play was important for leadership and participation and was observed and discussed as part of the study. ¹

The qualitative data for this study were collected through key informant interviews, interviews with young participants, direct observations, and participatory activities using a flipchart. These data were coded and analyzed using thematic analysis to search for themes emerging as important to the description of the phenomenon (Daly, Kellehear, & Gilksman, 1997). The phased approach included: reading and re-reading the transcripts to note patterns that arose; generating initial codes; exploring themes within the codes; defining themes; and thematically coding and analyzing all the data. A reflexive reading allowed me to locate myself as “part of the data...generated” in order to identify how my reading of the data captured or expressed my relationships with the content and people (Mason, 1996, p.109). While bringing order and structure to the analysis held importance, I was also mindful to create space for playful interactions between the data in the process of thematic coding and analysis.

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Relevant Findings and Discussion

Findings from this study highlight the role of play in building relationships (with self, others, and nature), and its role in building safe, supportive environments for collaborative leadership and meaningful participation and engagement of young people, as well as between young people and adults. This article will introduce the findings on relationships and implications for meaningful participation and the devaluation of play.

**Relationship with Self**

Findings from this study highlight play as an integral component in deepening self-understanding and exploring alternative ways of knowing. Observations and interactions with young people engaged in the research highlighted this point; experts interviewed on their own noted similar findings from self-development and research experience. For example, one woman posited that play supported her to develop a “greater sense of self because [of engagement] in…experiential processes and activities” in her own life. The present study suggests that play creates space to free the mind and reduces inhibitions that can impede sense of self and personal development. While in play one “can move away from judgement to just being” (M KI).

Findings are harmonious with prominent literature that suggests that play creates a supportive space to foster a deeper social connection and understanding of self (Melamed, 1985), a positive sense of self (Arvidson et al, 2011; Dale, 1996), and supports emotional development, (Ellis 1973; Erikson 1972, in Tanis, 2012) and self-regulation (Christiano & Russ, 1996). Further, the role of play in reducing social inhibitions and increasing a sense of mental wellness appeared to support young people to be able to feel confident and/or gain confidence and act as agents of change in their communities. For example, one young person asserted that “play and experiential activities can reduce stress...especially for students who are studying for finals and stuff...if they can find time to come up to these activities, definitely reduce stress.” Over the two days of the workshop, young people began to gain confidence as seen by their increased desires to present and lead activities. Meaningful participation through play itself can enhance a young person’s sense of connectedness and belonging because it supports young people to have a sense of control in their own lives, a sense of ownership, and agency, which can have an impact on strengthening mental health and wellbeing (Oliver et al, 2006). When introduced in a way that
aligns with individuals’ interests and comfort levels play can support young people to develop a deeper sense of self.

**Relationship with Others**

As the two STM workshops progressed, play’s role in supporting relationship development was observed through participants’ strengthened interactions with one another through team building activities. For example, one eleven year old girl who came to the workshop without a caregiver or chaperone, used playdough as a medium to begin to gain comfort in the group. While sitting in a circle, she quietly used her comfort in her artistic abilities to create playdough flowers to share these over time with her peers to spark conversation and begin to build relationships. Value of relationship was further affirmed through interview statements about the importance of relationships “which inspires positive change.” The use of circle and active play allowed for time for breaking down barriers, connecting, unifying, energetic laughter, fun, and innovation which created space for curiosity, wonder, and suspension of judgment. It is argued that the element of fun is paramount as fun and humour “stimulate creativity as the brain moves from a cognitive, rule-bound state to a more fluid, relaxed state where the whole body is engaged in problem solving” and community (Prouty, 2000). Play created opportunities for the young people to experiment with roles and experience one another’s’ perspectives as they worked through child rights-based issues collectively. For example, during an Equitas Pictionary style play-based activity entitled “Draw it Right,” young people were able to build a relationship with rights and their peers through collective problem-solving in an interactive form. In this study, it was evident that the use of play in building relationships can, as one man asserted, “disrupt, in a positive way, information flows to try and create more of the kind of information for engagement and relationship building you really want.” Circle integration created opportunity for young people to listen to one another and respect one another (Wilson, 2008). Additionally playfulness between young people and facilitators, such as sharing “dad jokes” at unstructured break times and spontaneous decisions to develop advocacy music raps deepened relationships. Where language acted as a barrier, play, such as collaging during the Montreal workshop, supported non-verbal interaction across peers. Furthermore, relational development was evidenced through a few participants’ desire to stay
connected post workshop through exchanging contact information with one another and seeking future opportunities to stay involved.

