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A Play-based Research Approach: Young Researchers' Conceptualisations,
Processes, and Experiences

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Abstract

Play is often seen as a trivial experience that happens in the gaps or breaks in research, outside the research process proper, or at best as an element that is instrumentalised to build rapport, rather than as aspect of research deserving attention in its own right. Although a few studies exist on play-based research (e.g. Campo et al., 2018; Koller & San Juan, 2015) there is a dearth of literature on play-based research approaches, and even less on play-based research led by older children and young people.

This dissertation uses an interdisciplinary childhood studies, social ecological, and children's rights approach to explore play-based research with young researchers and to examine its role in their relationships and dialogue on social issues. The research focused on children and young people's own conceptualisations, experiences, and embodiment of play and play-based research approaches. The research was carried out with ten young researchers (aged 15–20) entitled Wilderness Emerging Researchers (Emerging Researchers) on the traditional territory of the unceded land of the W̱SÁNEĆ, Lkwungen, Wyomilth peoples of the Coast Salish Nation, otherwise known as Greater Victoria. The Emerging Researchers were trained in a play-based research approach prior to designing and conducting research with young people participants in their community. The play-based research approach allowed for emergence of new forms of play and the tools fostered time and space for diverse modes of play to be expressed. Data was generated through documentation of play-based research activities, and through field notes and semi-structured interviews.

The findings chapters explore: (i) young people's conceptualisations, understandings and experiences of play including an examination of modes of play prevalent in the data: play as a challenge and play as humour, as well access to play for older children in relation to 'making time' and 'taking time'; (ii) how play-based research affects the Emerging Researchers' experiences of and approaches to relationships with peer researchers, community, adult

researchers, and methods; and (iii) play-based research's role in fostering reflective dialogue on social issues.

The dissertation concludes with implications of play-based research for academic literature and theory, research, policy and practice. The dissertation supports a growing call for a relational approach to children's participation in research (Hatton 2014; Mannion, 2007) by demonstrating the significant role of play-based research in embodied relationships with people and methods. Finally, it highlights how play-based research approaches are valuable for older children and young people as spaces for dialogue, relationships, and exploration of play.

Lay Summary

This dissertation turns attention to play, and the affordances of play-based research, as a research approach with much value, particularly for participatory projects led by children and young people. While play occasionally appears in the current literature on participatory, creative and/or arts-based research, this dissertation takes seriously an experience that otherwise often only appears in the margins of research accounts. Arguably play is often seen as a trivial experience that happens in the gaps or breaks of research, outside the research process proper, or at best as an element that is instrumentalised to build rapport, rather than as aspect of research deserving attention in its own right. Despite the growth in creative and art-based approaches to research, there have only been a few studies specifically using play-based research (e.g. Campo et al., 2018; Koller & San Juan, 2015), and there has been little development of the potentials of play in research led by older children and young people – arguably play is often only considered appropriate in relation to young children.

This dissertation draws on interdisciplinary childhood studies, social ecological, and children’s rights approaches to explore play-based research with young researchers. It focuses on young researchers’ own conceptualisations, understandings, and embodiment of play-based approaches. It goes on to address the opportunities this approach opened up for exploring their relationships with each other, and others in their lives, as well as how it created space for dialogue on complex social issues that they were personally negotiating. The research involved developing an iterative project to explore play with a group of ten young researchers (aged 15-20). The ten researchers were alumni from a three-year programme involving wilderness activities and, as researchers, are entitled Wilderness Emerging Researchers (Emerging Researchers). The research took place on the traditional territory of the unceded land of the W̱SÁNEĆ (Sanich), Lkwungen (Songhees), Wyomilth (Esquimalt) peoples of the Coast Salish Nation, otherwise known as Greater Victoria.

The project began with the design of the research process. Firstly, I developed specific tools – play-based activities – to facilitate play, while also intentionally incorporating space for more informal play. I then trained the Emerging Researchers in using these methods. They went on to design and conduct research with other young people in their community. While the Emerging Researchers were trained using play-based research tools, the play-based research approach also allowed for emergence of new forms of play and the tools fostered time and space for diverse modes of play to be expressed. Data was generated through play-based research activities, which were documented through taking field notes, images, and recording transcriptions, as well as semi-structured interviews with the young researchers.

The substantive chapters draw attention to some significant and unexpected findings. Chapter 4 explores how, against popular conceptualisations of play as easy, childlike and trivial, play emerged as a challenge, as something which curiously required considerable risk and effort. Play also emerged as a site of humour. Finally, it emerged that play requires time, a resource in limited supply for older children, evident from considerable discussion of the need for ‘making time’ and ‘taking time’ to play. Chapter 5 turns to how play-based research affects the Emerging Researchers’ experiences of and approaches to relationships with peer researchers, community, adult researchers, and methods. Chapter 6 explores play-based research’s role in fostering reflective dialogue on social issues and negotiating the tensions that different perspectives on these social issues created, whether with the group, or with their families and friends.

The dissertation concludes by elaborating on the implications of play-based research for academic theory, research, policy, and practice. The dissertation supports a growing call for a relational approach to children’s participation in research (Hatton 2014; Mannion, 2007) through showing the significant potentials of play-based research in drawing attention to embodied relationships in research projects. Finally, it highlights how play-based

research approaches are valuable for older children and young people, and not only early childhood, as spaces of dialogue, relationships, and exploration of play.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

As adults we have lost our way when it comes to children's play. We have over coded it, super-imposed adult desires and anxieties on to it, colonised it, turned it into something other than play (Russell, 2019, p. 15)

This dissertation explores play-based research as a participatory research approach with young people, and its role in their relationships and dialogue on social issues. It focuses on children and young people's own conceptualisations, experiences, and embodiment of play and play-based research approaches. The dissertation navigates the complexity of play as a research approach throughout the whole research process.

This introductory chapter begins by highlighting the focus of the research, and moves on to reflect on my own professional and personal experiences which established the motivations behind the research. It then introduces the research questions, approach to data collection, childhood studies positionality, and key terms. The chapter closes with an outline of the dissertation chapters.

Although a few studies exist on play-based research (e.g. Campo et al., 2018; Koller & San Juan, 2015; Zero Paper, 2016) there is limited literature on play-based research approaches, and a dearth of literature on play-based research led in partnership with older children and young people. The literature shows that some research has been conducted with participatory research approaches that use play as a tool (e.g. Campo, Baldassarre, & Lee, 2019; Underwood, Chan, Koller, & Valeo, 2015) or that are framed as arts-based research (e.g. Theron, Mitchell, Smith, & Stuart, 2011). While these studies contribute to ideas on play-based research, the literature infrequently uses play-based research as an explicit methodology and is primarily focused on early years' settings and younger children. The limited literature leaves a gap in knowledge on play-based research approaches for older children and young people. Arguably play is often seen as a trivial experience that happens in the gaps or breaks of research, outside the

research process proper, rather than as aspect of research deserving attention in its own right. As such, there is need for further exploration of play and play-based research for older children and young people.

Traditionally, research on or about children's issues has been adult-led with children considered as objects or at best as participants; children and young people have been unlikely to be engaged as researchers or advisors nor have they been engaged through play-based approaches to research. Over the last thirty years, since the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was adopted and early theoretical focus on childhood studies emerged (Cuevas-Parra, 2020), researchers and academia have embraced new approaches to undertaking research *with* children and young people (e.g. child- and youth-led, youth-adult partnerships) (Collins et al., 2020; McMellon & Tisdall, 2020) rather than *on* them. However, despite advances in including children in research and exploring play-based approaches, the literature has paid little to no attention to research with young people leading research using play-based approaches. Research on play-based approaches led directly by young people is critical to garner greater understanding of the role of play-based research in young researchers' own conceptualisations, understandings, and embodiment of play-based approaches.

Child-centred practitioner and research communities are in need of greater evidence to explore conceptualisations and embodied experiences of play from young people's perspectives, as well as greater research on play-based research approaches and their role in young researchers' lives. As such, an explicit emphasis on play-based research approaches led by young researchers is an original and valuable contribution.

1.1 Background and Context

My professional academic and practitioner experience in play, children's participation, children's rights, child protection, and participatory research over the last fifteen years influenced the focus of this PhD research. My situated knowledge and positionality is critical to how I understand and

interpret social realities. As a Caucasian, middle-class, settler Canadian young woman engaged in child-centred international and local research and practice, I situate myself as a humble learner, academic, and practitioner with respect for young people and adult partnerships. While play had always been an element of my life, from playing in the ocean to co-creating games with my siblings, to having an early childcare centre in my home as a child, onwards to babysitting and camp counselling with children with disabilities, a particular moment in my early career stood out to me; grounding play as something more important and something to reflect on. While completing a fellowship in Uganda with a local office of an international third sector organisation focused on education, I visited a school one Saturday with colleagues. Expecting to see only management upon arrival, I was surprised to see a coach with a group of children. As I got closer I saw they were playing a game I learned afterwards was called ‘Don’t Trust Your Eyes’ to learn about HIV/Aids transmission. Later that morning after the children left, I asked the coach why he was there on a Saturday to which he responded ‘they come every day, so I come every day. They have nowhere else safe to play’. His words and the children’s smiles and laughter resonated with me, and upon returning to Canada the following year I sought work with a play-based organisation as an intern while completing a Masters, then later began working with them.

My understanding, experience, and embodiment of play and play-based research, as well as young people-led participatory research has been shaped by my personal and professional journey. My experiences designing play-based resources and programmes, facilitating play-based workshops, and collaborating with children and young people in research processes across organisations, since my play ‘moment’ in Uganda, has allowed me to see strengths in play and participatory methodologies and to witness (and sometimes be complicit in) the façade of altruistic participatory rhetoric that is spoken to and written for funding and networks without concentrated action. Through engagement in the sector and personal reflections in day-to-day interactions and encounters, I constantly pondered larger questions and

cultivated a desire to explore play-based research with young researchers, thus embarking on a PhD.

As a PhD researcher, I actively practice critical reflexivity holding myself accountable to those engaged in the research (Absolon & Willett, 2005). Throughout my 3.5-year PhD journey my positionality did not remain static, and I suggest it was fluid, with progression, and constant transitions and transformations. In keeping with a reflexive approach and the focus of my research, play is integrated throughout the dissertation through use of images, quotes, reflexive practice, and play-based methods in data collection and analysis. Although the dissertation is focused on the Emerging Researchers' play, I weave in critical reflexivity on my own relationship with play during the research data collection process and as part of the analysis and writing. I highlight how moments at play, such as running in trails and painting, supported clearer thinking, greater reflections, and a playful mindset on themes emerging, and my ability to move forward in my writing.

