Moving Children’s Participation Forward Through Article 31 – the Right To Play.

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Abstract
This article uses a rights-based and social ecological approach to explore the role of the right to play in the lives of children and youth, as outlined in Article 31 of United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), in supporting the actualization of children’s meaningful participation, as outlined in Article 12 and as a guiding principle of the UNCRC. This article introduces the limited recognition of the value of play internationally, as emphasized in General Comment 17. It uses a rights-based approach to analyze the intrinsic and instrumental value of play as a right itself and its role in supporting children to actively participate as experts in their own lives, develop leadership skills, express their views, be listened to, and be active in decision-making processes. The authors will explore the positive contribution play can make to the healthy and holistic development of children and youth and how these skills support a sense of agency and leadership in children and youth at present and in their future. Right To Play’s methodological approach is grounded in participatory, experiential learning and the work of educationalists. This work will be showcased to highlight how play can strengthen children’s meaningful participation. The authors conclude that it is imperative that the international development and humanitarian community continues to strengthen the advocacy for and use of play to strengthen children’s wellbeing, healthy development and active participation in their lives.

Keywords: play, child rights, participation, child-initiated
Introduction

The right to play, enshrined in Article 31, continues to one of the most neglected of all children’s rights often due to a lack of awareness and understanding of the benefits of play (International Play Association, 2008; 2010). How can the international children’s rights community build an evidence base to strengthen the recognition of the intrinsic and instrumental value of play as a right in itself and in its role in realizing other rights? Right To Play uses a child-rights based approach (Collins, 2007) based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child’s (CRC’s) four general principles of non-discrimination (art. 2), best interests of the child (art.3, para.1), maximum survival and development (art. 6), and child participation (art. 12) through play to educate and empower children and youth to overcome poverty, conflict and disease. Guided by our principles of inclusion, child protection and gender equality, Right To Play works in partnership with children’s spheres of influence to create safe environments for children to develop and thrive. This article uses a child-rights based and social ecological approach to introduce the role of Article 31 of the CRC, and how this approach frames Right To Play’s programs promoting meaningful participation and children’s collective rights. The authors will introduce: 1) Right To Play’s organizational approach; 2) the limited recognition of play internationally, as emphasized in General Comment 17; 3) the value of play as a right itself and its role in supporting children to realize their rights through actively participating as experts in their own lives, developing leadership skills, expressing their views, being listened to, and being active in decision-making processes. The article concludes with a consideration of General Comment 17 for advancing the realization of the intrinsic and instrumental value of children’s right to play.

Background

Every organization has a contextual history that shapes its vision, mission and growth. Johann Olav Koss, Founder and CEO Right To Play, began the Right To Play’s story. In late 1993, just a few months before the opening ceremonies of the 1994 Lillehammer Winter Olympics, a young speed skater, Johann Olav Koss led a humanitarian trip to Eritrea. Working as an ambassador of the organization Olympic Aid (later to become Right To Play), the Norwegian athlete found himself face-to-face with the realities of life in a country emerging from decades of
war. Johann took notice of one boy who appeared particularly popular amongst his peers. When asked why he was so popular, the boy stated it was because he had long sleeves. The boy then took off his shirt, rolled it up, and using the sleeves to tie a knot, turned the shirt into a ball that he and his friends used to play in the streets. The game ended when it was time for the boy with the long sleeves to go home. These children had faced trauma and had lost family and friends to the violence, and yet, surrounded by a legacy of war, they just wanted the opportunity to play and thrive together.

Following the Lillehammer Olympics where Johann made history by skating to three world records and three Olympic Gold Medals, pledging his entire Gold Medal bonus to Olympic Aid, he returned to Eritrea. Labelled a fool by Norwegian media, he took an airplane full of donated sports equipment to a country in dire need of food and basic necessities. When Johann met the President of Eritrea, he expressed his regret and apologized for bringing what had been deemed unimportant resources to the country. Recognizing the critical role of sport and play in the development and well-being of his country’s children, however, the Eritrean President expressed his gratitude to Johann for acknowledging the importance of play in supporting children to thrive rather than focusing entirely on food for survival as many donors had done before him. This was just the beginning of the development and growth of an organization that uses the power of play to support children to actualize their rights.