Play fostered relationships not only at a young person to young person level, but also at an intergenerational level between young people and facilitators. Adult facilitators aged 19 to 32 years played an intergenerational mediator role of being recognized in the United Nations definition (15 to 24 years) and in Canadian census (15 to 34 years) as youth, and self-identifying as youth in some contexts and adults in others. This unique identity supported navigation of relationships and young people’s shift in perception of the adults as counterparts. Child, youth, and adult relationships can play an important role in the leadership development and realization of young people (Dawes & Larson, 2011). Play supported enhanced relationships with adults above the age of youth as well. It also aided the facilitators to be able to effectively communicate ideas of the young people back to the older adults and children’s rights ‘experts.’ Findings demonstrated the importance of removing ageist language in adult child relationships to “not ah treat young people as young people or even have this title.” While child/youth participation literature is valuable in its advocacy to shift understanding and action to engage young people, it can also be patronizing to young people in its bifurcation of young people and adults. It can suggest a simplistic approach to participation focused on having a say instead of acknowledging the critical importance of young people as citizens in everyday community spaces where their voices are heard and considered respectfully (Percy-Smith 2010, Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010). Young people’s perspectives in the study highlight the importance of treating “young people as adults” and respecting their “very important opinion[s]” in a mutual respectful equal dialogue (D, YP). This aligns with literature asserting the importance of respecting young people “as human beings who participate because they have something to say, rather than as children, with the accompanying stereotypes” (Perry-Hazan, 2016, p.111). While there was emphasis on being treated as an adult, it is also important to recognize that power dynamics exist between adults as well, and that being treated as an adult does not necessarily equate to being treated as a human being with inherent dignity. Shifting the “principle of children’s participation into practice is a complex task that involves changing the cultures of adulthood alongside those of childhood” (Neale, 2004, p.164). The use of age equality would be interesting to explore further in advancing shared respect for the lived experience and expertise of people from across generations.
While this study emphasized the value of relationships, it also highlighted the challenge in continuity of relational development and sustainability of relationships. As an adult interviewee highlighted, “people are around others or connected in trivial ways all the time. But genuine human connection is increasingly rare.” As the participatory play-based research took place on three different weekends with three different cohorts of young people, the ability to observe long term relational development and leadership was truncated and could not be explored. Longitudinal research on play and relationship development would be valuable and could be linked with play-based organizations that use play in child and youth leadership development programs. As play is “all about relationships and getting people connected,” the research highlighted how it can be used as a vehicle for deepening relationships to contribute to collective leadership and engagement.

