

24

CHILDREN'S GEOGRAPHIES

Playing with Participatory Methods

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Introduction

In the inaugural issue of *Children's Geographies*, Matthews stated that in research and decision-making children were and, in many cases, still are, “little more than silent (or silenced) bystanders and touchline spectators to projects that have attempted to disentangle their worlds through the observations of adults” (Matthews, 2003, p. 4). The value and use of participatory methods to understand children's geographies are highlighted in this chapter through an examination of participatory approaches for examining children's uses, preferences, experiences and opinions concerning outdoor play environments. The subtitle *playing with participatory methods* is not intended to trivialize methods that involve children in the research process, but instead to emphasize the importance of including children as active participants in research exploring their lived experiences. This is not a chapter on how to use participatory methods with children (for this type of information, see Derr et al., 2018), but rather to examine the value of participative methods, and to examine the strengths and challenges of participative work with children. The comic in Figure 24.1 captures the main tenets of this chapter concerning who has valid knowledge about children's play and play geographies, and what are the appropriate ways to collect knowledge. In trying to understand children's play the adults in the comic solely rely on adult knowledge and have not considered involving children in the process. In the comic the adults' frustration only dissipates after their eureka moment – when they consider collecting the experiences and opinions of contemporary children and including them in the process.

The first part of the chapter examines key intellectual shifts within the sub-discipline of human geography, the social sciences, and broader society which have fostered growth in the use of participatory methods with children. Part two examines several barriers to children's participation overall and especially for specific sub-groups of children. The third part provides two examples of participatory methods to show how the shifts and opportunities detailed in part one enriched two research projects with children.

Why Focus on Participatory Methods and Play?

Play, which happens across and within diverse environments, is essential for children's health, development, and well-being. Children that have access to high quality play environments,

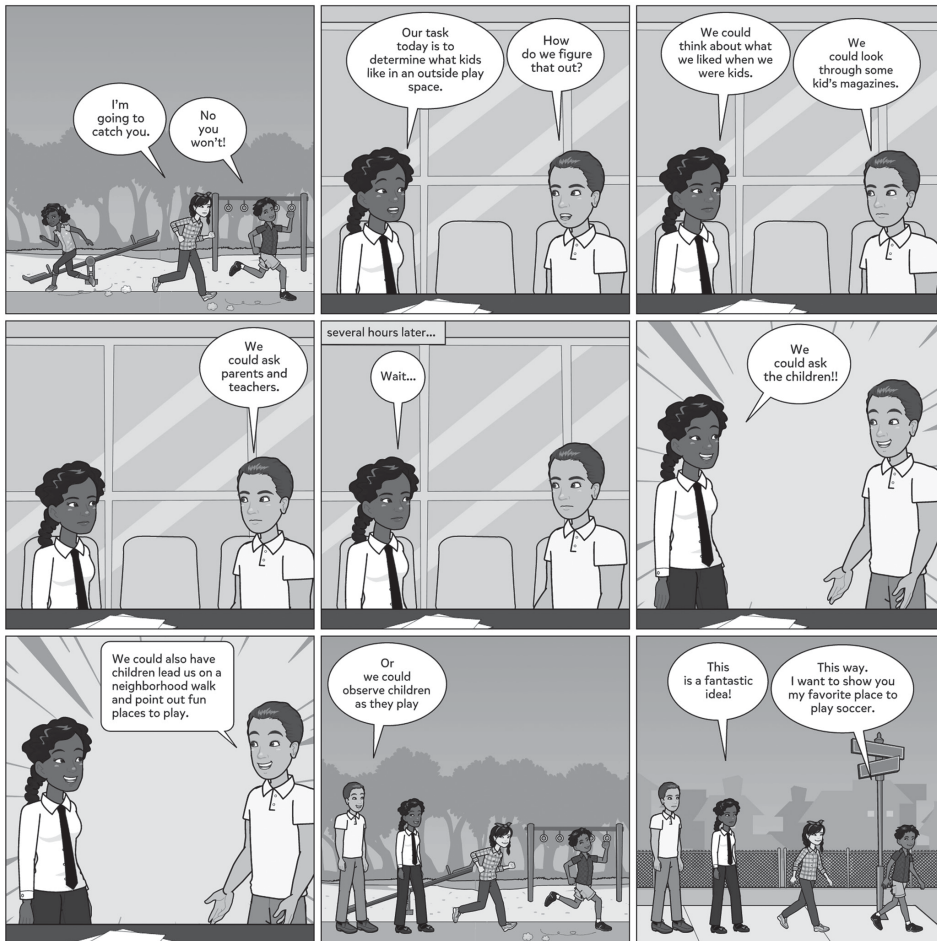


Figure 24.1 The Eureka moment.

