

## **Reflections on the Challenges to Providing Optimum Environments for Play**

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### **Returning to Challenges Outlined in General Comment No. 17**

This special issue of *Children, Youth and Environments* has outlined visions to create better play environments, reflected on the fusion of nature in everyday play, considered how play could be better facilitated for particular groups of children, and shown how technology could be used to the advantage of understanding and facilitating play. In conclusion, we reflect on the learning that is pertinent to each of the 11 challenges that were identified in General Comment No. 17. We end by reflecting on the role of experts in improving children's play.

### **Lack of Access to Nature**

The benefits for children of providing experiences to encounter the natural world through play are articulated in General Comment No. 17, noting that urban children in low-income families may have particularly poor access. The benefits do not only accrue to children; seeds for stewardship for the Earth's resources can be sown through childhood play.

Lack of access to nature is not universal. Profice and Tiriba ("Living and Playing in Nature: Daily Experiences of Tupinambá Children") describe how indigenous education in Brazil facilitates engagement with nature. Outdoor play routinely and extensively utilizes the natural environment. These experiences respect community traditions, which include encouraging knowledge to be shared across generations.

The affordance of the local natural environment—rivers, trees, embankments—are utilized in daily play within the school day, with teachers presenting as both relaxed and engaged, encapsulated in their description as being “attentive to the safety of all, but not waiting for imminent disaster.” The young Tupinambá people convey strong positive associations with nature. Similarly, drawing from the IPA’s *Access to Play in Crisis*, in “Children’s Coping, Adaption and Resilience through Play in Situations of Crisis,” Chatterjee shows how ready access to rivers for the children of both the Nimtola Ghat community in Kolkata and the Saphan Pla community southwest of Bangkok provides an exciting natural play resource, albeit one which is fraught with social and environmental danger. In these “crisis” situations, the key issue might be better understood as lack of access to “nature without danger.”

Living in a rural area does not ensure access to nature in play. As Terada, Ermilova and Kinoshita explain in “Why Do We Need Adventure Playgrounds in Rural Areas? The Revitalization Project of Ishikawa, Fukushima, Japan,” rural depopulation has changed the landscape and play culture in parts of rural Japan to the point at which it has become necessary to stimulate environment-based play in some rural areas. The intergenerational evidence that the authors present provides powerful evidence of the loss of nature-based play in Japan in recent times; for example, 79 percent of parents reported that, as children, they went to the forests and hills to play, compared to only 37 percent of today’s children. This loss is also evident for playing in rivers, climbing trees, making fires and other dimensions of natural play.

Access to nature can also be created in what is presented as “natural playscapes.” These manufactured environments are designed to provide opportunities to engage nature. Schlembach, Kochanowski, Brown and Carr explore “Early Childhood Educators Perceptions of Play and Inquiry on a Nature Playscape” on a university campus in North America. Initial concerns over risk and danger are allayed as early educators report how the natural playscape is encountered as relaxing space for both parents and children alike, and a place in which behaviors are improved, interactions among children are extended, and a range of opportunities to develop competencies present.

On the other hand, parents’ quest for a “better life” can inadvertently lead to disengagement with nature in their children’s play. This was clearly evident in Wirunrapan, Boranmool, Chaiarkhom and Kathawong’s field report on “The Right to Play of Children Living in Migrant Workers’ Communities in Thailand,” in which migrant children from Myanmar lamented the transition from their childhood freedom to play in nature, without danger and among flowers and fruits in the forest to environments that were socially and environmentally hazardous, with access much restricted.

Perhaps giving voice to children and affording them the opportunity to share their accounts of the everyday environment that they encounter should be viewed as a first step toward enriching the role of nature in children’s lives. To this end, the *Under the Same Sky: Children’s Rights and the Environment* toolkit (reviewed by Templeton) provides inspiration and guidance on how to make existing people-

environment connections (or lack of) more visible to adults and other local decision-makers.