**Relationship with Nature**

In addition to exploring human relationships, the STM workshops created opportunities for young people to reflect on their relationship with nature and its impact on their environmental perspectives and actions. As one young person stated, “what happens to the world, happens to ourselves.” By beginning in circle, young people made linkages with the metaphor of the circle, earth, and being in relation as “a circle is the shape of the earth, there is balance.” During the first workshop, young people spoke of earth as their mother, sister, and brother and the importance of respecting and caring for the earth as you would family. This built on their relationship with others, recognizing nature as a shared being. Shultz et al. (2004) state that the extent to which individuals believe they are a part of nature correlates with positive environmental attitudes. This was emphasized by a young man who posited that nature “is actually something that you know is...we are a part of not a part from. We are nature, so that anywhere we are we are in nature.” Growing up in Vancouver, young people made direct linkages to their relationship with nature recognizing that spending time in nature “brings a whole different sense of space...to who they are with others.” In the opening circle in Montreal, participants introduced themselves through a piece of nature that was important to them. One young person shared his personal relationship with dried leaves in his journal. Another spoke of a rock and how the rock was nostalgic for memories of early childhood and being close to the water.
Being present in nature and reflecting on spaces of nature supports interconnection with the natural world and our own stories. In the Vancouver cohort, three of the young people participating grew up on a small island. They spoke of gratitude for regular engagement in nature. One female stated, “I’m lucky I live on [an] island which is environmentally clean” and how she hadn’t quite realized how fortunate she felt until the workshop. Another female who grew up in Singapore spoke of all nature being chopped down in her neighbourhood and the concern she had for her home environment and other environments facing the same challenges. Literature suggests that with greater personal experience with nature, children are more likely to become environmentally concerned (Bunting & Cousins 1985, Harvey 1989). In Chawla and Derr’s (2012) review of over thirty studies, the most common experiences associated with adult care for nature are childhood play in nature, as well as engagement with others who share values of nature. As the Montreal and Vancouver workshops took place in the winter, with funding barriers and accessibility needs, they took place indoors in free university space in the city, reducing direct interaction with nature. However, natural artifacts were included in the circle (e.g. pine cones, plants, rocks, leaves, etc) to foster a nature-based experience. Young people and adults spoke of recognition that “there is so much to learn through nature” and of the concern that “we are losing our relationship with the earth.” Other research studies are congruent with this recognition of learning through nature. Hart (1979), Moore (1986) and Kreutz (2015) showed natural spaces provide children with creative play opportunities to develop life skills equipping them with resources for psychological well-being. Through play during the workshop, young people were able to reflect on and explore their complex relationships with nature.

Play also supported participants to reflect on the value of relationships with self, others, and nature in their own lives outside the scope of the workshop space. During the community mapping circle discussion, one young person spoke of the value in reflecting on the strength of his community to collaborate and the sense of community he felt there stating the “island is a pretty good community as far as helping others.” He highlighted the role in creating strong community ties for people’s commitment to and care for critical issues. For example, his local recycling depot and connected thrift store act as a social play spaces where community members convene, catch up, and further build relationships. Through play and dialogue, participants at the STM workshops were able to build relationship with self and one another, reflect on personal relationships in their lives in spaces such as school, neighbourhood, homes, leisure and team

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clubs, and identify actions they would like to take going forward to act as agents of positive change in their communities.

**Devaluing Play**

Although play and dialogue fostered relations, play was also devalued. While several participants spoke of the strength and value of play, a high number of participants interviewed highlighted that “there is still a large part of society who doesn’t value play.” This is congruent with the recognized devaluation of play globally. This study showed that the value of the terminology of play was not recognized across all young people and adults. Notably, while the word play was ‘infantilized’ and discredited by some young people and interviewees (or valued by the interviewee but perceived as discredited in their academic sector) the actual act of play when discussed in other forms (e.g. experiential learning) was valued for its role in supporting learning and development. Furthermore the unconscious use of play supported participants in their own thought processing and imagination. A young person participant stated, “if we get too creative they may not take us seriously. They are going to think we took more time to prepare to present than to discuss.” Another reinforced the argument to not use play by stating “sometimes older people will look down on us youth.” While these participants critiqued the use of play in presentation they were concurrently playing with play dough and sharing jokes as they developed their recommendations and ideas to present in an ‘adult-like’ format. This suggests that play supports creativity and thought processing yet recognition of this value does not exist. Further it highlights that the young people involved have been conditioned to understand play as not serious, professional, or respected in the adult-decision makers space and thus to move away from this format when seeking to be respected and listened too.