Figure 1.1 Playing with emerging themes in data with paint

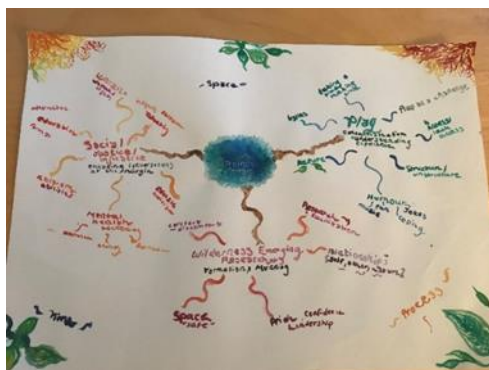


Figure 1.2 Playing in nature for clear thinking and refresh prior to finalising edits and sending my supervisors my draft dissertation



1.2 Research Aim and Questions

The aim of this dissertation is to explore the role of play-based research within the research process and its effect on young researchers' lives.

Research questions:

1. How do young researchers experience, conceptualise, and embody play?
2. What are the individual and relational experiences of play-based research, for young researchers within the research process?
3. How does play-based research affect young researchers' exploration of social issues in their lives?

This dissertation is located within 'childhood studies' – an umbrella term that includes social science sub-fields relating to childhood (Punch, 2020), such as sociology, anthropology, and children's geographies. Since the new sociology of childhood emerged in the 1980s emphasising the social construction of childhood (James & Prout, 2015), and since the advancement across disciplines, the field has been commonly referred to as childhood studies (Punch, 2020). Certain forms of childhood studies recognise childhood as a social construct with children conceptualised as active and competent social actors who are players in their own childhoods.

While situated in childhood studies, the research aims to go beyond some of the critique of childhood studies (e.g. Leena Alanen, Baraldi, de Coninck-Smith, Laoire, & Tisdall, 2018; D. T. Cook et al., 2018) to have a more 'disruptive impact' on challenging adult-centrism within the play-based research process, and to move away from a 'complacent and uncritical' field (Tisdall & Punch, 2012, p. 251).

1.3 Methodology

To answer the research questions, I used a play-based research approach with ten young-people researchers aged 15 to 20 years old. I gave them the title 'Wilderness Emerging Researchers'. The Wilderness Emerging

Researchers were introduced to play-based research tools that combine physical play, art, theatre, and nature and build from experiential learning models. Ten young people (four she/her, six he/him) were trained as Wilderness Emerging Researchers with seven (three she/her, four he/him) being keen (and having time) to move on to plan, lead play-based research with children, and reflect on the process. The 'between spaces' of this play-based research were particularly valuable for recognising and fostering the blend of structured play and unstructured play that emerges within the research.

Context

The research was carried out with young people who were alumni from an organisation that works and plays on the traditional territory of the unceded land of the W̱SÁNEĆ (Sanich), Lkwungen (Songhees), Wyomilth (Esquimalt) peoples of the Coast Salish Nation. In English, these areas together are also known as Greater Victoria, an area of Vancouver Island in British Columbia, Canada. The location was selected based on my previous work experience and partnerships in Canada and based on its applicability in relation to research questions. The decision to conduct the research on the island was determined by the community-based partner who I had volunteered with as a committee member (a committee of the third sector board) and who had active programming where children and young people could be invited to engage as play-based researchers (also known as Wilderness Emerging Researchers).

The organisation I partnered with creates access to nature for youth, families, and adults living with cognitive, physical, financial and social barriers. The values of the organisation are: integrity, play, adventure, gratitude, diversity and inclusion, and the environment. The organisation's programmes include adaptive outdoor recreation (e.g. snowshoeing, canoeing, nature walks) designed to be inclusive for persons with physical and cognitive disabilities,

and mental health issues, and wilderness school. The Wilderness School Programme works with young people from grade 8 to 10 (ages 13 to 15) living with financial and/or social barriers, to support them to develop relationships and strengthen interpersonal skills within a small cohort through regular outdoor programming.

Alumni from the Wilderness School Programme were invited to act as Wilderness Emerging Researchers to be trained on, contextualise, plan, and lead research with other young people using play-based research approaches to explore wellbeing. While I was active in supporting the Emerging Researchers to lead their research through training, being available for questions, resources, and more, this dissertation was focused on the Emerging Researchers themselves and *not* on the research conducted by the Emerging Researchers. As such, each member of our research team was active on a project, mine being my PhD dissertation and the Emerging Researchers their collective play-based research facilitation on wellbeing and play.

1.4 Terminology

This section provides an overview of a few key terms that will be used throughout the dissertation: young people, Wilderness Emerging Researchers, play-based research, and participatory research.

1.4.1 Young People

This dissertation uses the term ‘young people’ to refer to people in the study who are under 18 years of age (aligned with the UNCRC definition of children). This phrase respects the reality that many older children, as per the children in this study, prefer the category ‘young people’ to ‘children’. Ages and age ranges are complex when defining differences between childhood, youth, young adulthood, and adulthood (Wyness, 2006). In this research, young researchers were between the ages of 15 and 20, and thus the 18 to 20-year-olds were also considered young people, and young participants

(who participated in research led by the young researchers) were between the ages of 13 and 18.

1.4.2 Wilderness Emerging Researchers (Emerging Researchers)

This dissertation uses the term ‘Wilderness Emerging Researchers’ (hereinafter ‘Emerging Researchers’) as a title for the young researchers who were trained in play-based research, and most of whom went on to design the research approach, and lead research with young people in their community. The name was originally developed by myself in consultation with the research partner. It was then introduced to the young people upon recruitment to garner their perspective on the name and determine if they wanted to modify it or develop a new name. The young people felt that it aligned with their focus (as previously being named ‘wilderness school participants’) and that it did not overemphasise their categorical age-based positioning as ‘children’ or ‘young people’. The name seeks to respect the Emerging Researchers as human beings with valuable contributions, expertise, and lived experiences who are emerging as researchers.

1.4.3 Play-based Research

To carry out my research, I used a play-based research process. I employ the term ‘play-based research’ to refer to the inclusion of play in research. This involves research that integrates any form of play into one or more steps of the research process and that facilitates opportunities for play to emerge organically throughout.

Play may include acts of play (e.g. tossing a ball, playing a game), playful moments (e.g. jokes), feelings of play, or other forms. Play, as explored in the literature review, is conceptualised, experienced, and understood differently across children, young people, and adults and across sectors and disciplines. The term play-based research builds from arts-based research that acts as a form of qualitative research referring to the use/reflection of art during the research process (Knowles & Cole, 2008). My focus here is not to define what play is, ‘but rather on exploring the resources and opportunities

that the form affords researchers' (Kuttner, Weaver-Hightower, & Sousanis, 2021, p. 197). Research can be recognised as the creation of new knowledge and/or the use of existing knowledge in a new way to generate methodologies, concepts, ideas, and understandings. Play-based research can be used to collect and elicit data, to document experiences, conceptualisations and understandings, to generate new or explore existing knowledge, to analyse data, and to present and disseminate findings in different formats.

Participatory Research

Participatory approaches for research involving young people are 'de rigueur in social research' (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015, p. 2). These approaches are varied and widespread including different participatory tools that may include art, theatre, play, and creativity. A foundational premise of participatory research is the value given to meaningful participation (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). Participatory research with young people (Christensen & James, 2008; Kellett, 2010), and research by young people, has grown in popularity (Alderson & Morrow, 2011; Lundy, McEvoy & Byrne, 2011), where young people are invited to act as lead researchers or co-researchers (Hunleth, 2011). This research takes a participatory approach recognising its value in much research with young people, yet is not the focus of my analysis. Play-based research, as described above, is the central focus of the research and analysis.

1.5 Structure of Dissertation

I provide a review of the relevant literature in Chapter 2 and situate this dissertation in relation to areas pertinent to the research questions. I begin by introducing literature on conceptualisations and approaches to play from diverse disciplines and sectors. I then explore play-based research approaches with children and young people and a critical reflection on play as a tool and/or a process that emerges when researching with children and young people. I identify the gaps in research and practice and discuss the

focus and research employed in this dissertation. The chapter provides a rationale for the aim of this study.

Chapter 3 presents the methodological approach taken and methods used in this study. I outline my ontological and epistemological stance, and present the rationale for my methodological approach. I introduce reflexivity and my own positionality in its relation to the research design, and provide an overview of the procedural and relational ethics of the research. I provide a clear overview of the analysis process, paying attention to its different dimensions.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 present the findings of this research study. In Chapter 4 I explore play in the lives of the Emerging Researchers. The chapter draws on young people's understandings, experiences, and embodiment of play within their own lives and that of their peers to further develop our understanding of what play entails. I begin by introducing modes of play that were prevalent in the data: play as a challenge and play as humour. I then move to exploring the relationship between 'choice' and access to play in 'making time' and 'taking time' that impacts young people's opportunities for and experience in play.

In Chapter 5, I explore how play-based research affects the Emerging Researchers' experiences of and approaches to relationships. In the first section, I analyse the relationships that Emerging Researchers had with play-based research methods and activities and how these were understood and experienced. I explore their relationships with the play-based methods themselves and in relation to experiences of play. In the second section, I analyse relationships with people in the research formed through play with an emphasis on the Emerging Researchers' relationships with one another, relationships with adult researchers and facilitators, and relationships with community members.

In Chapter 6, I introduce play-based research's role in fostering reflective dialogue on social issues. This chapter seeks to contribute to broader

conversations on the role of play in dialogue. In the first section of this chapter, I analyse the role of play in fostering dialogue on critical social issues in everyday spaces. In the second section, I use the different types of social issues explored among Emerging Researchers as illustrations of the role of play in dialogue on pertinent issues for young people. Thirdly, I explore the role of play in experiences and dialogue around mental health through a critical and mad studies lens, with particular examination of conversations around anxiety, depression, and alcohol use.