Today, Right To Play operates in twenty countries around the world to strengthen positive child and youth development with a focus on enhancing quality education, transforming healthy practices, and building peaceful communities. Right To Play respects its fundamental duty of care and responsibility to protect, promote and realize children’s rights and is committed to ensuring its policies, code of conduct, systems and practices ensure the best interest of children. At an organizational and programmatic level, a child-rights based approach is both implicit and explicitly embedded. To achieve scalable and sustainable contributions to children’s wellbeing and development, Right To Play works in partnership with children, communities, civil society organizations, international institutions, and governments to advocate for the power of play, articulated in Article 31, to realize children’s rights and contribute to their wellbeing and development, and to ensure that play-based approaches to development are woven into the fabric of a country’s national systems and structures. Through these efforts, play-based methodology has been integrated into national plans and strategies that effect children, such as the Early
Childhood Education curriculum in Benin, the Basic Education curriculum in Thailand, and the national Physical Education curriculum in Rwanda. The power of play for children’s development and realization of rights in systems globally will be further developed throughout the rest of the article.

**Article 31 and General Comment 17: It is time to value play**

While the UN CRC recognizes play as the right of every child, it is rarely prioritized in humanitarian and development settings. In fact, there are few settings in which play is prioritized, regardless of its inclusion as Article 31 in the UNCRC. In 2012, the UN initiated General Comment 17 which recognized that too often, inadequate attention is given by States parties to the Article 31 rights. The poor recognition of play’s significance in the lives of children has led to a lack of investment in appropriate provision of play opportunities, and weak or non-existent protective legislation that supports children’s right to play. Signatories to the UNCRC must file national reports to the UN Committee, however very few of these reports include Article 31 (CCRC, 2011 (8); CRIN, 2012; Shackel, 2015). A global consultation on children’s right to play, undertaken by the International Play Association (IPA) in 2010, refers to the fact that Article 31 is often considered as “the forgotten article of the UN Convention” (IPA, 2010, p. 4). The consultations found an absence of adequate policies, plans or strategies for children’s play at the local and national levels of government of many countries around the world, often due to the lack of awareness and understanding of the value of play amongst parents, politicians, and policy-makers. With little priority given to children’s right to play due to this lack of understanding, the consultation found that public funds originally destined for play and recreation are often misused due to corruption or inefficiency (IPA, 2010).

**The Value of Play and Enhancing Child Participation in Learning**

While still undervalued by many, play is found in all cultures and is increasingly seen as a cornerstone of children’s full and healthy development. Indeed, play is an integral part of our humanity as *homo ludens* the playful human (Huizinga, 1944; Sutton-Smith 1996). Research in the past ten to fifteen years has increasingly highlighted the critical role of play in the healthy cognitive, social, and physical development of children (Hirsh-Pasek & Michnick Golinkoff, 2008; Marantz Henig, 2008; Ratey, 2008; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services,
Rather than being deemed a mere luxury, play can contribute to the realization of children’s rights to survival and development when properly utilized. The definition of play, however, is still wide-ranging and elusive. It’s no surprise then that the IPA consultations on the children’s right to play found that the most common challenge in implementing Article 31 was a lack of awareness by most adults of what play actually is, and how it can contribute to the growth, development and well-being of children (IPA, 2010). Each type of play can be characterized by the role of the child and the parallel role of the adult, all with different benefits and challenges. While there are many different types of play, ranging from structured to unstructured; physical to less active; and social to individual, universal to all types of play is its ability to act as a bridging language that can cut across sociocultural barriers. The physical and social benefits of play are most widely recognized, such as play’s ability to build children’s physical literacy as well as collaboration, cooperation, problem-solving, and communication skills (Miller & Almon, 2011; Ratey, 2008). Play can increase children’s ability to regulate their emotions and behaviour; play can enhance children’s self-efficacy, self-esteem, confidence, and feelings of mastery and well-being; play can 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; Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development, 2010; Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development, 2011; Hammer & Baluja, 2012; Hirsh-Pasek & Michnick Golinkoff, 2008; International Platform for Sport and Development, n.d.; Ratey, 2008; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010; Farné, 2005; Giesbrecht, n.d.; Marantz Henig, 2008; Miller & Almon, 2009). Physical play can support the development of motor skills; increase strength, endurance, and healthier bones and muscles; improve cardio-respiratory functioning and reduce the risk of some chronic diseases; and enhance children’s understanding of their bodies and abilities (Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development, 2011; Farné, 2005; International Platform for Sport and Development, n.d.; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010).