### **Lack of Recognition of the Importance of Play and Recreation**

General Comment No. 17 opines that play is misunderstood and undervalued “in many parts of the world”; regrettably, that some forms of play are more highly valued than others; and that play is particularly in deficit for adolescents. Although short-sighted, meeting children’s play needs may be considered less pressing, relative to other concerns. For example, in the immediate aftermath of environmental crisis and amidst everyday hazards, it is perhaps to be expected that play is not prioritized and that the focus of life is on survival or recovery. Indeed, Chatterjee highlights how some parents in post-earthquake Japan forbade their children access to outdoor play, largely on the grounds of protecting them from perceived social and environmental dangers. However, Chatterjee challenges us to rethink what appears to be common-sense and shows how play can be a vehicle for recovery and a means for children to cope with the transitions that they have encountered. Similarly, Wirunrapan and colleagues observe a lack of recognition of the importance of play among adults in their case study of migrant communities. Parents’ more pressing concerns of avoiding detection and avoiding the social and environmental hazards that are perceived to prevail, lead adults to dissuade their children from play, rather than facilitate access to it.

In a different geographical context, Almon and Keeler (“The Rise of Adventure Play Provision in North America”) sense that the nadir has been left behind and that there are many emergent signs, both local/informal and national/professional, that the value of play and the pivotal role of adventure play provision is increasingly being recognized in North America. However, Owens would disagree, based on the experiences of teenagers in West Sacramento, California she describes in “‘We just want to play’: Adolescents Speak about Their Access to Public Parks,” thus reinforcing the claims in General Comment No. 17.

Both Yuen (“Championing and Implementing the First Inclusive Play Space in Hong Kong”) and Yantzi, Landry-Altman and Camirand-Peterson (“The Community-Based Revitalization of the Ridgecrest Accessible Neighborhood Playground in Greater Sudbury, Canada”) provide examples of how ignorance of the importance of play for some children can be a stimulus to achieve progressive and positive outcomes for all. Each project draws strength from a case study in which access to play is denied, i.e. a mother describing how her 24-year-old son with special needs was prevented from using a playground swing (Yuen) and a plea from a father that a playground development should not inadvertently deny his son the opportunity to play (Yantzi et al.). Although in both instances, the project outcomes are positive, the gains were only achieved after sustained efforts spanning several years. For Yuen and colleagues at Playright Children’s Play Association, this involved actively engaging stakeholders, professional specialists and interest groups, which took four years of incremental progress, while for Yantzi and colleagues it involved repeated and innovative use of a timely funding stream over a ten-year period.

Of course, recognition of the value of play in the life of children does not necessarily imply that play is facilitated; as Lynch, Moore and Prellwitz demonstrate in "From Policy to Play Provision: Universal Design and the Challenges of Inclusive Play." In their review of play policies across Europe, they find that—despite asserting the child's right to play through article 31 of the UNCRC—there are very few examples of national play policy that provide an impetus for these aspirations to be realized. There is also a risk that children's absence from the outdoors is misinterpreted as reflecting their preferences, rather than their restricted opportunities, which as Terada and colleagues highlight, was the interpretation of some adults who questioned the demand to create a natural play space in their locality in rural Japan.

### **Unsafe and Hazardous Environments**

In General Comment No. 17 it is acknowledged that hazards are particularly prevalent in the lives of the poorest children and that these hazards may arise from social contexts and poorly managed urbanization. However, these problems are neither insurmountable nor unavoidable. "Street Play in the Revitalization of Low-Birthrate Communities: Playborhood Street Tokyo" by Shimamura could be read as showcasing how play utility can be recovered from what otherwise might be considered an unsafe, inappropriate or hazardous environment. The objective of this initiative is not to remove the hazard, but rather to suspend it for a time-limited period by opening up streets to facilitate community play (which is also presented in General Comment No. 17 as a means of balancing risk and safety). Some may criticize the limitations of this response to a hazardous environment, i.e. limited not only in time, but also by the necessity of having adults present to manage the transition of the environment from hazardous to hazard-free. However, in the specific context of the Playborhood Tokyo project, these "limitations" are not pertinent, as one of the goals of the project is to encourage intergenerational interaction through play.

Although not expressed directly, Profice and Tiriba show that danger is also matter of perception. Rivers, trees and steep embankments are not conceived as hazards to be managed in the world of the indigenous educators of the Tupinambá children in Bahia, northeast Brazil. On the contrary, they are merely part of the everyday landscape providing affordance and opportunity that children realize through play. (Mis)perceptions of what constitutes a hazard can also be challenged through experience, as Schlembach and colleagues found when early childhood educators reflected on their experiences of leading children's play in a natural play space environment. Embracing risk is also writ large in the experiences of those children encountering everyday hazards and crisis in India and Thailand (Chatterjee). In the same project, however, parents in Nepal were more nuanced when appraising the neighborhood environment, advising their children to limit their play to safe spots amidst a wider landscape of destruction.