Mixed messages on the value of play are prevalent in society. For example, play was noted to be implicitly devalued through examples shared of ‘no play allowed’ signs in streets, gardens, and yards while concurrently, signs of children at play proliferate in playgrounds and cul-de-sacs in certain areas across Canada. Of note, the devaluing of play as childish was more greatly observed in Montreal workshops than Vancouver. This could have been for multiple reasons. This greater devaluing of play was more obvious in larger group settings where opportunity for embarrassment can be heightened for young people. While over time, play can arguably support individuals to “gradually [begin] to peel off their game face and freely express”
(Kolb & Kolb, 2010, p.44) themselves, this requires time to shift attitude and behaviour to be comfortable being at play. Additionally, play was again devalued when it was to be used in the presence of adult decision-makers to present ideas. In Vancouver, the smaller group may have reduced the heightened level of group performance embarrassment of play. Additionally, the lack of presentation to an adult decision-maker perhaps reduced the same need to appear ‘adult-like’ and mature in the presentation of their recommendations. However, it should be noted that one group in Vancouver also chose to use a more “mature” PowerPoint when presenting on environmental issues to their peers. This finding contradicts literature that suggests that play can be used by children “itself as a tool to communicate critical issues pertaining to children in their communities” (Collins & Wright, 2018, p.20).

Amongst adults interviewed, play held less value for academics than for practitioners as it was not recognized as credible or rigorous in several academic spheres. A few academics voiced their personal interest in play with the recognition that it is devalued in their institutions. One academic stated, “play is usually associated to young children. I don’t use the word play.” Alternatively, in the conversation with the majority of the non-academic practitioners, the value for play had higher recognition. It should be noted that the academics once probed, spoke to the value of play in experiential learning, participatory, theatre, and arts-based research processes. This seems to further suggest that the perceptions of the word play lack rigour and credible “use.” Play is seen as a valuable tool for social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development of younger children while concurrently, it is often discredited for use by adults by academics, many practitioners, and society. However, playful behaviour and playful thought can generate radically new approaches to challenges set by the physical and social environment (Bateson, Bateson & Martin, 2013, p.1). Additionally, it is useful to incorporate space for spontaneous non-structured ludic play in the experiential learning process, where individuals can achieve deep learning in a free and safe space that provides the opportunity for play with potential and growth (Kolb & Kolb, 2010). The lack of value of play by adults has implications on the young people’s perspective on play, desire to engage in it to express themselves, and its value in leadership development and decision-making processes. In further research, exploration of adult play spaces in concert with play spaces for young people could support a greater understanding and shift in practice of the role of play.
In summary, the study suggests that play supports relational development with self, others, and nature which is arguably valuable for leadership development, youth/adult partnerships, and being active in decision-making process. The devaluing of play and poor use of play has a negative impact on play for leadership development and the resulting level and form of participation for young people.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

This article explored the relationship between children’s right to play and meaningful participation of young people. Findings suggested that play contributes to relational development with self, others, and nature which is critical for team based shared leadership and young people’s realization of their rights and ability to engage in decision-making processes collectively. This article recognizes rights as relational to one another as well as the right to play’s role in supporting relational development to aid in actualization of other rights.

The emphasis on relationship with nature also pushes us to move beyond a human-centered approach to rights and relations. Further research could be explored on the relationship with nature and its impacts on young people’s engagement in action around climate change adaptation and environmental awareness. Additionally, akin to the literature on play being disparaged in comparison to other rights, findings pointed to a lack of value of play in society for adults and older youth, which has negative implications on engagement in play and its role in participation. During the research, young people and adults shared recommendations and reflections for how young people can better engage in decision-making processes and have children’s rights realized going forward. While this was a small-scale study with limitations in duration of data collection and numbers of participants, findings and recommendations can add value to design and development of future training, coaching, mentoring and support for practitioners, policy makers, educators and youth workers, as well as be used as a model for how to effectively engage children, youth, and adults in building trainings based on their contextual needs and understandings. Going forward, it would be beneficial to facilitate further workshops with young people to determine the extent to which the discussions have impacted their perspective on and their level and form of engagement in play at present.