Less recognized are play’s cognitive benefits, and play’s vital role in enhancing the learning process. This is due to the fact that play is often, and erroneously, seen in contrast to productive work (Hammer & Baluja, 2012; Hirsh-Pasek & Michnick Golinkoff, 2008; Marantz Henig, 2008). The IPA global consultations found that these negative perceptions of play have deep roots in the socio-cultural construction of play as a concept in many different societies,
where play is defined in opposition to work, and by implication, is not necessary and therefore not important (IPA, 2010). However, not only can play help boost neurological growth and the development of complex, skilled, responsive, and cognitively flexible brains, but play can also enhance the development of concepts and ideas (Duncan & Lockwood, 2008; Marantz Henig, 2008; Ratey, 2008). Through play, children can build their executive functioning and critical thinking skills, and can generate ideas of their own while exercising their imaginations (Colucci, 2012; Duncan & Lockwood, 2008; Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development, 2010; Hirsh-Pasek & Michnick Golinkoff, 2008; Miller & Almon, 2009; Ratey, 2008). Well-designed programs that use play as a tool for learning can create a safe environment where mistakes have lower consequences and more risks can be taken and learned from (Duncan & Lockwood, 2008; Marantz Henig, 2008). Furthermore, play can create an engaging educational environment where children can develop a love of learning (Hirsh-Pasek & Michnick Golinkoff, 2008; Miller & Almon, 2009).

Perhaps one of the greatest benefits of play is its ability to create a participatory learning environment due to its innately inclusive and interactive qualities that, when tapped into effectively, have the power to transform the mind of the player. Well-designed play programs that respect the principle of non-discrimination and are accessible to children of differing abilities and learning styles encourage an interactive learning process, and allow children to work through problems and come to important answers on their own rather than being static recipients of knowledge (Colucci, 2012; Duncan & Lockwood, 2008). This differs drastically from top-down and rote learning environments where a one-way flow of information makes it difficult for learners to critically assess what they are learning, as there is little incentive or encouragement to do so (Freire, 1970). The danger in the rote structure lies in the fact that without the opportunity and ability for all children to critically assess what’s being learned, it becomes difficult to be aware of one’s ability to impact upon the learning process and one’s own growth and development. This translates into a sense of powerlessness as the learners are not taught to foster independent thought or a sense of agency within themselves. Through top-down educational processes, the agency of each student is greatly reduced, as is their belief in their own power to shape and control their own realities. It becomes difficult for children to recognize the role they play in shaping and transforming their own lives, whether it is a transformation aimed at a healthier and more beneficial situation for him or herself, or a transformation aimed at changing
the world. As Freire (1970) posits, in top-down, or ‘banking’ models of education, learners are seen as spectators rather than re-creators of the world. Participatory learning processes made possible through play are more conducive to the shared control of discourse which can put an equal amount of power in the hands of the learners, making them an essential element in their own learning and development. This type of learning environment creates more opportunity for children to recognize their potential as agents of change (Freire, 1970). The more a person believes in their ability to create or affect positive change in their life, the more likely that person will be to take the necessary action due to their increased sense of personal agency (Bandura 1995; Bandura 2004). This enhanced 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.