Finally, Chapter 7 brings all of the findings chapters together, addresses the research questions, and discusses the implications for academic literature and theory, research, policy, and practice. It supports a growing call for a relational approach to children's participation in research (Hatton 2014; Mannion, 2007) through showing the significant role of play-based research in relationships with people and methods. It highlights how play-based research approaches are valuable for older children and young people, and not only early childhood. It calls for critical reflection and awareness of internalised adultist discredit of play of older children and adults that is perpetuated in social spaces of young researchers impacting their engagement in play. Additionally, it highlights how play in adult and child and young people interaction could foster stronger intergenerational partnerships. Children and young people must be invited to be a part of the design and co-creation of programmes and policies both directly addressing play and/or where play can be built in, so that they align with their conceptualisations of and visions for play. The conclusion shares how findings in this research showed that play's role in peer-to-peer relationships was central for development and deepening of relationships between Emerging Researchers. Connecting with and integrating children and young people's own conceptualisations of play, such as play as a challenge and play as humour, into research methodology, can strengthen the research process and support greater ownership of and relationship with play-based research for young researchers.

Most significantly, this research shines light on new ways of facilitating participatory research that delves into play as a research methodology varying from targeted play-based activities to exploring play in the between spaces and at the margins. Play-based approaches are not merely about using play-based research tools but go beyond, to look at how tools and ways of engaging enable pockets of play, and to reflect on play that emerges during the research process. The dissertation provides an introduction into the huge potential play-based research approaches do and can have in carrying out research with young people, and in its impact for young people's relationships and engagement with social issues.

This chapter has provided an overview of the dissertation providing background context to the rationale for the research, an introduction to the research questions, approach and terminology, and has concluded with an overview of the structure. The next chapter will explore the relevant literature situating the project and identifying research gaps.

Chapter 2 Conceptualising Play and Play-based Research

This dissertation focuses on children and young people's own conceptualisations, experiences, and embodiment of play and play-based research approaches. The chapter begins with an exploration of diverse conceptualisations, approaches, taxonomies, and debates in play, drawing from academic and grey literature to identify core themes and tensions that exist across disciplines and sectors. It moves to introduce embodiment, a central tenet of the dissertation methodology. Next, the chapter introduces participatory research with children and young people prior to delving into play-based research purpose and approaches. It then provides a short review of play and relationships, and play and dialogue. It concludes by highlighting the gaps in literature and introducing the rationale for the focus of this dissertation.

2.1 Conceptualisations of Play

A consensus about play's definition does not exist. It is defined in a range of forms across theories and disciplines, with an even wider array of perspectives on its value, purpose, and form (Hyder, 2005). Lester (2016) critiques the fixation to 'define and classify [play] into exclusive patterns' (p. 16) and the adult obsession with 'trying to work out why we play, what it is, and what it all means' (Lester, 2019, p. 20). Burghardt (2005) asserts a paradox of play in suggesting that it is complex and can 'only be understood through itself' (p. 405), and one's experience with play. The complexity of defining play is prevalent across literature and is recognised by scholars, such as Eberle, Lester, Hyder, Feezel, Russell & Ryall, and Burghardt as a futile exercise for a term that is 'maddeningly imprecise complex and ambiguous' (Eberle, 2014, p. 214). Fler (2009) highlights how there is much debate around what constitutes play and how it is made visible to professionals. There is significant disagreement on the concept of play with researchers and practitioners in different disciplines and sectors taking diverse approaches to studying and understanding play, with questions being

asked: 'is sport play? Can art be play? If we play a musical instrument, can this be included in any definition of play?' (Russell & Ryall, 2015, p. 10). Others seek to create taxonomies of play, developing structured categories that range from life skills (e.g. social, emotional, physical, cognitive) to diverse forms (e.g. creative play, locomotive play, object play, games with rules) across a spectrum (e.g. Hughes, 2002; Parten's Stages of Play, 1929). As such, play is defined, conceptualised, perceived, and categorised in diverse forms across sectors, disciplines, and forms of research without one answer.

Efforts to define play are critiqued for their assumptions of universality and developmental models based on middle-class children of the Western/minority world (Gaskins & Goncu, 1992; Gaskins & Miller, 2009; Goncu, Tuermer, Jain, & Johnson, 1999; Nsamenang, 2013). Research on play has often privileged Western cultural practices, failing to recognise play as culturally specific (Cooney, 2004; Haight, Wang, Fung, Williams, & Mintz, 1999). A universal claim to play also 'ignore[s] the contrasting realities of childhood experiences' (Roopnarine, 2012, p. 20). These normative assumptions fail to recognise play's variations and cultural influences for children across diverse societies (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2001).

In play, there is something 'at play' which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to action; thus, all play means something (Huizinga, 1955). Huizinga (1955) asserts pure play is one of the main bases of civilisation and that play in itself is neither good nor bad. In addition to the lack of awareness and/or shared consensus of what play actually *is*, there are also limitations to understandings and perspectives on how it contributes to wellbeing (and diverse definitions of wellbeing), development, and regular life of young people (IPA, 2010). While many researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers are actively seeking to define and quantify play and its developmental and economic outcomes, others, such as Lester, critique the fixation on determining the identity of play and the desire to 'represent, define and classify [it] into exclusive patterns [reducing the] flow of life to a utilitarian

account in which the movement and trajectory of subjects is already pre-established' (2016, p. 16). Children's and young people's own perspectives on play are infrequently explored and there is a gap in the literature on children's understandings, experiences, and conceptualisation of play, particularly for older children and young people.

Intrinsic play suggests a value of free and spontaneous play in the moment, focusing on what it contributes to a child's life and enjoyment, and not on the outcome. Whereas instrumental play suggests the role of play is to serve a specific or several objectives to reach intended outcomes (Collins & Wright, 2019). Neither suggest a specific definition yet both have different approaches for a supposed purpose of play. This research will seek to move away from the binary dichotomy between intrinsic and instrumental purposes and understandings of play and will not attempt to define play narrowly. Instead, I will seek to embrace its complexity and holistic value and recognise diverse ways of knowing and understanding that are further explored below.

2.1.1 Play and Philosophy

Philosophy, alongside many other disciplines, has long struggled to define play (Russell & Ryall, 2015). Play is influenced by the cultural *zeitgeist* of times and places. Russell and Ryall (2015) critique the philosophy of play in that it is often written by Caucasian males, which affects the application for people of diverse cultures, socio-economic status, ability, and gender. This is problematic as it limits the understanding of play to a particular vantage point failing to recognise diverse lived experiences and intersectionality of children's lives and their play. Sadownik (2017) notes that play is 'strongly connected to the cultures and societies...children are living in' (p. 132). Play can be recognised as a process, not as an abstracted 'thing', and thus those at play are constantly changing (Maclean, Russell, & Ryall, 2021). Fink (1968) introduces a different approach, recognising play as key to human existence. He argues that play resembles an 'oasis' of happiness: 'The purpose of play is not, as with the purposes of the rest of human activities, projected out towards the highest ultimate purpose' and has value in and of

itself (Fink, Saine, & Saine, 1968, p. 9). Schiller writes about play as a unifying impulse (in Larsen, p. 180). Other philosophers contradict those that value play by suggesting that play has no value. For example, Callois, although articulating value of play in other places, asserts that 'play is an occasion of pure waste: waste of time, energy, ingenuity, skill and often money' (2001, pp. 5–6).

2.1.2 Play in Human Development and Learning

A focus on play for development originated in the age of scientific method and positivism, particularly within the psychological sciences. Play in human development has focused on emotional, social, and cognitive development. Erikson and Freud sought to relate play to emotional development (Ellis, 1973; Erikson, 1972). Their emphasis is on how individuals process play experiences in their minds and make meaning of these experiences. Erikson suggests that play supports healthy ways for children to resolve anxieties and thus contributes to emotional development for young people (Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2013). Harvard's Project Zero asserts 'students learn to share ideas, express themselves, negotiate, and reach compromises ... (as well as) balance autonomy, interdependence and collaboration skills' through engaging in play' (2016, n.p). Play has also been linked with self-expression and its role in encouraging children to express positive and negative feelings and to regulate them effectively (Vlaicu, 2014). An emphasis on cognitive development through play was introduced by Piaget and Vygotsky (Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005). According to Piaget (1962) children are on a linear trajectory from infant to adulthood passing through distinct stages of development. This approach expands the social-emotional focus to explore the development of children's thought processes. Different forms of play, such as pretend and construction-based play, have been correlated with improvement of cognitive aptitudes. Vygotsky's (1978) perception of play is centred within a paradigm of progression. In developmental psychology, play is commonly seen as an instrument in children's developmental schema (Larsen, 2015). Play has been considered as 'more than mere indulgence' and as 'essential to children's health and

well-being' (Lester & Russell, 2010, p. 10). Rousseau argued for the importance of play and its role for early educators, as did Pestalozzi, Frobel, and Montessori who stated that play emphasised a notion of *purpose* (Hyder, 2005, p. 14). Since the 1960s, play's role in children's acquisition of life skills has been increasingly well recognised (Tanis, 2012), through a developmental lens (Moyles, 1989). Evidence suggests that 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 wellbeing; 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 (Colucci & Wright, 2015; Duncan & Lockwood, 2008; Farné, 2005; Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2008; 'Play Synthesis,' 2012). Frohlich, Alexander, and Fusco (2013) assert play, in particular free play, is critical for generation of skills and knowledge for successful functioning in social situations and adaptability. Similarly, Paley (2009) argues that play supports the link between cognition, emotional, and social development, and the relationship to understanding the self and other.

While play has been researched and theorised as critical for early childhood development, there is also a critique of using psychological developmental stages for understanding children and their play. Bakhtin (1993) argues that we should move away from trying to 'finalise' children, as can be seen in linear age and stages models, and recognising children as 'becoming' not only from childhood but throughout their whole lives. The developmental approach has been critiqued for its overemphasis on vulnerabilities of the child and their 'construction' (McNair, 2016) also for limiting understandings of play to early years and as a tool of progression into 'rational' adulthood. As such, the developmental psychology model has been challenged as 'adultist', reducing the child to passivity (e.g. Prout, 2005). The development and learning focus places a greater emphasis on instrumental and outcome-based values of play, overlooking intrinsic and process-oriented value of play. Sociologists of childhood have raised significant concerns about the

‘age’ and ‘stage’ ‘developmentalism’ model (Gabriel, 2020). This dissertation operates from a childhood studies theoretical approach and thus moves away from the psychology development framing, while at the same time acknowledging its role and societal implications for my own perceptions and experiences and that of the young people involved as researchers.