Note: This comic was co-created by Nicole Yantzi and her 16 year old nephew Nathan Yantzi who have enjoyed playing in many different types of environments.

offering rich and diverse play experiences, are more likely to have well-developed skills in memory, language, and behaviour regulation which assist with school adjustment and academic learning (Bodrova & Leong, 2005; Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006). The need to value and prioritize children's play environments should be a concern throughout the world including in areas of conflict and crisis such as after human and environmental disasters, and in highly marginalized and displaced communities (International Play Association, 2017). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1999) recognizes the right to play for all children, which is further emphasized by UN General Comment 17 article 3 "Play and recreation are essential to the health and well-being of children and promotes the development of creativity, imagination, self-confidence, self-efficacy, as well as physical, social, cognitive and emotional strength and skills" (United Nations, 2013, p. 4).

Play is researched in many different disciplines (e.g., psychology, sociology, education), but in children's geographies the focus has been on the physical environments that children play in (e.g., Murnaghan, 2019), how these environments impact children's behaviours and development (e.g., Woolley, 2018), and how children can themselves influence their play environments (e.g., Rasmussen, 2004). The way in which children's geographies scholars examine these three areas has evolved to include more roles and power for children as research participants. As alluded to in the introductory comic, to understand children's play geographies, it is essential for researchers and planners to involve children in the research process. According to Beazley et al., (2009, p. 370) there are four articles in the UNCRC that together mean that children "have the right to be properly researched". For example, Article 12 of the UNCRC states that children have a right to express their views on issues affecting their lives, and to have these views listened to by decision-makers and considered in policy and practice (UN General Assembly, 1989); however, as Bessel (2017) rightly points out the UNCRC does not specifically discuss research. Children's geographies have evolved to embrace and integrate these notions within research processes and outputs more explicitly.

Part 1: Shifts Inside and Outside Human Geography

In the past children's experiences were largely excluded in qualitative and quantitative human geography research which instead used adult proxies to collect data on children's behaviours and experiences. Children were not asked, rather, their parents/guardians, teachers, educational assistants etc. were questioned on the children's behalf. However, a critical turn in human geography, beginning in the 1970s, would significantly affect approaches to the study of children's geographies, and the role of children themselves. Critiques of the predominantly quantitative and positivist focus of human geography facilitated the development of social geography which attempted to highlight power differences and inequalities in society. This attention to societal differences led human geographers to begin questioning the lack of diversity of human experiences that was being represented in research (Norton, 2009). This critique emphasized the need to "expose the hegemonic values which underpin these differential positionings and to raise consciousness that within western societies many aspects of life are the outcome of white, ableist, adult, male, middle-class decision-making" (Matthews & Limb, 1999, p. 62; Sibley, 1995).

The observational research conducted by Bunge (1973), Hart (1979), Moore (1986), and Katz (1986) laid important early foundations in geographic research on children's play environments. Then in the 1990s there was a significant surge of work examining children's experiences of the spaces where they live, learn and play (see McKendrick, 2000 for an extended bibliography). Yet, Freeman's (2020) reflection on twenty-five years of work in children's geographies highlights many outstanding issues including under-researched children, spaces and experiences; the continuing need to critique how methods can strengthen and marginalize participation; and using research to draw attention to children's precarious lives due to environmental, social, economic and cultural marginalization.

Within the sociology of childhood, the new social studies of childhood movement (NSSC) was a catalyst for the paradigm change in how children are viewed and included more broadly within research processes in the social sciences (James & Prout, 1997; James et al., 2014). Some of the key tenets of the NSCC included: (1) children's experiences are diverse and intersect with other social positionings such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity, gender and ability; (2) children's experiences and perceptions are different than adults and valuable and worthy of study in and of themselves; and (3) that "[t]he overarching reach of institutional processes to

define and separate children as a group apart emphasizes the hegemonic control that concepts of 'childhood' – what is thought right and proper for children – exercise over children's experiences at any point in time" (James & James, 2004, p. 21). According to James (2009, p. 34) the shift to seeing children as social actors, with unique experiences and opinions from adults, represents one of "the most important theoretical developments in the recent history of childhood studies". The key premise of considering a child as an individual social agent reinforces the bi-directional relationship between children and their environments; they are not only impacted by their physical settings, but they can also shape and impact these environments in return. For example, recent research demonstrates how youth assume societal discourses surrounding identity and belonging, yet at the same time they challenge, re-imagine, and change what these discourses mean in their everyday lives (Vanderbeck & Dunkley, 2004). There is ample evidence that demonstrates children influence how their social spaces and everyday environments are used (James & James, 2004; Valentine, 2011). Children can develop solutions, show creativity, and come up with thoughtful suggestions and reflections on their daily experiences (James et al., 2014).

Increasingly, viewing children as social agents who have different experiences and opinions concerning their environments than adults, is argued to require that research be conducted in a more participatory way. As Hopkins and Bell state "[a] researcher's philosophical understandings about the roles of children and young people in society and space is connected to their understanding of research ethics and the way that they believe children should be treated in research" (2008, p. 3).