It is also important to note, as Chatterjee observes, that "practice makes perfect." The unrestricted access of children in Thailand to undoubtedly hazardous everyday environments leads to the transformation of these places from unsafe spaces into friendly places for play. Careful not to dismiss the dangers presented by hazardous

environments or the role of supportive adults in fashioning child-friendly environments, it is nevertheless an important observation that children can flourish even when more palatable situations do not prevail. As she observes, these children's lives are "privileged with spontaneity, creativity, play, freedom of movement and emotional expressions. The very qualities that we seek to recover or reinstate when we lament the loss of childhood in the modern consumerist society."

### **Balancing Risk and Safety**

General Comment No. 17 is not advocating removing all risk from the environment. Although it is necessary to seek to remove the risk of serious harm from children, it is also acknowledged that "some degree of risk and challenge is integral to play" and therefore must be managed. One way to seek the optimum position is to address misperceptions of risk that prevail, as shown by Almon and Keeler. Examples and evidence are provided from North America of how three risk myths associated with adventure playgrounds are being challenged: 1) research demonstrating that accident rates are low, and possibly even lower in adventure playgrounds, relative to conventional "destination playgrounds"; 2) lawsuits are rare; and 3) on the basis of this evidence, no additional insurance premiums are levied as there is no evidenced enhanced risk to cover.

It might be speculated whether the social hazards that must be negotiated by children in the migrant communities in Thailand (Wirunrapan et al.) lead children to seek refuge in spaces that, although hazardous, are actually less dangerous and certainly less threatening to children. Similarly, associations of "natural" play spaces with risk may be misplaced. As shown by Schlembach and colleagues there are grounds for re-appraising these as safe(r) spaces for children; the authors portray these as less-overwhelming environments and ones that afford a "calm, peaceful escape from the rigors of daily classroom life."

Prohibitions against play can have unintended consequences but can also be deployed effectively to allow children to embrace what the everyday environment can offer while avoiding harm. Chatterjee shows Nepalese parents' nuanced appraisal of the neighborhood environment, advising their children to limit their play to safe spots amidst a wider landscape of destruction. Wirunrapan and colleagues observed simpler approaches to prohibition, with the unintended consequence that children sought out risk as a result of being restricted in where they could play. On one hand, parents' prohibitions that prevent children from accessing what they might otherwise perceive as attractive environments for play (such as river banks or deserted buildings), led some children to create feelings of risk through imaginative play (as evidenced in the Spirit Board game). On the other hand, prohibition was also found to increase some children's resolve to access these forbidden spaces. Observing that this is characteristic primarily of boys, the authors found that the boys create risk through certain behaviors (e.g., throwing stones at windows), but also use their imaginations to transform forbidden and hazardous spaces into sites of adventure (e.g., fighting imaginary warriors or running away from wild beasts). In all these examples, children embrace risk.

**Resistance to Children's Use of Public Spaces**

Children are being curtailed in their use of public space in many ways and in many places. General Comment No. 17 argues that this has adverse consequences for children and for wider society. Examples of the restrictions placed upon children in public space are reported in many forms in this collection. For Yuen, this finds expression in the exclusion of an adult with special needs from a children's playground in Hong Kong. This is strikingly similar to the curtailment of play that is reported by teenagers in West Sacramento (Owens). Contrasting the views of Almon and Keeler, a group of teenagers (mainly boys) in West Sacramento argue that their play is not only ignored, but also overtly curtailed in the public parks in their neighborhood. Migrant children in Thailand must limit their play and use of public space due to the concern over drawing attention to the illegal status of their family; it is the perhaps misplaced concern to protect their children from environmental hazards that led parents in Japan to forbid outdoor play in the aftermath of the Great East Japan earthquake (Chatterjee).

The resistance to children's use of public space is being challenged. Owens shows that all is not lost, and that participatory action research can be deployed to encourage the wider community, and key decision-makers within it, to rethink their prior understanding of teenagers and play. Yantzi and colleagues in Canada and Terada and colleagues in Japan identify similar benefits through playground redevelopments. Similarly, the Tokyo Playborhood project described by Shimamura brings community members together to acknowledge their (lost) shared interests in play. More remains to be done by parents and employers to ensure children's play opportunities within migrant communities, as Chatterjee and Wirunrapan et al. also observe.