Children’s Participation

Learning through play contributes to children’s ability to participate as active agents of change in their lives, their communities, and their world. Child participation is defined as “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” (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009, p. 5). Since the ratification of the CRC, emerging theory and research in both the sociology of childhood and children’s rights studies have recognized children as social actors who contribute to shaping and changing families, communities, and society (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998; Mayall, 2000; Tisdall, 2014). A plethora of researchers have documented how children can and do participate in their everyday lives, and influence decisions that affect them individually and collectively (Collins, 2015; Percy-Smith, 2010; Ruiz-Casares, Guzder, Rousseau & Kirmayer, 2013; Tisdall, Gadda, & Butler, 2014).

Ecological and Holistic Systems Approaches

Although the value of children’s participation is well documented, Right To Play recognizes the challenges and pitfalls prevalent in the use of child participation from tokenism, to ‘projectization’ of participation, to assumptions that children are the same across time and space. Too often children are expected to fit into adult ways of participating when what is needed is institutional and organizational change, which facilitates children’s voices (Prout,
2003). In our work we recognize the importance of engaging with all spheres of influence to understand and realize the principle of participation through play. In addition to play-based programs that enhance children’s participation in their own learning and development, Right To Play uses an ecological and holistic systems approach which emphasizes the interconnections and relationships between individual, family, community, and society (Garbarino & Kostelny, 1992; Jack & Jordan 1999, in Wright, 2004). As such, Right To Play works in collaboration with rights holders and duty bearers as part of an integrated whole, and not in isolation as mechanistic aggregates (Laszlo, 1996). The collectivist language embedded in children’s rights is key to connect with collectivistic local beliefs found in many communities in which Right To Play operates, where child rearing goals emphasize interdependence, group harmony, reciprocity and mutual responsibility (Bissell, Boyden, Cook, & Myers, 2011). At the community level, Right To Play Leaders (government school teachers and community based organization coaches) participate in a series of trainings to support them to develop knowledge and skills to create child-centered, play-based learning opportunities in positive learning environments, and be equipped with knowledge and behaviour to encourage children’s meaningful participation. At the parent/caregiver level, Right To Play works with Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) and coordinates mothers groups to explore barriers to their daughters’ education and how to support the realization of their children’s rights, including engagement in decision-making. Children connect at an intergenerational level with community members to support community building and foster sustainable change. Further, collaborative intergenerational initiatives are supported, such as Child Saviour Committees which are community-based mechanisms in Benin where children, parents/caregivers, recognized community members and elders, and the village king come together to address child protection issues in the community. Through these forums, children are provided an avenue to speak and engage in decision-making in partnership with adults. In the following section, the emphasis will be on the children’s role as leaders and collaborators in child clubs and committees in Right To Play programs, while incorporating examples of the interconnected relationships on all levels.
Child-led and Collaborative Initiatives

Children’s meaningful participation (child-led, collaborative, and consultative) in decision-making processes has had a significant impact on children to be active social agents in their own development (Jones & Walker, 2011). Children participating in Right To Play’s play-based learning programs were found to be more involved in leadership roles in their communities, have stronger levels of self-esteem and wellbeing, and be more respectful, organized and focused (Right To Play, 2015a). In Burundi, Right To Play participants have a higher percentage of strong leadership skills (87%; 69%) than non-program children. In all Right To Play’s countries of implementation, participation in child clubs (focused on child rights, child protection, girls, etc.) and Junior Leader programs provides children with a space to express their views, be listened to, and be active agents of change in their schools and communities.