Part 2: Critical Perspectives

For an in-depth overview of ethical and methodological strengths and challenges of using participative approaches with children see the special issue in *Children's Geographies*, 2007, 5(3). Here, we will focus on critical dimensions that impact the ability of children to participate in the geographic research process. We will examine the agency literature and what it means for research with children, and how unequal power relationships between children and adults, different social positionings, and children's limited involvement in all phases of research can have profound impacts for conducting 'truly participatory' research with children. Participatory research is less about the choice of method and more focused on "the social relations involved in the data production and analysis, particularly with respect to where the locus of control and power lies" (Ansell et al., 2012, p. 169).

While we recognize the contention in the literature with defining agency, and particularly how this applies to children, this chapter follows current geographies of children and NSCC praxis in recognizing that children are active agents that shape and influence their surroundings (James and James, 2004; Markström and Halldén, 2009; Valentine, 2011). However, we acknowledge that children may not have equal opportunities for agency in all their daily environments; children may be limited in their agency given practices, social and cultural values, and assumptions in some spaces and contexts. This can have consequences for research processes and praxis emphasizing the importance of examining both the role of adult gatekeepers (Clark & Richards, 2017) and how demographic and social characteristics such as gender, ethnicity and family income can facilitate or hinder children's involvement (Hoggett, 2001; Markström & Halldén, 2009). It is important to recognize that there are significant barriers related to power relationships and social positionings that manifest inequities in participation in research amongst children. Researchers must negotiate and address the adult-centric policies and rules embedded in specific spaces and contexts, "as research projects cannot erase the context of adult power

that children face daily in their homes, schools and communities” (Abebe, 2009, p. 458). For example, research conducted in schools can be impacted by the many adult gatekeepers who must give their permission for children to participate, including relevant boards, principals, teachers, and finally the child’s parents or guardians. As adults choose which children will be involved, some children’s perspectives remain invisible (Horgan, 2017).

Scholars conducting field work with children in poorer, developing countries, and underserved communities face additional challenges in understanding how the historically and geographically contingent social constructions of participation, childhood, and adult-child relationships impact research (Abebe, 2009; Twum-Danso, 2009). The socialization of children in many cultural communities to be submissive, respect their elders, and not bring shame to their parents can conflict with the UNCRC’s values of children’s rights and participation. As Twum-Danso (2009) discovered this can make it very difficult to address adult-child power differences in their research in Ghana. Although the researcher preferred for children to speak freely, the practice of having to stand up or raise their hands to speak was so ingrained that it made child participants extremely uncomfortable not to follow this practice. The children also struggled when asked their opinion as this was something they had never experienced (Twum-Danso, 2009).

Intersecting identity characteristics can hinder the participation of specific groups of children in research which in turn impacts which stories and experiences are represented. Therefore, it is crucial to focus on “the process producing those voices” which involves “power dynamics as well as ... broader cultural, societal, ideological and institutional influences and how children’s voices are heard and represented” (Horgan, 2017, p. 250). The statement of a young woman of colour in Cahill’s (2007, p. 300) research that “The most important thing for me to be able to do this work was it not feeling like school” emphasizes the importance of how researchers position themselves and discuss the research project. In selecting New Zealand children for the ‘Kids in the City’ project, the team carefully selected schools based on neighbourhood walkability scores, socio-economic status, and ethnic make-up of the school population including indigenous children (Oliver et al., 2011). Researchers play an essential role in determining what stories and whose voices will be represented. Dodman (2004) encourages researchers to move from a sole focus on the problematic aspects of youth in developing countries such as teen pregnancy and street children and instead ask them to evaluate their daily spaces. Research conducted with 11- to 15-year-old participants in Kingston, Jamaica demonstrates the importance of examining the complexities of their perspectives about their home, school and city and contextualizing this in terms of socio-economic status (Dodman, 2004).

A central aim of participatory research with children and youth is to provide mechanisms, which include not only tools but social structures and relations by which we can better hear and understand the lived experiences of children – including calls for these understandings to be co-produced with young people themselves (Horgan, 2017). Researchers must ensure that this participatory work does not take on a tokenistic or performative nature, masking what are still agendas and narratives constructed by adults (Horgan, 2017; Clark & Richards, 2017).

Several scholars including Hart (1992) and Lansdown (2005) have questioned how children are involved in the research process and emphasize the importance of critically thinking about the word participation. Hart’s (1992) original ladder of participation depicts different approaches to involving children, with the higher rungs depicting participation that is more meaningful for the children as they are more genuinely engaged in or contributing to research practices and decision-making. The lower rungs, which represent manipulation, decoration, and tokenization, are examples of ‘participation’ which only superficially involves children, or worse, undermines young people’s rights and agency (Hart, 1992). Similarly, Lansdown’s (2005)

model terms the degrees of children's participation as consultation, participatory processes, and self-initiation. At the highest degree, children are not only involved in the decision-making processes but also "define the work and are not merely responding to an adult agenda" (Eckhoff, 2019, p. 7). Figure 24.2 demonstrates that meaningful roles for young people are based on increasing the number of opportunities and the number of children that can be involved while at the same time increasing the influence and role of young people in the organization or community. Applying this to participatory research means increasing the opportunities for diverse young people to be involved and expanding their power within research and decision-making processes.