2.1.3 Play and Wellbeing

Play has been considered an essential part of a child's psychosocial wellbeing and as an outlet for children to express and process their emotions to adverse situations. Bradshaw, Hoelscher, and Richardson (2007) suggest that while playing children are able to create their own wellbeing. Additionally, others, such as Russell and Lester (2010) posit play as self-protection, which provides the possibility for children to strengthen adaptive competences and resilience. Tyrer and Fazel's (2014) systematic review with asylum seeking and refugee children shows that creative arts-based interventions (including play) may reduce relational and emotional challenges, post-traumatic stress, and depression symptoms, while improving wellbeing.

Play can be viewed instrumentally for supporting children to recover a sense of normalcy and joy after loss, dislocation, and trauma (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013) to support children to cope with stress, trauma, and anxiety connected with emergency contexts (Chatterjee, 2018), and to aid in social reintegration of children who have experienced conflict. Humanitarian programmatic studies, such as Cook's (2015) exploration of a Right To Play Mali programme, suggest that play enhances mind-body connection, social bonding, community engagement and support with overcoming social challenges, fostering a sense of agency, and social activism. Problem-solving skills acquired through play have been considered a predictor of resilience to enhance resolution of life challenges (Boyden & Mann, 2005; Fok & Wong, 2005; Grotberg, 2001; Place, Reynolds, Cousins, & O'Neill, 2002). Although an array of practical, anecdotal, and theoretical evidence on play and sport programmes' role in psychosocial wellbeing exist, there is a dearth of empirical evidence to support such claims (Henley, Schweizer, De Gara, &

Vetter, 2007) and minimal acknowledgement of children's perspectives and leadership role on the value of play and its contributions to their own wellbeing. As such, my research will seek to contribute to the sector through its exploration of play, young people led research (and child participation), relationships, and mental wellbeing from children's and young people's perspectives.

2.1.4 Play: A Rights-based Approach

Play can also be viewed using a rights-based approach which connects with children's participation rights, both of which are central to this dissertation. The right to play is affirmed in Article 31 of the UNCRC. General Comment 17 on Article 31 further acknowledges and advances how play's realisation is fundamental to:

the quality of childhood, to children's entitlement to optimum development, to the promotion of resilience and to the realization of other rights. Indeed, environments in which play and recreational opportunities are available to all children provide the conditions for creativity; opportunities to exercise competence through self-initiated play enhances motivation, physical activity and skills development

(Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013, para 3.1)

Shackel (2015) argues that despite evidence that play is beneficial and a vehicle to support the realisation of other children's rights, Article 31 – a child's right to play and leisure – continues to be one of the most neglected rights of the child. David (2006) asserts that a UNICEF

analysis of the 98 country-based concluding observations adopted by the Committee between 2000 and 2004 shows that in only 15 countries the CRC Committee addressed the contents of Article 31 (less than 15%), often in a very brief and scattered manner' (p. 17). Rest, play, leisure and culture are disparaged and regarded 'as a luxury rather than a necessity of life' (Hodgkin & Newell, 2007, p. 469)

in 'comparison to other rights whose violations bear [crueller], visible, and spectacular consequences(p. 13).

A global consultation on children's right to play, undertaken by the International Play Association (IPA) in 2010, referred to the fact that Article 31 is often considered as 'the forgotten article of the UN Convention' on the Rights of the Child (IPA, 2010, p. 4). The lack of focus on and support for play poses critical challenges to young people's access to and experience of play. The literature could further explore the interconnection between the right to play and its relationship with children's own perceptions of play and their meaningful participation in the process.

2.1.5 Play and Children and Young People's Meaningful Participation

Child participation is defined by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (in GC 12) 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' (2009, p. 5). The UNCRC includes a set of participation clauses (art.12.1, art 13.1, art 14.1, art. 15.1, art. 17.1) that require adults to recognise children as right holders who can meaningfully participate in decision making about their lives. A range of models for meaningful child participation exist globally including, but not limited to, Hart's Ladder of Participation (Hart, 1992), first developed for adult's participation by Sherry Arnstein (1969); Treseder's Degrees of Participation (Treseder, 1997); Shier's Pathways to Participation (Shier & Train, 2001); Kirby and colleagues (2003) Model of Participation; and Lundy's Model of Participation (Lundy, 2007). While there is now 'no shortage ... of literature on children and young people's participation' (Mcmellon & Tisdall, 2020, p. 162) there is a wide array of conceptualisations, understandings, and challenges in and for participation. There are a variety of positions on whether children should lead as autonomous beings, whether there should be intergenerational partnerships with adults, or whether young people

should be engaged at all. For example Collins, Rizzini, and Mayhew (2021) argue participation benefits from ‘collectivity, rather than isolation of age groups and individuals’ (p. 301). Diverse perspectives exist across majority and minority world contexts with several Latin American authors framing participation as intergenerational and relational collective action (Collins et al., 2021). McMellon and Tisdall (2020) posit that participation rights are radical, innovative, and challenging because they question ‘traditional’ views of children as dependent, incompetent, and vulnerable. Barriers to and challenge for participation exist at legal, political, ethical, and practical levels. Participation theorists emphasise the importance of context (Johnson, 2011), relationality (Tisdall & Punch, 2012), and institutional realities (Hart, 2008).

Several academics argue that play can contribute to children’s meaningful participation. Jones and Walker (2011) posit skills acquired through play strengthen children’s meaningful participation (child-led, collaborative, and consultative) in decision-making processes, which impacts children’s abilities to be active social agents in their own lives (Wright, 2018). Tanis (2012) asserts that play is a full-body experience that interconnects movement, involves our senses, evokes our emotions, and engages our spirituality. Play has been seen to contribute to critical life skills development, such as collaboration, cooperation, problem-solving, and communication skills (Miller & Almon, 2011). It is suggested that learning through play fosters opportunities for children to be able to recognise themselves as agents of change (Freire, 1970), increasing their likelihood to take action due to an enhanced sense of personal agency (Bandura, 1999). Colucci and Wright (2015) state the ‘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’ (p. 7). Thus it has been argued that through play, ‘children are able to acquire core life skills to strengthen their leadership competencies, and use play itself as a tool to communicate critical issues pertaining to children in their communities’ (Collins & Wright, 2019, p. 20).

Wall (2013) recommends the term 'childism' as an approach understanding children's play (p. 261). Akin to feminism, he calls for a political goal to effectively understand and engage with children's agency to 'deconstruct the ways in which agency and participation across societies assume a basis in experiences of adulthood' and to reconstruct the meaning of these terms to align with children's particular experiences (Wall, 2013, pp. 33–34). Lester (2013) demands we think about play differently and 'revitalise the very notion of participation' (p. 22). Additionally, he critiques the individualised notions of participation that can 'merely ratify adult decisions and give credibility to paternalistic actions rather than contribute to any transformation of provision and spaces' (Lester, 2013, p. 27). Play can be seen as a form of 'minor politics in which children momentarily take control over the conditions of their lives' (Lester, 2013, p. 28) and disrupt order (Lester, 2016). These playful spaces, Lester (2013) contends, can 'transform bordered space into participatory spaces' (p. 29) where children are able to move way from structured adult proscribed spatial demands. While structured playgrounds and play spaces highlight control over children's spatial movements (Gagen, 2000), the act of play itself and disruption of order can support radical participation and aid young people in reclaiming 'adult' spaces for themselves (Biddle, 2017).

Play as an expression of children's own political agency can expand our understanding of participation, to value participation in the daily lives of young people and the 'construction of their own worlds' (Lester, 2013, p. 34). Further, Bennet (2010) suggests children's play creations are moments of political participation present in everyday life that have the scope to be more powerful than the politics of adults. While literature on the value of play from a human development lens on life skills is prevalent, greater research is needed from a childhood studies perspective and Lester and others' seminal insights on play as a political space and place for children and young people's meaningful participation and decision-making process. These seemingly 'radical' ideas of play as political and its role in participation inform

my research with young people leading play-based research and its implications for their engagement in research and community.

2.1.6 Play and Humour

While not often thought of as a form of play, Loizou (2005) asserts that humour is closely related to play. Others, such as, McGhee and Goldstein (1983) suggest that humour is a playful activity between people who have developed relationships and can be seen as intellectual play (McGhee, 1984), where people are able to play with ideas together. Further, Mannel and Mchmahon (2009) believe humour is a valuable shared form of playfulness for social encounters. Humour, used to explore difficult life experiences, could be seen as what McDermott and Lenters (2019) refer to as a jolt, 'embodied and causing pause' to 'reorient ourselves to our worlds' and move beyond complacency of the way things are within young people's lived realities (p. 13). Humour can also act as 'boundary play' for young people to support them to make sense of their worlds (McDermott & Lenters, 2019). It is also suggested to have a social role (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988) and physiological and embodied process. McDermott and Lenters (2019) note that humour can be 'daring', likening it with the idea of play as a challenge, and opens potential for pushing boundaries and engagement. Additionally, humour has been perceived as a form of 'cognitive playfulness' (Ziv, 1989), somewhat similar to intellectual play, where it can shift one's frame of mind. Rossing (2016) attends to humour's intensities as a 'line of flight' from normative order, which acts as a mode to play within this dissertation. As such, humour is explored in its relation to play recognising the gap on the exploration of humour as a form of play in the literature.

2.1.7 Access and Opportunity to Play

Older children and young people are required to regularly 'negotiate between their more expansive, playful subjectivities and the denial or repression' of these (Ferguson, 2017, p. 130). Play is often considered an activity of childhood with play in adulthood being stigmatised (Nicholson & Shimpi, 2015). Woodyer (2012) recommends that play should be liberated from only

being focused on children. While the value of play is prevalent in early childhood literature and somewhat in middle years, play for older children and young people is less frequently cited in research or advocated for in children's rights and childhood studies spaces. Young people themselves may internalise child and young-people oppression and perceive play as trivial and 'childlike' in their endeavours to be accepted in adult spaces (L. H. V. Wright, 2018). In a study done with young people in early adulthood, a lack of time was identified to engage in leisure (play) activities (Batchelor, Fraser, Whittaker, & Li, 2020). It was noted that technically time existed, yet the sense of guilt for 'productivity' implied a concern about 'wasting time' playing making leisure a precarious area of social life (Batchelor et al., 2020). While access to leisure is often explored in relation to poverty, socio-economic status, and discrimination, which holds importance in play, this dissertation explores access more in relation to gaps for older children and young people, as well as societal perceptions and young people's internalised oppression of play experiences.