In schools, Right To Play’s play-based programs and forums support children to feel confident to freely express their views on barriers to their well-being, and be engaged in dialogue and action for positive change. In order to be successful, child-led initiatives are based on communities’ local knowledge, understandings and contextual realities. In Benin, child rights and protection clubs in schools, which comprise six children who are elected as representatives by their classmates, engage children in play-based training on leadership (Youth As Leader; Team Up; Junior Leader Approach) participation and protection (Creating a Safer World: Child, Rights, Participation and Protection; My Life My Plan), and are provided space to develop action plans outlining the initiatives they plan to lead to address various issues in their school and community. Having children take the lead in the development and implementation of their action plans directly increases the opportunities for children to recognize their actions have value, to be listened to by their peers and teachers, and to be seen as leaders by themselves and their peers. In Benin, young leaders are involved in influencing and advocating for youth policies, and in organizing and participating in community interventions such as sensitization events, cleaning of public spaces, the creation of public infrastructures, and an area watch to prevent theft. In Zè, Benin, children developed a set of class rules in collaboration with their teachers (Right To Play, 2015a).

Child-led initiatives are creating quality change in families as well. Child rights clubs in Oudiah, Benin were able to obtain the financial support of local authorities – in this case, the
chief of their District – for awareness activities within the community on the importance of birth registration. In Burundi, children are acting as catalysts in their homes and communities by shifting societal perceptions and actions towards diverse ethnic groups and the power of education. Through conflict resolution, cooperation and inclusion activities, children begin to value one another across ethnicities and are encouraging their parents to settle conflicts. In Rwanda, children have encouraged families of out-of-school children to support them to return and complete their studies through facilitation awareness raising skits and initiatives on the importance of education, coordinating fundraising efforts for children who cannot afford school supplies and uniforms, and providing inclusive encouragement to the out-of-school children (Right To Play, 2015b). As highlighted in the research earlier in this article, play has the power to reduce barriers and strengthen participation and leadership, as one teacher described it “children have developed self-confidence and leadership skills especially girls who are now motivated to participate in different initiatives, such as being junior leader or a child protection club committee member” (Lavan, Massart, & Monseur, 2013).

Children are also engaging in national level initiatives both in and outside the scope of programs. In Right To Play Pakistan programs, 60 Junior Leaders from three provinces came together in a two day workshop to develop a vision (network, collaborate, empower, learn), structure and plan for a Junior Leader network at the school, community and national level to exchange ideas, mentor their peers and share knowledge, challenges and best practices on school and community initiatives. In Rwanda, youth engaged in Right To Play programs are being elected in different institutions such as the National Youth Council, as well as sector, cell and village administration (Lavan et al., 2013). In line with the United Nations Study on Violence Against Children (2006), which recommends space for children to freely express their views and give them due weight in prevention, reporting, and monitoring, children and youth in Mali are using play-based activities to increase awareness with children and adults on child protection issues and reporting cases shared in peer networks (IICRD & RTP, 2015).

**Conclusion and Way Forward**

Through evidence-based advocacy and practice, the power of Article 31, particularly play, can be realized to support the interconnected realization of all children’s rights. Through
play in Right To Play programs, children are able to actively engage in decision-making processes, develop to their full potential and thrive amidst a broad array of challenges. Despite strong evidence that play is beneficial to children’s development, Article 31 continues to be one of the most neglected rights of the child (Shackel in Smith, 2015). In line with General Comment 17, we opine greater recognition that each element of Article 31 is mutually linked and reinforcing, and when realized, serves to enrich the lives of children in essential ways. The realization is critical to the quality of childhood, to children’s entitlement to optimum development, and to the promotion of resilience and realization of other rights (General Comment 17). Utilizing General Comment 17, indicators to effectively monitor and evaluate Article 31 can be developed to support States in their responsibility to respect, protect and fulfill children’s rights, and can be used by other bodies to aid in the realization of children’s right to play. Through complementary bottom-up and top-down processes, we recommend that the local to global communities continue to implement quality programs, strengthen the evidence base through rigorous grey and academic literature, and advocate and actualize sustainable change in policy and practice from the community to global level.

References