Some scholars in geography and other disciplines facilitating participatory research with young people are more consciously trying to deepen the involvement of children within and across the research process. 'Deep participation' reflects an approach which seeks to involve child and youth participants in as many stages of the research process as possible, beginning with defining the scope and key research questions, through to identifying methods, conducting data collection, analysis, and interpretation of the research, and ending with the dissemination of findings and research outputs (Ansell et al., 2012; Horgan, 2017). This approach means that youth participants themselves are genuinely collaborating to drive the research aims and processes (Kesby, 2007). Cahill (2007) provides a powerful example of what can happen when researchers involve youth participants at the very beginning. In introducing the project to participants, it was presented in an open and vague way focused on the experiences of young

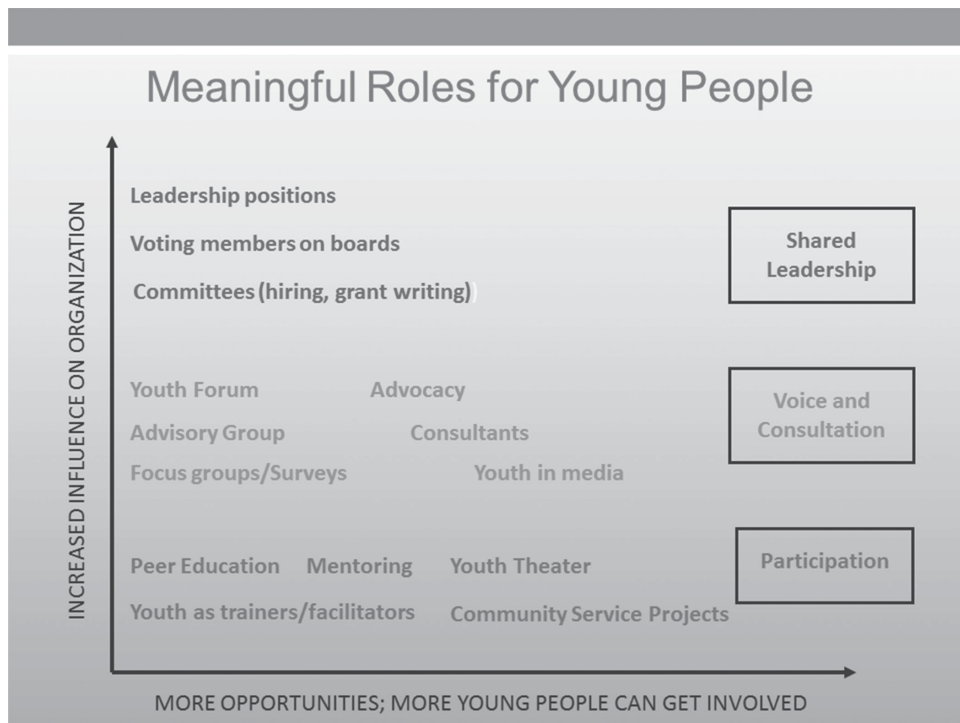


Figure 24.2 Meaningful roles for young people.

Source: Adapted from the Youth Commission, Hampton, Virginia.

women in the city. Discussion with participants about what was important to them, culminated in a richer research project titled “Makes me mad: Stereotypes of young womyn of colour”, which examined how they were shaped by, resisted, and ultimately tried to change the stereotypes that affected their experiences in the city.

Child participants are rarely given the opportunity to determine the products of the research, how they are produced and where and how they are disseminated. This situation, however, may be changing as more social science researchers are conducting work within action research frameworks which seek to not only better understand children’s lived experiences, but to help affect positive change within children’s social and environmental realms. In Cahill’s (2007) study the participants, viewed as co-researchers, developed a website (www.fed-up-honeys.org), sticker campaign and a report (Rios-Moore et al., 2004).

There are several potential benefits to involving youth in all research phases including that: (1) they bring ideas and perspectives to the table which adults cannot provide, including an understanding of contemporary youth experience and culture; (2) children are typically less mired in regulatory or political frameworks or adherence to past practices, and may be more likely to think creatively and out-of-the-box (Derr et al., 2018); and (3) young people are often eager to play a more substantive role in improving their communities and local play and recreation environments. Derr et al., (2018), drawing on more than a decade of participatory work with youth in Colorado, United States, remind us that “young people themselves want to be seen as valued contributors, and to be included in urban decision-making and public places within their communities” (p. 8). When youth are involved in planning, building, and maintaining play and recreation places in their community, they are more likely to experience those environments as welcoming, which can translate to increased use and care of these local settings (Loebach et al., 2020; Melcher, 2020).

Working with children involves using a combination of methods, which do not rely on a single mode of expression, such as reading/writing or answering verbally, providing children with diverse ways of contributing (Warming, 2011). One of the strengths of using participatory methods with children is the additional time and space they provide to adapt to meet participants’ abilities, needs and timelines. Kesby (2007, p. 200) acknowledges that there is a “need for researchers of children to be flexible in their use and deployment of various techniques, and of the need to allow participants to take a lead in the research process”. In Part 3 we briefly discuss examples from our own research that meet the participants ‘where they are at’ spatially, socially, and physically.