2.1.8 Section Conclusion

In this literature-analysis section on play, the definitions, understandings of, and approaches to play have been explored across theoretical disciplines and briefly in relation to play as humour, access, participation, and psychosocial wellbeing. The literature highlighted a lack of consistent definitions and understandings of play and a need to move away from a narrow framing of play. Play is recognised for its contribution to development of social and emotional life skills, such as self-efficacy, self-confidence, and team-building that support meaningful participation. While play's contribution to participation from a developmental model is supported through literature, further research on play's role in meaningful participation from diverse disciplines, such as that of Lester's (2013) introduction of play as a political space, would add value to the sector. Limited literature was available on young people's perspectives, understandings, and conceptualisation of play. Literature focused on specific programmatic examples with few larger research studies available. As such, greater research is needed that does not

confine play to linear definitions and development models, and that explores an array of perspectives, particularly from children and young people themselves with diverse lived experiences.

2.2 Embodiment

Embodiment literature is critical for conceptualising the full mind and body process of play and play-based research. Embodiment literature cuts across disciplinary and sectoral boundaries with diverse approaches to theoretical framing and research. Embodiment scholars explore an array of subjects, including, but not limited to, disability, sport, creativity, body shape health, and sexuality (Kwan & Haltom, 2019). Embodiment literature has critiqued the separation of mind and body that uses Cartesian dualism to favour the 'rational mind' over one's 'irrational body' (Lester, 2019, p. 43). For example, Lester (2019) critiques the Cartesian model that constructs a binary hierarchy of mind over body contributing to a child development ideology that presents children as irrational, needy, and dependent on cultivated rational adults (p. 43). Also, in opposition to the mind-body separation, Pink (2011) writes of embodiment as a concept that dissolves a distinction between the 'sensuous experiencing body and the rational mind' (p. 345). Academics, such as Lambert (2020), explore how movement stories and experiences linger in/on our bodies after we experience them and can aid people in making sense of themselves, their bodies, and the places and people surrounding them. Similarly, Spray (2020) proclaims that the embodied child is learning to be in body and making their own knowledge from experiences. An embodiment theory, Merleau-Ponty (1962) suggests, can shift the vantage point to subjective experience and sensations of the body, and Malecki, Rhodes, and Usher (2018) argue an embodied framework explores the sensory and physical processes and the realm of self. Others proclaim that bodies are always in action and never fully bound (Harrison, 2000; Woodyer, 2008). While subtle differences exist across vantage points on the embodied experience, the authors referenced in this section engaging in embodiment predominantly critique the mind-body separation and explore the interactions and sensory experiences of the embodied self.

Diverse perspectives exist on people's own role in their embodiment. Foucault's work on the socially constructed body and power relations explores how the body enters into a social definition (Shilling, 1993). Fiset (2011) highlights how bodies may be adapted or controlled depending on the power that exists. For children and young people who experience power-struggles with adults and discrimination, power that is held by adults and privileged bodies could have a significant impact on children's embodied experiences. Azzarito and Sterling (2010) argue that children's (dis)engagement with their bodies may be due to (lack of) opportunities and the educational, social, and economic resources that are (un)available to them, thus also highlighting the gaps in relation to body due to discrimination/limited power within their social systems. Scraton and Watson (1998) posit that spatial dimensions of one's body within socially constructed spaces inform youths' ways of both being and becoming in spaces. As such, if children's spatial dimensions are constrained, their being and becoming in spaces may be impacted. Aligned with the above literature, Datta (2008) argues young people's physicality is displayed, constructed, and regulated by micro-practices their bodies regularly perform in society.

Brown, Cromby, Harper, Johnson, and Reavey (2011) assert researching embodiment adequately means making central our embodied participation in the research process. Kwan and Haltom (2019) recommend the use of qualitative methods to enable embodiment researchers to engage in embodiment practices. Games and art processes, it is suggested, as a form of play in research, can contain, through embodiment, a space for stories to emerge for participants who then filter games through their own personal life experiences (Vettraino, Linds, & Jindal-Snape, 2017). Research on young people engagement with physical culture offers possibilities for revealing young peoples' embodiment as emplaced in the localities of their everyday lives (Azzarito & Sterling, 2010). Researching embodiment is recognised as difficult to do justice to as researchers frequently are 'forced to reduce these stories to words on paper; as interview transcriptions ... or fragments of narrative' diminishing the essence of embodiment and movement central to

play (Lisahunter & Emerald, 2016, p. 29). Cherrington and Watson (2010) further this argument by highlighting that researchers often think and write in language which is inadequate to capture embodied and sensuous aspects of life. Humberstone (2011) argues that 'despite the centrality of embodied experience with sports' (p. 497) (and arguably play) little research has been able to communicate the complexity of the emotion and sensual aspects of the experience. Wheaton (2010) also highlights the lack of research to communicate the entwined nature of the 'acting, perceiving, thinking and feeling body' (p. 1071), which is central to the play experience.

Contrary to written forms of research, Lisahunter and Emerald (2016) point to the role of arts-based, audio-visual, mobile, multisensory, and spatial methods to explore the boundaries of language in research. Similarly, Sparkes (2017) and Warren (2008) highlight the emotional, sensual, and kinaesthetic complexities arts methodologies and research practices can capture, while introducing the methodological challenges at the same time. An array of examples, from Mandala drawings (Blodgett et al., 2013) to graphic elicitation, to painting and drawing (McMahon, MacDonald, & Owton, 2017) about or expressing embodied experiences, are emerging. Gravestock (2010) suggests that art forms are an embodied endeavour, which fosters a dialectic interaction, yet fewer examples exist on the role of play in the embodied research process. Küpers (2017) argues for research to be more 'multi', 'inter', and 'trans'-disciplinary to allow for playful inter-practice for embodiment research. Küpers (2017) introduces the use of videography to both collect and analyse embodied processes. The examples, however, often do focus on people's interpretation of the researchers' interpretations of others' art and thus contradict advocacy for less of the written formats. This leaves further room for more research that explores play-based approaches to researching embodiment that go beyond text-based requirements.

2.3 Participatory Research

Play-based research uses a participatory research approach. In childhood and youth studies literature, participatory approaches of research involving

young people ‘have become de rigueur’ (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015, p. 2) where participatory research with young people (Christensen & James, 2008; Kellett, 2010), and research by young people, has grown in popularity (Alderson & Morrow, 2011; Lundy, McEvoy, & Byrne, 2011). These approaches are varied at different phases (e.g. design, data collection, data analysis, knowledge engagement) in the research process and exist across diverse fields such as childhood studies, youth studies, children’s rights, education, communication, health sciences, criminology, child and youth care, and others. Participatory research has included children and youth as part of consultations, acting as lead researchers or co-researchers (e.g. Cuevas-Parra & Tisdall, 2019; Hunleth, 2011; Lee, Currie, Saied, & Wright, 2020) and engaging in participatory advisory groups (Collins et al., 2020). While young people as researchers are becoming increasingly recognised and valued and ‘research *on* children has lost favour’ (Willumsen, Hugaas, & Studsrød, 2014, p. 346), several academics caution against and critique a panacea normative presumption that participation is inherently ‘good’ or ‘valued’ (Davidson, 2017; Tisdall, 2018; Willumsen et al., 2014). A rhetoric of considering children as experts is used to justify children’s participation with researchers sometimes expecting child participants to have levels of awareness that adults may not even hold (Spray, 2020). Children’s participation in participatory methods, while highly lauded must also be critically reflected to explore the value of its use for children and young people themselves and the research. Without critical reflection the research community with children and young people runs risk of being contrary to the desired intentions of meaningful engagement and perpetuating adultist forms of working with children and young people.

2.4 Play-based Research

The term play-based/playful research and its explicit use has only emerged in a few studies (e.g. Campo, Baldassarre, & Lee, 2018; Koller & San Juan, 2015; Zero Paper, 2016). Diverse accounts of what ‘counts’ as play exist across the limited research using play, with different assumption being made on what play ‘is’ or entails. Atkinson (2006) suggests that playful research

techniques create rich information in unexpected ways and support relationships between young people and adults. Campo and colleagues (2018) provide insights into play-based research yet their focus appears to be somewhat rigid and structured linking with the gamification of a play-based research process. In Project Zero, Harvard University is exploring playful research approaches in their work with adults who utilise play-based pedagogy in education. Literature on their approach is limited at present and only provides a brief summary of reviewing playful approaches. Others, such as Koller and San Juan (2015), have used play-based interviews that included time to play with materials prior to and during the interview to build rapport with the intention of reducing inherent power imbalances. While an interview may not be traditionally a participatory research approach, their intention to integrate play highlights a desire to shift the interview method to be more playful. Underwood and colleagues (2015) also used play-based interviews as a tool, through introducing the approach with three- to five-year-olds with disabilities, to explore capabilities. While both pieces of literature focused on a play base they were for a particular form of qualitative research (i.e. interviews), not participatory methods more broadly, and focus specifically on research with early years' children. Through experimental research on the playification of research, Campo and colleagues (2019) argue that a play approach in research could be a 'milestone in conceiving a new a way to research with children' due to the potential play has in supporting research dialogue, their emphasis being on pre-schoolers (p. 122). In Urbina-Garcia's (2019) systematic literature review exploring methodological approaches to listening to children's voices in research, the results showed that activities and materials are becoming more creative with the materials referenced being playful tools (e.g. puppets, pictures, play-based activities, photos, drawing, and community walking). Several studies that had used discussion groups in the review referenced creative and play-based activities to foster active participation. Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles and Rousell (2020) developed a co-research play space to foster opportunity for children and young people to act as 'para-academic researchers' where

children can move away from normative research approaches and create their own forms of co-creation and critical reflection. While these studies contribute to ideas of play-based research, the articles reviewed (except for a couple that spoke to play-based interviews) did not use play-based research as an explicit methodology and all were focused on early years (e.g. three- to seven-year-olds) leaving a gap in knowledge on play-based methodologies for older children and young people.