**Pressure for Educational Achievement**

There are many ways in which an emphasis on formal academic success is curtailing both opportunities to play and the nature of play in educational settings and beyond; General Comment No. 17 provides examples of seven ways in which play is threatened through education. Work in this collection suggest possible correctives.

Although not fully exploring the issue in his paper, Shimamura notes in passing that a pre-occupation with education in Japanese society leads to play being understood as a form of education; i.e., that it should be structured and purposeful and is best managed for children by adults. Interestingly, Shimamura's reflection is not that there is a deficit of independent play. Rather, he suggests that play in Japan is impoverished because "ordinary (local/adult) people" are excluded from children's play experience, as is evidenced by the man in Ishinomaki who is encouraged by children playing with spinning tops.

Profice and Tiriba's work challenges our understanding of what constitutes "educational achievement." Working within the framework of Brazilian National Indigenous Education Guidelines, they illustrate how respecting community traditions and inter-generational knowledge exchange are conceived as "educational

achievements.” In this instance, this provides an impetus for nature to be blended into everyday schooling and for biophilia to be sustained through play in nature.

What constitutes educational achievement need not be reconfigured in order to find positive outcomes through play. One of the most striking conclusions drawn from Schlembach and colleagues’ work with early educators was how the children gained “conceptual awareness” in the field, which they then applied to activities in the classroom (such as when rolling objects down the hill in the play space was later related to work with ramps in the classroom). Indeed, the observation that there were opportunities for children to experience being successful and competent may be suggestive of the relative advantages of natural play space settings for learning.

### **Overly Structured and Programmed Schedules**

Not all of the threats to playtime come from the quest for formal academic success. Increasingly, there is concern—particularly in developed economies—about how children’s leisure time seems to be over-structured, with adults often preferring children to be engaged in activities that appear more “productive” and which are undoubtedly more organized.

Almon and Keeler make the argument for embedding adventure play opportunities in everyday “conventional” play settings (such as the schoolyard) and establishing the presence of adventure play space in the neighborhood, as opposed to providing pop-up adventure play. In contrast to organized leisure, this is premised on a different model of learning (child-led, less programmed) and works toward different learning outcomes (more concerned with relationships/ creativity/ adaptive behaviors, less focused on skill acquisition, less overtly cerebral).

It may also be useful to be clearer about the nature of the problem with “overly structured and programmed schedules.” The structured incorporation of nature-based play in the school day of both the Tupinambá children in Brazil (Profice and Tiriba) and the children in a North American university pre-school setting (Schlembach et al.) are testimony to that.

### **Neglect of Article 31 in Development Programs**

Although not directly concerned with development programs, the two papers in this collection from the IPA *Access to Play in Situations of Crisis* project (Chatterjee and Wirunrapan et al.) provide some evidence to support the contention in General Comment No. 17 that in situations of adversity, a concern for survival crowds out opportunities for the child to thrive through play. The relevance of the point extends beyond development programs. Shimamura ends his reflection on play in Tokyo by juxtaposing the presence of play on Tokyo’s streets in relation to the Olympic Games of 1964 and the Olympic/Paralympic Games planned for 2020. Whereas he observes that play was “driven off the streets” in 1964, he envisages a role for the playborhood movement to repatriate play to its rightful place on the streets as a legacy of the 2020 Games. More generally, the lack of national play policies, identified by Lynch and colleagues, suggest that article 31 is being neglected beyond development programs (which is also a concern that Voce raises when reflecting on Arup’s design guide for urban play). Rintoul observes that the

playwork practices that empower practitioners to facilitate play in situations of crisis would be entirely relevant for staff who support play in non-crisis situations.

### **Lack of Investment in Cultural and Artistic Opportunities for Children**

As is observed in General Comment No. 17, there are wider concerns that the broader artistic and cultural sector does not do enough to embrace and promote opportunities for children. Play redevelopment affords opportunities for children to engage in artistic and cultural activity. For example, the redeveloped Ridgewood playground in Sudbury, Canada (Yantzi et al.) was surrounded by artwork produced by young people. It may be significant that this artistic opportunity was presented in the context of a playground development (ostensibly a development for children). Perhaps ironically by railing against the limitations on opportunities for play, teenagers in West Sacramento deployed their creative talents to raise awareness among the wider community, initially by creating a web-based public map to share their stories, which were illustrated through videos and photographs. As Owens describes, their participatory action research work culminated in the production of a comic book, which was their preferred means to communicate favorite recreation opportunities, challenges, adjustments and recommendations to decision-makers.