Part 3: Research Examples

An effective but highly underutilized approach for understanding children’s play behaviours and environments is the engagement of young people themselves in the evaluation of local play and recreation settings and asking them about their experiences. Part 3 features two research briefs that make evident how the selected participatory approaches can accommodate the strengths and challenges different participants experience in expressing their views and sharing their experiences.

Example 1: Photovoice

There are numerous studies which highlight the benefits of summer camp experiences for youth with disabilities including increasing feelings of hopefulness, security, and self-efficacy, but it is rare for such studies to include first-hand accounts from the youth campers. In

Ontario, Canada, children with disabilities can attend a sleepaway camp, either one for children with any kind of disability or else one for children with specific disabilities (herein referred to as disability-specific sleepaway camp). In studies to date of the impact of these summer camp programs, research participants are primarily parents/guardians, support workers and camp counsellors, and therefore their views and experiences of camp as respite tend to dominate. As part of her master's thesis research, Jenna Simpson (supervised by the first author) demonstrated the value of Photovoice in capturing the voices of camp participants themselves, and how adolescents (14–17 years) with neurodevelopmental conditions at a disability-specific sleepaway camp in Ontario, Canada make meaning of their summer camp experiences (Simpson, 2019).

Camp Neuro, a pseudonym, accepts children and adolescents with neurodiversities, whose severe behavioural challenges mean that they are unable to attend other camps and/or have been removed from other camps. Simpson's (2019) research was the first to consider the views of Camp Neuro held by the youth campers themselves and, in so doing, adapted Photovoice to meet the needs of the neurodiverse participants.

Photovoice "can be altered to fit diverse partnerships, community contexts, participant characteristics and research or intervention interests" (Catalani & Minkler, 2010, p. 448). This flexibility means that Photovoice is a promising approach for capturing the experiences of individuals with severe intellectual and cognitive challenges who may struggle to express themselves verbally (Stafford, 2017). Photovoice typically engaged participants to take and then discuss their own photographs in small or large group interviews to explore their lived realities. This approach was not optimal for the Camp Neuro participants as each participant had unique behavioural challenges which could make group talk difficult (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Kaehne & O'Connell, 2010), and the participating teens had varying communication abilities (Simpson, 2019). At Camp Neuro the teens are encouraged to set up their own daily schedule; the study methodology allowed the teen campers to determine when they wanted to take photographs of the camp, as well as how and where they wanted to take photographs. Participants were guided to take photos that would help to express their answer to the question "What does Camp Neuro mean to you?" (Simpson, 2019). The teens were also given the option to participate in individual interviews to discuss their photos, which allowed the interview format to be specifically tailored to their needs and preferences (Simpson, 2019). The flexibility inherent in Photovoice provided the ability to work with participants' strengths and help them feel included in and share power within the research process. As Stafford (2017, p. 611) states "when researching with children with diverse impairments what is important is that they are offered flexibility and choice in how they are researched". In terms of their participation, the campers had the freedom to choose which parts of the research they wanted to participate in, determine their own schedule for data collection, and help to decide how findings were to be shared.

Often researchers employing a Photovoice protocol will use the participants' photographs as discussion prompts but do not actually analyse and present the content of the photographs themselves. Simpson's (2019) original plan for the Camp Neuro study stipulated that those participating in the interview phase were to select five of their photographs to discuss. Simpson (2019) discovered that the participants felt proud of all their photographs and wanted to talk about each of them; the study plan was therefore amended to let participants talk about all their photographs if desired. To capture campers' experiences who had difficulty vocalizing the photographs were treated as data (see Simpson, 2019 for more details).

Photovoice provided the opportunity to work with youth with neurodiversities who can struggle with abstract thinking and expressing their emotions (American Psychological



Figure 24.3 Purple's photograph.

Association, 2013). During unstructured interviews, the photographs provided a tool to help participants move from a concrete thing – a picture of something at camp – to more abstract thoughts and even life lessons; participants that were interviewed expressed moving and profound sentiments about Camp Neuro and life outside camp (Simpson, 2019). Two of the participants learned that they have intrinsic value. One camper, when asked about a photograph she took (Figure 24.3: Purple's photograph), expressed “camp taught me that... even if it's flawed, it's still beautiful. And before camp, I had trouble realizing that but at camp it kinda opened me up to new possibilities” (Simpson, 2019, p. 96).

Often youth with neurodiversities are not included in research about their life experiences as their capacity for communication and understanding is questioned (Stafford, 2017). This Photovoice project revealed that adolescents with severe neurodevelopmental conditions can still share powerful experiences and learnings from their play and recreational environments when flexible participatory tools and diverse modes of expression are integrated (Simpson, 2019). The results were used to co-create an exhibit at a major fundraiser for Camp Neuro attended by peers, caregivers, funders, and decision-makers. By helping to select the photographs and interview excerpts to display at the exhibition, campers also participated in the dissemination and translation of the research findings. Funders and decision-makers who attended indicated that they left with an enhanced awareness of the value of Camp Neuro for the campers themselves (Simpson, 2019).