2.4.1 Play in Research: Play for ‘Purpose’

As explored in the play section of this literature review, play is conceptualised diversely across sectors and disciplines. It is critiqued for being instrumentalised in developmental psychology, education, and medical spaces as outcome-oriented towards particular health and wellbeing outcomes (Frohlich et al., 2013) and valuing some forms over others (Russell, Fitzpatrick, & Handscomb, 2020). It is further critiqued for viewing play with purpose for progress (Pellegrini, 1995) instead of being valued in its own right. Sørensen and Spoelstra (2012) ask if play is a richer phenomenon than functional instrumentalised understandings of it. Küpers (2017) provocatively goes on to suggest that ‘using’ play can colonise individuals’ inner lives by equating it with performativity and productivity. Similarly, Rosen (2017) argues that even spaces that disguise themselves as free play participate in a neoliberal pedagogy of producing particular forms of human capital that reduces play to an instrumentalised construct. In Graber and colleagues’ (2020) rapid review of literature on play in pandemics, the literature highlighted play being used as a tool for outcomes. As such, critiques of the instrumentalisation of play raise concerns about the risk of play being ‘used’ for particular means, often in relation to a neoliberal construct of development and performativity.

2.4.1.1 Play-based Methods for Research Outcomes

In research, play can be instrumentalised as a tool to extract data from children and young people and to achieve a particular outcome or results. For example, Kronick and colleagues (2018) used sand play to capture

voices of migrant children and understand their experiences. Graber and colleagues (2020) suggest that play-based data collection methods could act as an effective means for supporting children to share their perspectives and lived experiences. A push against an outcome-oriented emphasis does exist (e.g. Campo et al., 2018) through playification of research which ‘indicates a playful attitude’ instead of a game as a particular output. However, even in Campo, Baldassare, and Lee’s (2018) article, language such as ‘when dealing with children’ is used (p.121) suggesting play as a tool to ‘deal with children’ for a particular outcome. In the literature on play-based interviews, explored above, there was a subtlety that playtime occurred prior to interviews in order to gather data from children. Even when embedded, as with Campo, Baldassare, and Lee’s (2018) claim of play as an integral part of design, play is still being used for a particular purpose of research, with intentions to achieve an outcome. As this dissertation is exploring play-based research approaches, it begs the question, is play as a tool inherently ‘bad’ or negative, and, are there ways it is, or can exist for, purpose and process, with honesty on intentionality in partnership with young people?

Play is prevalent in an array of participatory research approaches and in creative and arts-based research methods, while not explicitly referred to as play-based research. Arts-based research and creative research are increasingly growing in popularity. Arts-based research methods are becoming more predominant in enabling diverse forms of participant expression, restorative, empowering, and therapeutic qualities (Leavy, 2015), and for addressing children’s emotional wellbeing (Hamilton & Moore, 2004). Leigh (2020) suggests that creative methods are enabling and revealing more honest stories than traditional methods. Although scholarship exists on the value of art methods in research with children and young people (Theron et al., 2011), particularly for those who have experienced global adversity, data on the value of using many art techniques in research as a therapeutic process is often anecdotal (D’Amico, Denov, Khan, Linds, & Akesson, 2016; Gantt & Tinnin, 2009). Fletcher and colleagues (2016) argue that physical engagement through play fosters intimacy and disrupts ‘restrictive norms that

tend to limit creativity and expression in many adult-designed workshops, and encourages playfulness' (p. 98). Play-based activities (e.g. Magic Carpet ride where a group collaborates to flip a tarp while standing on it) they argue, act to build trust and support relational development between young people and adult researchers. Fairchild and McFerran (2019), through collaborative group song-writing, claim that music can allow for full participation and contribution through creative modes without a need for verbal or written communication. While the literature was written as 'arts-based', intersections between art and play are important, recognising that forms of art (e.g. painting, song-writing, and photography) are often also considered as acts of play by academics, practitioners, and children and young people researching, supporting, and engaging in play.

2.4.1.2 Play as a Tool in Participatory Approaches

Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) suggest that 'participatory action research is emancipatory [in its] aims to help people recover, and release themselves, from the constraints of irrational, unproductive, unjust, and unsatisfying social structures that limit their self-development and self-determination' (p. 597). PAR has also been posited as a 'decolonizing' research method with the power of healing and social justice (Chilisa, 2012, p. 251), and provides an ethical approach for collecting data on sensitive subject matter, such as trauma. In participatory research and PAR projects, cooperative and challenge-based games, drawings, drama, and other playful approaches are frequently used to engage diverse young people and appeal to their interests. Wijnendaele (2011) suggests that cooperative games can support young people to 'open up' and be motivated to talk about issues, and alternative methods allow young people to express themselves diversely. The 'use' of play as a tool for achieving particular outcomes, as within this research, requires critique. Several researchers are starting to seek to address the data-driven focus by also exploring art and play's potential for young people and the approaches as 'interventions for research participants' to improve health and wellbeing (e.g. D'Amico et al., 2016). This could still be considered outcome-focused marrying the research and practice purpose-

driven 'use' of art and play, yet it also expands to engage with both process and purpose of play.

2.4.2 Play on the Margins: Unstructured or Planned

This section examines between spaces of unplanned play forms that emerge within the research space with and by young people. These consist of diverse forms, such as 'hanging out' (Pyry & Tani, 2019), sharing jokes, 'chilling', and emergent areas of play designed or explored by young people themselves. A few researchers in participatory youth spaces identify a need for commitment to relationality and allowing time and space for young people to get to know one another through informal processes (e.g. music, food, and play) (Goessling, 2020). Goessling (2020) noted that young people expressed a desire to stop doing 'research' and to just 'hang out with you and our group and take pictures' (p. 22) in her research. The very act of hanging out, Pyry (2015) and Stevens (2007) suggest, is a form of play and should be valued accordingly. Pyry and Tani (2019) argue this hanging out/dwelling playful space is pertinent for young people's participation and should not be 'determined by its intentionality or outcomes' (p. 1229). This idea of playful between spaces can also relate to concepts of fun that support group cohesion (e.g. Fine & Corte, 2017) and that are often trivialised and not taken seriously. However, Wright, Tisdall, and Moore (2021) argue that fun is something valuable that goes beyond 'engagement for data' and that can emerge accidentally in the breaks alongside the "rigorous" research activities. Thus, fun can evoke emotion that support value in process itself and in outcomes within research. Pyry and Tani (2019) suggest that playful moments of hanging out deepen young people's relationships with one another and in the spaces they are engaged in. Cele (2013) goes on to argue chilling and hanging out allow for reflection and complex forms of socialisation. Lester and Russell (2014) assert that play without being attributed to utilitarian or instrumental developmental purposes allows for more fluid forms of expression across life and with attention on the moment. While acknowledging the value of this between space, do we run the risk of the instrumentalising of young people's practices and alternative hanging out

spaces, 'such as graffiti, skateboarding gear, or "girl power" to incorporate back into the neoliberal system [selling] back to a larger audience?' (Pyry & Tani, 2019, p. 1228). Or, in research, does this allow for a hybridity of a purpose (a research project with questions and a need for data of some sort), without pre-determined answers or a particular hypothesis, thus respecting the process and emergences of play and child- and young person-led processes?

2.5 Relationships in Research

Play in the research process appears to be highly relational with others, the self, and play-based materials surrounding young people. Horgan (2017) posits participatory research with young people as a 'relational process which involves generational and power differentials' (p. 247). Reich and colleagues (2017) suggest that developing meaningful relations in research is both messy and challenging and thus will explore the complexity alongside the strengths in these processes. Akin to Wilson (2008) the research explores relational accountability and its pertinence in any research process.

Davidson's research (2017) exposes the importance of adopting a dynamic relational process in working with young people in research. Davidson (2017) reported that, in her research with young people, games, jokes and playful exchanges 'were the mainstay of [her] relationship with participants' (p. 236). Richards-Schuster and Timmermans (2017) highlight the value of young people knowing that adults are available to 'step back in if need' and recognising the trust and understanding of young people and adults to negotiate these roles. This aligns with literature (e.g. Cuevas-Parra & Tisdall, 2019) that argues for adults' role to provide support and facilitation but *not* to control young people-led research. Additionally, Lee and colleagues (2020) caution against romanticised notions that young people should lead every aspect of the research, as this may actually impede their ability to excel. An intergenerational approach forefronts young people as research leaders, while recognising the role of adults' engagement in the space.

Relationships also go beyond human-to-human interactions and are prevalent in human and non-human interactions as well, in research. Bennet (2010) explores human and non-human affective relations, arguing that 'things' can be brought to life by humans and yet that things may also generate effects on humans as a relationship between the non-human and human world forms. Indigenous literature introduced an ontology that includes non-human agency and the 'more than' human-to-human relationships (e.g. Couthard, 2014; Martin, 2017, Watts, 2013), prior to that of waves of new materialism. Chappell and colleagues (2019) suggest that a dialogue between human and 'other than' human players allows for a creative process and deeper relationship to emerge. Barad (2003) further notes human bodies and art works (which could be likened to the relationship between human bodies and nature/research methods) are an entanglement that can be incorporated and interwoven into one's very being. The relationship literature on human and non-human beings interconnects with the embodiment literature, explored earlier in this literature review, play as dialogue explored below, and relationships with methods. While not explored in depth in this literature review, young people's relationship to the nonmaterial world (e.g. nature and research methods themselves) warrant further exploration and are highlighted in the dissertation.

2.6 Play and Dialogue

'Play can be the beginning of a conversation (dialogue)' (Berger & Zezulko, 2018, p. 67) in everyday spaces on critical social issues. Zimmerman and Morgan (2011) suggest play 'arises a dialogue that invites us to elaborate our capacity for expression' (p. 50). Art forms have been used to 'generate dialogue by creating temporary or permanent social spaces' to connect in ways to change how people see themselves and social situations in order to raise social consciousness (Bell & Desai, 2011, p. 289). Elwood and Mitchell (2012) suggest that young people's dialogue of the everyday can constitute an important space for their own politics as well as their formation as political actors. This aligns with Woodyer's (2012) assertion that play can provide an opportunity to critically reflect on everyday experiences

by providing young people with moments to rupture and transform normative ways of being and doing. It has also been noted that visual representation used in combination with methodologies that elicit conversation can support young people to effectively engage in dialogue around sensitive issues and convey components of their lives (Leitch, 2008). Rosen (2017) argues that the characteristics of play offer a space for collectively exploring and gaining insights on issues that matter for participants. While play looks at its role in dialogue as word based, it is important to recognise play as a dialogue itself without words being used and to reflect on its non-verbal forms of expression and communication for children and young people.