As STM workshops are annual events, supplementary research integration into the workshop methodology each year could support further understanding and analysis of the role of play in these events. In addition, integrating play into the adult follow up Children’s Rights
Academic Network (CRAN) sessions can support critical reflection on the value of play in adults’ lives and the interconnection with the young people in STM workshops. Research on playfulness for adults is limited, although recently this exploration has begun to proliferate (Magnuson, 2011). In Glynn and Webster’s (1992) study, five factors that constituted adult playfulness, spontaneous, expressive, fun, creative and silly-related to Lieberman’s (1977) five factors of playfulness for children. Playfulness for both young people and adults has shown to relate to many positive attributes including creativity, which is valuable for quality decision-making and innovation. In participatory play-based research, the process of research itself must be valued and also recognized as both an intervention and an outcome (Fletcher, 2014). Further research on the relationship between nature and play and its impact on social and emotional learning that may support leadership development and young people’s ability to engage in decision-making processes would be a valuable contribution to exploration of play in the conference, workshop, and decision-making spaces themselves.

Young people’s participation rights and quality engagement is not just a strategy or an event; it is a mindset, an ideology, a value, and a life philosophy that applies to everything that we do (Hart et al. 2004). Additionally, it has implications for how adults are trained, coached, and mentored to integrate play and support young people’s meaningful participation and engagement in decision-making that is based on the recommendations of young people that they will be working with. It is critical that the diverse lived experiences and identities of young people are recognized when seeking to facilitate space for engagement and to recognize that no one model will be applicable to all. Individuals and community’s development and resilience “depends on the function of complex adaptive systems that are continually interacting and transforming” (Masten, 2014, p.9). While the young people’s perspectives in this study were unique to their own lived experience and expertise, their ideas and the value of asking young people what they need and want from adults and the approach of young people-young adult partnerships can be recognized as a quality practice for future initiatives. Schools, community programs, and government processes should be reconfigured to reflect the social and developmental needs and desires of young people to move beyond tokenistic voice, to be able have space, voice, influence, and audience for effective engagement in decision-making processes. We need to deconstruct the adult child bifurcation, value play across ages, and begin
from a place of humility and reflexivity to contribute to leadership and meaningful participation in decision-making process for children, youth, and adults collectively.

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References


UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General comment No. 17 (2013) on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts (art. 31) UN Doc. CRC/C/GC/17


The research was conducted in accordance with the UNCRC, and Royal Roads University Research Ethics protocol, and best practices in researching with children. The research received clearance and approval by Royal Roads University Research Ethics Board. Ethics addressed critical elements of voluntary and informed ongoing consent, limited confidentiality, anonymity, do no harm protocol, and power imbalances between researchers and participants.

In order to adhere to confidentiality of young people and adults I have used young person, adult, and a letter accompanied by KI (Key Informant) and YP (Young Person). I have not included specific age of the young people intentionally in order to recognize their perspectives outside the scope of a linear developmental specific age construct. I have chosen to move away from pseudonyms, recognizing the “dynamics of power inherent in the act of naming” (Guenther, 2009, p. 412). Although I have not shared names of young people, they have chosen to include their names in other reports surrounding the Shaking the Movers workshop.

Equitas is a non-profit organization that works for the advancement of equality, social justice and respect for human dignity in Canada and around the world through transformative human rights education programs. The organization uses play and experiential learning activities to support children, youth, adults, CBOs and government bodies to learn about values of rights. https://equitas.org/

‘Dad jokes’ is a term used to describe a ‘corny’ or predictable joke that is typically a pun. Dad jokes are usually child-friendly and inoffensive. They have this name as have been frequently told by fathers with sincere intent to humour. The youth facilitators coined the jokes they were telling throughout as “dad jokes”.

Notes

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