Example 2: Youth-Performed Play Space Assessments

While children can spend a significant amount of time in community play spaces, including local parks and public schoolyards, they are rarely involved in the assessment of these places or decision-making processes designed to improve them (Loebach et al., 2020; Corkery & Bishop, 2020, Flanders Cushing, 2016). This second example highlights how participatory methods can be used to meaningfully engage groups of children in research to assess and inform the development of their community play spaces.

The goal of the research was to understand student and community needs for the renovation of their school play yard, and to develop design priorities via consensus decision-making informed by the students' insights from their own research and evaluation. In London, Canada, university researchers, with ongoing support from city planners, worked with a group of Grade 8 students (aged 12–13 years) to carry out a series of assessments of their school play yard over three months. Diverse, child-driven methods to evaluate, for example, how and when the space was being used by students and the broader community, existing amenities which were considered valuable, and to highlight gaps in play provision or environmental trouble spots, such as areas where trash or water collects (see Loebach, 2020).

One key objective of the adult facilitators was to minimize the inherent power imbalances that typically exist between adults and children in research processes (Schafer & Yarwood, 2008; Todd, 2012), particularly when the engagement takes place in an institutional setting such as a school (Spyrou, 2011), as well as within peer groups (Kellett, 2010). Several strategies were utilized, including working to build genuine relationships with the children (Warming, 2011) by engaging with them each week over multiple months. Over time, this allowed the facilitators to become 'familiar figures' with whom the young people were comfortable and did not interact with in the same way that they might be expected to with teachers or other adult authorities (Mayall, 2008; Horgan, 2017). This helped to position the students as legitimate co-researchers alongside adult facilitators who consciously worked to avoid taking on an authoritative role (Kellett, 2010).

The students were divided into small 'design firms', each of which were responsible for assessing the existing play space and the needs of its current users, including themselves, but also other students, educational and maintenance staff, and community users, and putting forth design recommendations which reflected their research findings. In this way the power was largely shifted from the adult facilitators to the student groups (Ansell et al., 2012), and students acted as co-researchers as well as key informants themselves (Jones, 2004; Spyrou, 2011). Setting up the youth in peer groups, with no adult present for the discussion and decision-making components, allowed for youth-driven ideas and insights to emerge. Each student in a 'firm' also took on differing roles, diffusing the responsibilities to help minimize potential power dynamics within the peer groups themselves (Kellett, 2010).

While the adult facilitators presented multiple vehicles through which students could assess their current play environment, including environmental audits, behaviour mapping, and interviews with other students and staff, as co-researchers, the students were involved in decisions about how these methods would be operationalized. For example, identifying as a group that it was necessary to learn more about the wishes and needs of other child users, the facilitators recommended that they consider interviews or focus groups. The students decided to conduct focus groups and worked together to develop the questions which would be asked of other students; each firm then conducted a 30-minute focus group with one other grade then reported back, allowing the large group to identify priorities and wishes for varying aged students at the school.

Similarly, to better understand the condition of and opportunities provided by the existing space, the students chose to conduct environmental audits of their play yard. Facilitators provided the firms with an initial set of prompting questions to consider but student groups were then encouraged to develop additional research questions that might be relevant to pose and explore through their in-situ assessment of the space. Each firm then prepared maps of the yard which reflected both their unique questions and their findings (see example maps in Figures 24.4 and 24.5). To examine how students at the school currently use the space, the students chose to carry out behaviour mapping or 'activity mapping' in the play yard; facilitators