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter introduced literature on conceptualisations and approaches to play from diverse disciplines and sectors. Additionally, it explored play-based research approaches with children and young people and a critical reflection on play as a tool and/or a process that emerges when researching with children and young people. The review has introduced diverse theories from across disciplines (namely psychology, philosophy, child rights, and childhood studies), taxonomies, categorisations, and approaches to play and has highlighted the importance of not seeking to minimise play through adult definitions. There is a dearth of literature on play-based approaches in research and their effect on young people, particularly young researchers themselves. Play-based research is not a term frequently used and yet holds significant potential for research with young people.

Thus, this PhD dissertation aims in particular to add to the existing literature on participatory research and play. It examines the complexity of conceptualisation of play by young researchers themselves with diverse lived experiences. As highlighted above, while efforts to define play are rampant, there is a strong critique of adults' fixation on defining and classifying play (Lester, 2019). As Burghardt (2005) suggests, play can only really be 'understood through itself' (p. 405), and, I argue, requires a partnership with children and young people to explore their perspectives. Yet there is a gap in

literature on older children and young people's conceptualisation and understanding of play, highlighting a critical need for greater research in this area.

This dissertation explores play-based research approaches and young researchers' relationships and dialogue on social issues during the process of, and as a result of, their engagement in the research. While a few studies exist on play-based research approaches (e.g. Campo et al., 2018; Koller & San Juan, 2015; Zero Paper, 2016) there is a dearth of literature on play-based research in partnership with older children and young people. This chapter confirmed that research has been conducted with participatory research approaches that use play as a tool or that are framed as arts-based research (arguably also a form of play). However, the explicit emphasis on play-based research approaches is a necessary, original, and valuable contribution to the research literature base.

This dissertation navigates the complexity of play as a research approach and play that arises in the research process. Based on the literature, the relationship between the process and between spaces of play, and play as a tool itself, required further attention. My research intends to fill the above mentioned gaps and further contribute to the research sector. The child-centred practitioner and research community is in need of greater evidence to explore conceptualisations and embodied experiences of play from young people's perspectives as well as greater research on play-based research methods and their role in young researchers' lives. The following chapter will introduce the methodology for the dissertation.

Chapter 3 Research Methodology and Methods: Play-based Research Approach

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an account of the methodological approach taken in this research to explore young researchers' conceptualisations, experiences, and embodiment of play and play-based research approaches. I developed a methodology through use of a play-based research approach that sought to allow for a multiplicity of perspectives to emerge and to enable pockets of play for young people. Play-based research tools used were critical ingredients for the research approach. However, a play-based research approach goes beyond the tools themselves to recognise the importance of the ways the tools are used, the space and time that is enabled for play, what play emerges in research, and what is further documented and explored. The chapter begins by providing an overview of the ontological and epistemological perspectives that frame the study and contribute to its methods. I then present the research design, making a case for play-based research with young people. I introduce a rationale for the approach and highlight the 'messy' elements of implementation. I go on to address the methodological tools used and the process of the research. Finally, the chapter discusses research ethics through a procedural lens and relational view to emphasise listening, reflection, and respect (Lahman et al., 2010). I conclude with detail on reflexivity and its role throughout the research.

3.1.1 Research Questions

The aim of this dissertation is to explore the role of play-based research as an approach and within the research process, as well as its effect on young researchers' lives. My research acted as a starting point to engage with young researchers to explore the following research questions:

1. How do young researchers experience, conceptualise, and embody play?

2. What are the individual and relational experiences of play-based research, for young researchers within the research process?
3. How does play-based research affect young researchers' exploration of social issues in their lives?

3.2 Epistemology and Ontology

This research study uses an interdisciplinary childhood studies, social ecological, and child-rights approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Gal, 2017; James & Prout, 2015). All three theories respect children as critical social actors in their own lives and society. Woven together they recognise the value of relationships and social interconnections in children and young people's lives, as well as the social and systemic barriers that impede children's rights and ability to engage in play and take leadership in the research process. Childhood studies, an umbrella term that includes social science sub-fields relating to childhood (Punch, 2020), considers children as social actors or agents, influencing their own lives, and the lives of others, as well as the societies in which they live (Moss & Dahlberg, 2008). Childhood studies recognise childhood as a social construct with children conceptualised as active and competent social actors who are actors in their own childhoods. While situated within childhood studies the research seeks to disrupt and challenge adult-centrism within the play-based research process, and to move away from a 'complacent and uncritical' field (Tisdall and Punch, 2012, p.251).

A social ecological approach values the relationships and social interconnections at all levels of a young person's social environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). An ecological approach recognises social factors in young people's lives and thus also places responsibilities upon institutions and society (A. Hart et al., 2016). Using the social ecological model as a model of participation (Gal, 2017) instead of development (as originally designed by Bronfenbrenner, 1979) relates to children's meaningful participation in various forums and contexts across spheres of influence and

in this research. A child rights-based approach (CRBA) values children's human rights in recognition of the UNCRC's general principles: non-discrimination, the best interests of the child, participation, and maximum survival and development and the interconnected articles of the UNCRC holistically. Lundy and McEvoy (2012) assert that a CRBA should be informed by UNCRC standards to ensure children are able to claim their rights and effectively hold duty-bearers accountable for fulfilling their obligations. In using a child-rights based approach, rights are recognised as relational practices, as critical elements of young people's everyday relational interactions and not as autonomous constructs (Kenneally, 2017). This research draws upon a CRBA in its respect for and realisation of children's rights throughout the research and participation of young people. It is not a pure CRBA approach given its limitations in being able to engage young people in the original design prior to ethics approval of the project vision. However, the young people were involved from the start of the play-based approach research training and designed their own research to lead with young people in their communities.

This research sought to disrupt dominant ways of knowing that perpetuate the power dynamics of child-adult relationships that exist today, and the power dynamics among children of diverse socio-economic backgrounds and lived experiences. In doing so, and in writing about child participation and engagement, I was cognisant of unintentionally presenting a homogenised identity of children. Thus, while the terms 'young people' and 'children' were used throughout this research, I avoided homogenising young people through taking time to understand and respect them in ways that recognise their diverse intersecting and diverging identities. This included investing time in conversations with each Emerging Researcher, learning about young people's identities and stories through play-based activities, and recognising that akin to adults, young people are complex with multifaceted lives. This was pertinent in exploring the Emerging Researchers' own understanding, conceptualisations, and embodiment of play.

In alignment with my research questions, the ontological framework recognises young people as social actors with agency expressed in relationships and context (Boyden & Ennew, 1997). Young people's perspectives and decisions are thus valued and respected in the relationships they have with their peers, colleagues, communities, and non-human world, as well as within the contexts they are situated. Based on a philosophy of mutual partnership the young people and I collaborated and worked to disrupt conceptual barriers between the research and researched, (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995) by recognising that people are able to assess their own core needs and act upon them (Minkler, 2004; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003), and by valuing young people as equal (or superior) contributors in the research project. As the research is within a PhD it is important to recognise that my role was that of a researcher, and yet by working in partnership with young people who also acted as researchers I worked to disrupt the normative researcher-researched dichotomy. Through engaging in partnership with the co-researchers, acting silly (e.g. singing along to Disney songs in the van as we drove to hikes and lakes on our research expedition), playing (e.g. paddle boarding and campfire games), and emerging in daily tasks (e.g. washing up after camp dinners) I practically sought to disrupt a distinction between adult and young people's roles in the research. Additionally, through engaging in activities where the Emerging Researchers had greater skills than myself and provided me advice (e.g. paddle boarding balance; tying strong camping knots for rain tarps), we further disrupted the idea of the expert adult. In valuing partnership and collaboration, I was conscious of a romanticised notion of these terms and sought to disrupt common ways of understanding collaboration to recognise tensions that can and do exist across relationships through using play and art to engage in both verbal and non-verbal relational practices.

In recognising complexity in collaboration and process it was also pertinent to be aware that, although young people may share some similar everyday experiences because of their intergenerational ordering that positions them as subordinate to adults (Alanen, 2001), this is where their shared social

experience often ends. One cannot (and should not) attempt to equate gender studies or other studies that seek to disrupt oppressive structures and respect diverse groups, such as African Studies or Disability Studies, with childhood studies, as each area experiences unique strengths and discriminatory barriers. However, there are potential parallels that exist with the significance that there are many differences that exist within these groups across race, ethnicity, social categories, sexual and gender orientations, and abilities. Hammersley (2017) suggests that the implications of the intersectional character of identity is not only in the diversity of experiences and perspectives of character, it also causes challenges in that young people themselves may have more similarities with an adult of a similar shared background and experience than other children within their categorised subgroup.

3.3 Methodology and Methods

Play has many diverse conceptualisations and forms, and can be ephemeral and in the between spaces of play, structured and unstructured, free and planned. Play, as explored in the literature review, is conceptualised, experienced, and understood differently across children, young people, and adults and across sectors and disciplines. In order to answer my research questions, I researched an ongoing process where I co-created the play-based research process with young people to explore the role of a play-based research approach.

Although research lacks a singular definition, across literature it is often recognised as the creation of new knowledge and/or the engagement with existing knowledge in a new way to generate methodologies, concepts, ideas, and understandings. As play-based research is an emerging field, it may be questioned for its ability to produce/explore knowledge. Spyrou's (2018) and Cuevas-Parra and Tisdall's (2019) push for alternative understandings of knowledge, ways of thinking about the world, and why

knowledge is valued, when defending collaborative research with children. Play-based research also allows for knowledge production that is different and provides new possibilities for social research. I employ the term 'play-based research' for the inclusion of play used/arising in the research process¹. This can occur in any or all phases of research, such as research planning, data generation, analysis, interpretation, representation of results, and/or dissemination. Similar to arts-based research, through play researchers can explore diverse perceptions, conceptualisations, understandings, and embodied expressions that are 'often overlooked by traditional research' (Lopez, Wickson, & Hausner, 2018, p. 1). Play-based research has the potential to advance critical conversations in social research practice and further expand research's possibilities. It troubles the separation of research as a science that is instrumental and play as something that lacks the 'seriousness' research requires. It encourages scholars to re-examine the traditional notions of science that separate research from play (Leavy, 2020).