### **Marketing and Commercialization of Play**

This collection has been primarily concerned with outdoor play opportunities in public spaces. Consequently, the challenges presented by unregulated and pervasive commercialization and marketing of domestic play products has been less central in our papers. Indeed, much of the play that has been reported—such as the adventure play that is advocated by Almon and Keeler—is an antidote to marketed and commercialized play, particularly when adventure play is provided at a neighborhood level. However, it is interesting to note that this collection of papers has demonstrated the importance of marketing and communication strategies to promote play. This is perhaps most clearly shown by Yuen in Hong Kong, where the media was initially used to highlight the problem, public awareness was raised through the production of documentary videos and public design competitions with media engagement throughout.

### **Growing Role of Electronic Media**

The premise for many of the papers in this collection, reflecting a concern expressed in General Comment No. 17, is that children are increasingly spending too much time engaged in play through digital platforms and media. As with many of the challenges identified, the adverse consequences are perceived to impact the children themselves (e.g., exposure to cyberbullying) as well as wider society (e.g., the erosion of traditional play and play cultures).

Although not belittling this issue, it is interesting that Wirunrapan and colleagues present children's play with electronic media as part of their solution to the problem of accessing play in their hazardous environments in Thailand. Similarly, Chatterjee presents such play as a coping mechanism used by adolescent girls in Japan, who are described as stealthily playing games on mobile phones to enliven their daily routine of chores and schooling. Similarly, and as noted above, Owens reports how

the teenagers of West Sacramento utilized electronic media to produce a web-based public map and comic book, which they used to articulate the case for improved provision for teenager play in their neighborhood.

On a different tack, researchers in the service of play often deploy technology. In "State of Play: Methodologies for Investigating Children's Outdoor Play and Independent Mobility," Han and colleagues weave together child-friendly methods and technology-based applications (GPS and accelerometer data) to provide intelligence about outdoor play and independent mobility in three case study neighborhoods in the Vancouver area. Cox, Loebach and Little show in "Understanding the Nature Play Milieu: Using Behavior Mapping to Investigate Children's Activities in Outdoor Play Spaces" that we can utilize the advanced analysis capabilities of geographic information systems to examine the complexities of children's interactions with outdoor environments, and better understand and visualize their playful environmental behaviors.

### **The Expert Voice**

The play sector benefits from the expertise and commitment of a wide range of professionals who advocate and campaign on behalf of play, such as playworkers, playground designers, researchers specializing in play, and play therapists. It is not in any way to undermine or deny the importance of this expertise when we note that this collection has demonstrated that a much broader "expert" base exists and can be harnessed to promote children's play. Following the impetus provided by the UNCRC, it is no surprise that this expert base now includes children themselves, whose talents have been deployed in the guise of Junior Playground Commissioners/Designers (Yuen), illustrators (Yantzi et al.; Owens), and expert reference/user groups (Yuen; Yantzi et al.; Han et al.). The *Under the Same Sky* toolkit (reviewed by Templeton) provides some guidance on how this expert voice can be articulated. However, it is equally important to acknowledge the specific contributions that a wide range of adults can contribute, including local elected representatives (Yantzi et al.; Owens); local residents, including parents (Yuen; Yantzi et al.; Almon and Keeler; Owens; Chatterjee; Han et al.); private sector providers (Wirunrapan et al.); researchers (Yantzi et al.; Almon and Keeler; Terada; Cox et al.; Owens; Lynch et al.; Shimamura; Han et al.); design specialists (Yantzi et al.; Terada; Arup as reviewed by Voce); government officials (Yantzi et al.; Owens; Lynch et al.); and professionals working in educational/childcare settings (Yantzi et al.; Almon and Keeler; Schlembach et al.).

The challenges that must be overcome to realize the optimum environment for children's play are not inconsequential. However, as this collection demonstrates, there are many ways in which these can be achieved and a broad community of committed and potential interest groups that can work toward this end. We hope that this collection serves as a call to action and encourages further research and practical initiatives throughout the world.

## Acknowledgements

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the school day (*Play Scotland, 2017*), Inclusive Play Space Guide: championing better and more inclusive play spaces in Hong Kong (*PlayRight Child's Play Association & UNICEF, 2016*); Loose Parts Play (2016, *Inspiring Scotland*).