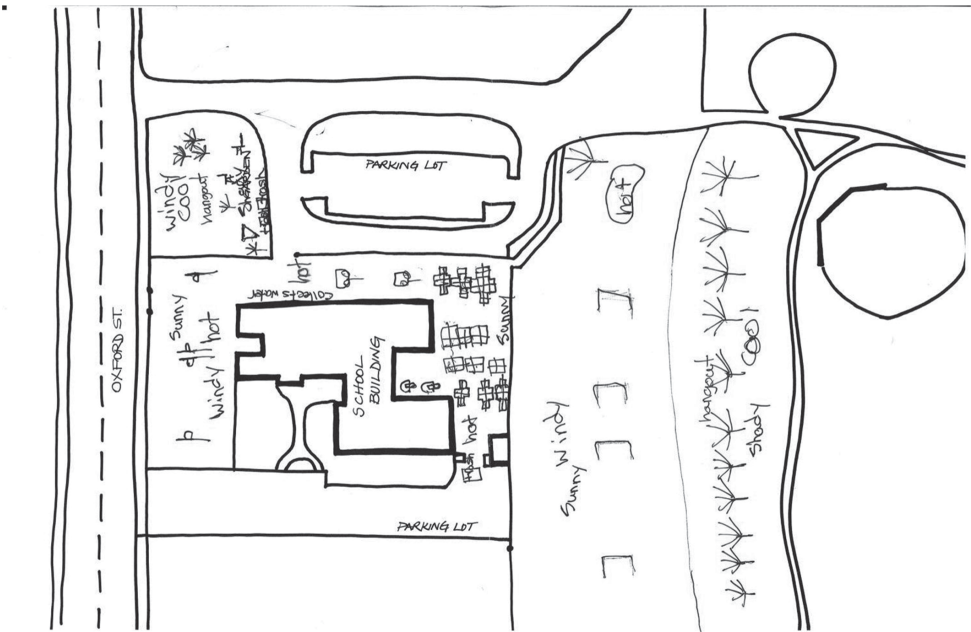


Figure 24.4 Environmental audit map produced by student co-researchers.

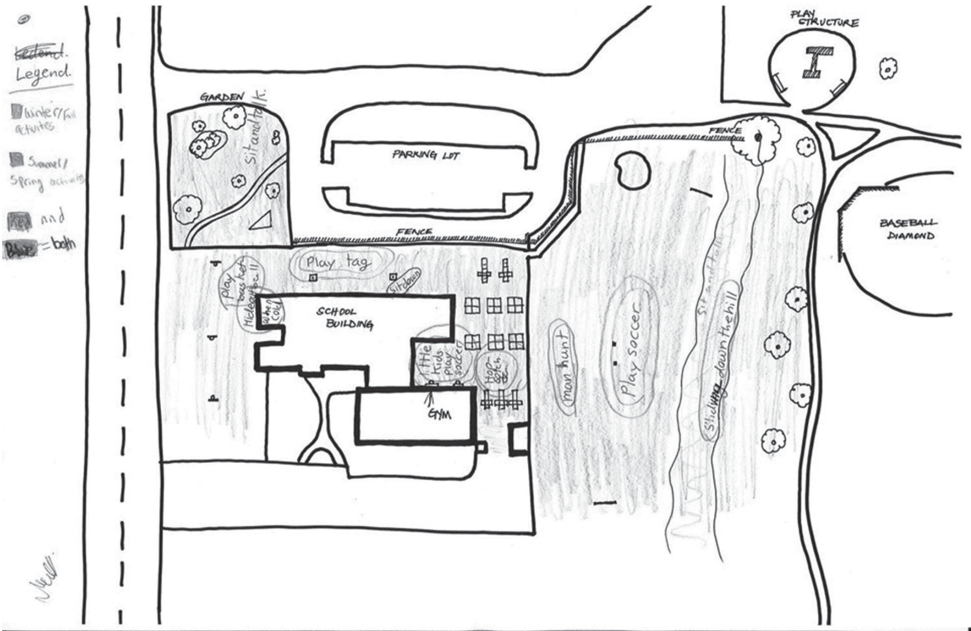


Figure 24.5 Environmental audit map produced by student co-researchers.

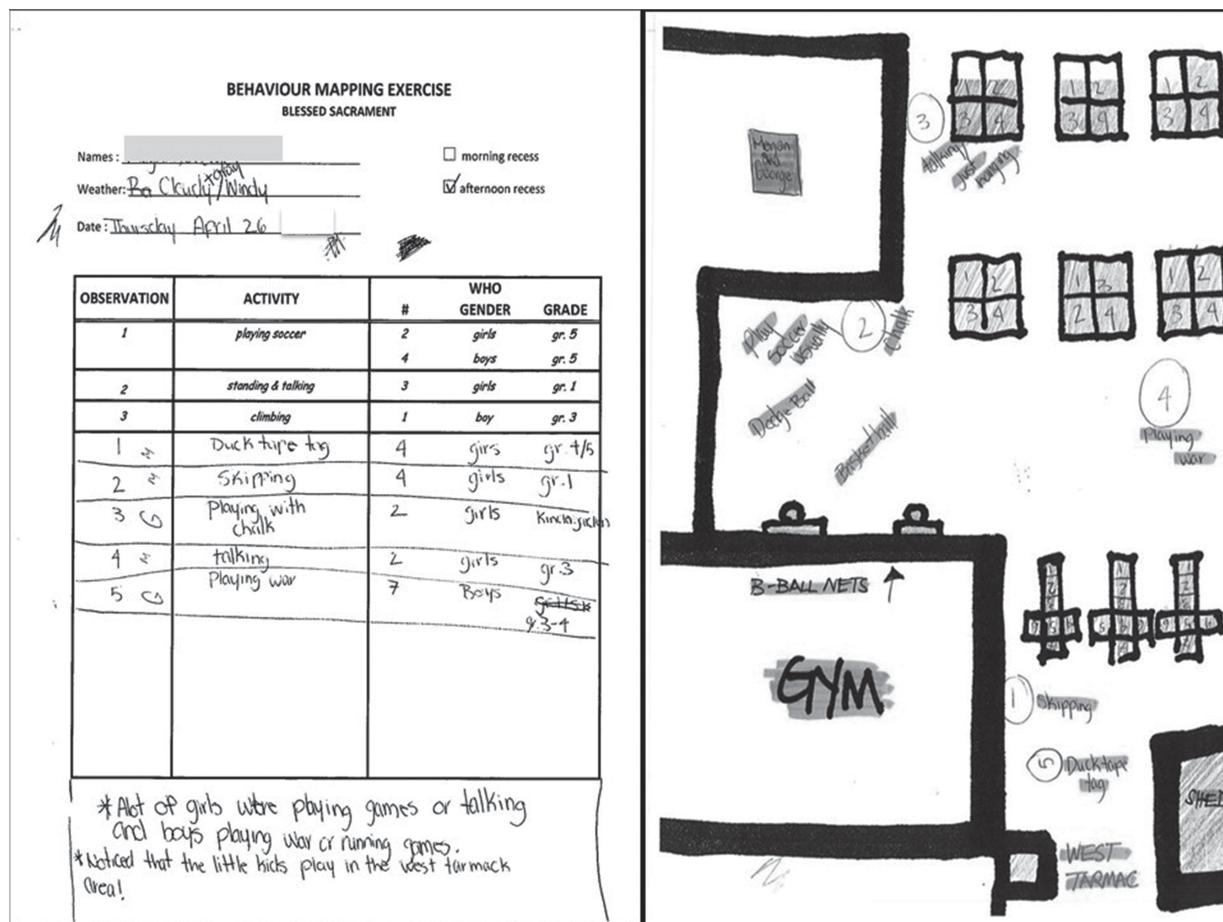


Figure 24.6 Activity map of play yard activity produced by student co-researchers.

helped them to develop a simple protocol for observing and documenting common activities taking place in the yard (Figure 24.6 shows an Activity Map and Data Sheet produced by one of the groups). Students also conducted ‘intercept interviews’ with other students while they were playing to learn more about what they did in the yard, and what they liked or disliked about the space. Afterwards, in a large group debrief, each group shared their insights from these activities and facilitators helped the students to organize their collective observations and insights to inform their next steps.

Environmental audits, behavior mapping and focus groups conducted and adapted by the students were part of a larger, iterative framework whereby the youth participants produced their own knowledge of and narratives about the play space; they used their individual and collective findings from their research to inform their own design plan and recommendations for the space. Each firm presented their findings and plans to the larger group; the priorities and key insights of each group were recorded on a master list. All of the ideas and priorities were then discussed and confirmed as a group via consensus decision-making strategies, which resulted in a final set of recommendations for the play space renovation.

These activities were also supplemented by other components of the project framework which worked to deepen youth participation. One of these strategies was the integration of multiple, interactive and highly visual methods to provide youth participants with many ways to evaluate the play space and capture the diversity of experiences and wishes within the group. The use of mixed, visual, and activity-focused methods, along with opportunities to engage as individuals as well as in small and large groups, provided multiple mechanisms and modalities for the youth to safely express their individual insights as well as to contribute to collective analyses (Hill, 2006; Elden, 2012, Quiroz et al., 2014).

Another strategy for facilitating deeper participation is through capacity building; that is, providing participating children with relevant training and knowledge building opportunities. Multiple workshops were conducted with student participants to provide them with foundational knowledge and tools that would allow them to conduct their research activities in a more independent and informed manner. For example, the project started out with multiple sessions aimed to introduce them to the city officials as well as the social, environmental and economic policies normally driving decision-making around community spaces, and steps in the design process. Later in the process, when students decided to conduct focus groups with other students, they were given tips and guidelines for conducting effective focus group discussions and analyzing the results. In this way, the adult researchers looked to provide the youth with the knowledge, language and tools necessary for them to genuinely serve as co-researchers and analysts, rather than simply carrying out research activities that were actually adult-framed. Gaining the tools and language for participation and demonstrating to city planners their capacity for substantial and creative contributions to environmental assessment and planning, may also pave the way for the youths’ continued interest and engagement in research and civic activities.

Conclusions

The chapter attests to the importance of ensuring that children are given opportunities to share their experiences and ideas about their play and recreational environments. With participatory methods it is not enough that the method supports the research question or hypothesis, researchers must also ensure that the approach to data collection, analysis and sharing of results also supports the participants’ abilities which are facilitated and constrained by the temporal and geographic context in which they live. The flexibility and creativity inherent to

participatory methods make them well suited for capturing children's complex and diverse play experiences and behaviours. Children value the opportunity to share "their own words and images [to] convey the authenticity of their ideas and the specificity of their visions" (Derr et al., 2018, p. 244). We encourage all researchers to seek those eureka moments in which children's engagement is meaningful, valuable and they are given opportunities to impact their play and recreational geographies. Processes and tools for soliciting the voices and lived experiences of children can be challenging and resource intensive; operationalizing them in a way that also allows for and respects differing voices and experiences to be heard, is even more so. However, despite the challenges of facilitating children's deeper participation in research and decision-making, this chapter highlights multiple examples which effectively and genuinely engage children in evaluating their own play behaviours, preferences, and geographies.

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