Play can be included in a range of research approaches, such as Participatory Action Research (PAR)(Reason & Bradbury, 2006) and Creative Action Research (CAR) (Cox et al, 2021). Similar to PAR, play-based research entails an 'understanding that people hold deep knowledge about their lives and experiences' and are critical players in shaping questions and framing interpretations in the research process (Torre & Fine, 2006, p. 458). A play-based research approach is valuable for research conducted with young people because it serves to support relationship development between young people and adults, as well as support young people to critically analyse, reflect, and co-construct meaning (Christensen & Prout, 2002; Clark, 2010). CAR involves arts-based methods, creative process, and storytelling in a participatory action-oriented research methodology (Cox et al., 2021). It also has the potential to integrate play-based research methods. CAR interconnects with and builds from PAR to

¹ This term builds from arts-based research that acts as a form of qualitative research referring to the use of art during the research process (Knowles & Cole, 2008).

emphasise the creative process as a tool not only for research, but also to concurrently build capacity of young people in research. In my research, I employed and studied play-based research. While the study involved training young people as leaders in research to support reciprocal research, this study is focused on the play-based research itself and not any form of action research that took place.

Play-based research is not a clean linear approach. As such, I sought to make examine and make apparent the ‘the raw, unabashed reality of engaging in and with communities’ (Lac & Fine, 2018, p. 578) through play in a research process and openly include details on the messiness of the process to share the ‘speed bumps aloud’ (p. 579) in my dissertation. Following Pillow (2003), I suggest that sharing the ‘messy’ examples of qualitative research, in this case play-based research, that do not seek a ‘comfortable, transcendent end-point [and that] leave us in the uncomfortable realities of doing engaged’ research is beneficial to the qualitative research arena (p. 193).

Play-based research techniques can create rich information in unexpected ways and support relationships between young people and adults (Atkinson, 2006). Furthermore, the between spaces of play that emerged in the play-based research were particularly valuable to recognise and foster the blend of structured play and unstructured spaces. Unstructured spaces can be challenging for natural scientists and even social science researchers who are reliant on particular hierarchies and roles in research – about who has knowledge, who is to be researched and trained to follow a structured research design. This dissertation suggests that having structured *and* unstructured plan is a valuable element of the research. My research plan was thus developed with a recognition of the importance of recognising and fostering uncertainty when working with young people through play. Valuing play encounters during the research that fell within and outside the planned play-based research, , allowed for relational processes to form and unintended golden nuggets of sharing by the Emerging Researchers.

Play-based techniques can create rich information in unexpected ways and support relationships between young people and adults (Atkinson, 2006). The between spaces of this play-based research were particularly valuable to recognise and foster the blend of structured play and unstructured spaces. While unstructured spaces can be challenging for researchers that use more traditional approaches with different academic notions of methodology and structure, and a plan in place to execute research activities, this dissertation suggests that having structured and unstructured play is a valuable element of the research. My research plan was thus developed with a recognition of the importance of recognising and fostering uncertainty when working with young people through play. Valuing play encounters during the research that fell within and outside the structure, allowed for relational processes to form and unintended golden nuggets of sharing by the Emerging Researchers.

3.3.1 Having Fun with Research

In research, 'fun' is an important element that can be overlooked. People can often be afraid to say research is fun because they are afraid it 'waters it down or makes it appear less rigorous' (Leavy, 2015, p. 31). However, I would agree with Leavy (2015) in his argument that fun does not make research less rigorous, rather it means you are onto something. Fun fosters a research journey of spirit, aliveness, and emergence, and allows for creativity and flow to emerge. Furthermore, fun was central to the process for Emerging Researchers themselves and encouraged them to attend sessions and lead. This was evident in the laughter, engagement in play, and statements about enjoyment in activities that took place and the emotions and relationships that emerged. As a researcher exploring play, I sought to engage in my own playful and fun encounters throughout the research process both in ways that supported my wellbeing externally yet interconnected with the PhD research (e.g. hiking and running in nature, water colour painting, silly jokes, and laughter) and in playing with ideas active in the idea generation (visioning paintings), data analysis (e.g. mind mapping, sticky notes, baking reflections), and thesis writing process. Thus, there is an opportunity and need to explore 'fun,' and what it does in

research, both conceptually and methodologically, particularly in participatory research' for both children and adult researchers and participants (Wright, Tisdall, & Moore, 2021). While fun is important, I am also conscious that research historically and in present day research has been far from fun for many and is wrought with human rights atrocities that need to be remembered. Research has been a part of some of the 'worst excesses of colonialism', is considered 'one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary', and is a history that 'still offends the deepest sense of our humanity' (Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999, p. 1). Thus, when exploring the idea of fun, I was cautious of participants' lived experiences and perceptions of research in their own and their communities' lives, and carved space to demystify a traditional research. Through play-based techniques I introduced community-based participatory research values with the young researchers during an orientation session on the project and throughout the research process.

3.3.2 Location

As stated in Chapter 1, the research was carried out on the traditional territory of the unceded land of the W̱SÁNEĆ (Sanich), Lkwungen (Songhees), Wyomilth (Esquimalt) peoples of the Coast Salish Nation. In English these areas together are otherwise known as Greater Victoria, a region in the south of Vancouver Island in British Columbia, Canada. I chose to situate the research in British Columbia due to my experience living in the province, pre-existing relationships and understanding of context, and a desire to build meaningful sustained relationships over time. I conducted the research on the island due to my community-based partner organisation's active programmes where children and young people could be invited to engage as play-based researchers (also known as Emerging Researchers). I had a previous relationship with the organisation through volunteering with them as a committee member (a committee of the third sector board). Thus the location was selected based on its applicability in relation to research questions and due to my partner organisation's interest and availability. Additionally, while ample youth-led participatory research academic literature exists globally and in certain areas of Canada (e.g. Ontario and Quebec)

there appears to be significantly less in British Columbia, and thus my research could make a local contribution to the role of young people-led research, with a particular emphasis on play.

Recognising that research process and rapport building with children takes time and is critical for ethical research and valid reliable data, sustained engagement was, and is, fundamental for this project (Due, Riggs, Augoustinos, 2013). Furthermore, as evidenced through attempts to build partnerships, I learned that the duration of time needed to foster new partnerships for deep meaningful participatory research led by young people surpassed that of a conventional PhD process. Thus, having previous relationships that could be further developed, nurtured in a new relationship for research, and sustained beyond the scope of the PhD, was important.

I considered a variety of potential groups of children with diverse lived experiences, of low socio-economic status, complex family lives, disabilities, and mental health challenges to engage as researchers because there is a particular research gap working with young researchers in adolescent years from diverse backgrounds using play and a lack of research on the impact of leading research by young researchers themselves, as raised in the literature review. This is important because older children are significantly left out of research on play, and play-based research itself is limited. Working in partnership with young people in play programmes through play-based research provides an original contribution, in my research, to the sector. I thus identified partners with play-focused programmes that work in partnership with young people. Through this process I narrowed down a partner fit that aligned with the intended sample and research questions.

3.3.3 Partner: Community-based Organisation

I engaged with a local community-based non-profit organisation that creates access to nature for youth, families, and adults living with cognitive, physical, financial, and social barriers. The programmes include wilderness school (a programme for 13 to 15 year olds with outdoor adventure weekend and day

trips) and adaptive recreation for children and adults (outdoor programmes (e.g. snowshoeing, canoeing, nature walks) designed to be inclusive for persons with physical and cognitive disabilities, and mental health issues).

I worked with recruited alumni from a three-year gender-inclusive wilderness school programme for youth. The wilderness school programme works with young people from grade 8 to 10 (ages 13 to 15) living with financial and/or social barriers, to support them to develop relationships and strengthen interpersonal skills within a small cohort, through regular outdoor programming. The young people met for monthly activities that varied from one-day hikes or beach adventures to weekend camping. Each year the wilderness school young people had a longer summer trip (in the first year lasting three days and by the third year a full week) that included backpacking with full week hiking and/or kayaking.

As I invited young people through a community-based organisational partner, it was important to examine not only who gets invited but also who gets excluded, due to target focus of the organisations, interest of young people, adult gatekeepers, and recruitment strategies. Although I only recruited from the alumni of the wilderness school programme, the alumni were of diverse backgrounds and lived experiences. The ages of the young researchers and the child participants were targeted due to limited focus on this age group with play-based research with young people as researchers. Older children, where play is no longer 'assumed' to be as central in their lives, provide interesting insights on play that have been less frequently explored in research.

Young people, who were alumni from the wilderness programme, aged 15 to 20 years, were invited to act as Emerging Researchers (i.e. young people leading research) due to their potential interest in and insights into conducting their own play-based research with young people between 13 and 18 years. I operated from a childhood studies lens and although ages are documented I did not categorise young people by linear 'developmental' age constructs as such. While a spread of five years of the young researcher

team could be critiqued as too large an age spread it was valuable for peer-to-peer relations and dialogue in the research. Furthermore, while limited, training young people as researchers with larger age-gap spreads has been conducted intentionally and successfully in the past (e.g. Cheney, 2018). The diversity of age, alongside a shared experience of having been in a nature wilderness programme, allowed for relationships to foster and also peer mentorship to take place. Additionally, my community-based organisation research partner was working with this age group and was keen to explore the peer-to-peer learning across ages.

3.3.3.1 Recruitment

For recruitment, I developed a one-page poster on the Emerging Researchers project (see Appendix F) and an FAQ email overview. With this information, the community-based partner initiated a callout (via email, Facebook, and text messages) to over 50 young people who were third years and alumni graduates from the wilderness programme within the last four to five years. Young people were invited to follow up with any questions they might have via email and phone, and/or upon arrival to an orientation session.

3.3.3.2 Emerging Researchers

The Emerging Researchers' knowledge is marked by the context and space in which it was produced throughout their lives and thus influences their ways of understanding the world. The wilderness programme from which the young people are alumni is a component of their 'situated knowledge'. Situated knowledge challenges the idea that any knowledge is objective (Haraway, 1988). This research questions objectivity and recognises subjectivity with situated knowledge and experiences as part of the context of where it was formed (McGarry, 2016). Previous engagement in the wilderness programme alongside their unique personal experiences at home, school, in community, and at work provides the Emerging Researchers with particular insights. The interplay between the Emerging Researchers' experiences and engagement in play-based research provided unique and important insights into the

research. As the Emerging Researchers were engaged in the wilderness school programme at different times (in different cohorts with some overlapping) their experiences varied. However, there may be terminology learned and experienced during that programme that impact their ways of expressing and reflecting on play. For example, the Emerging Researchers, when engaged in their wilderness programme, were introduced to the concept of 'comfort zones', as something to move beyond and into a 'stretch zone' for engaging in new experiences. The dialogue on comfort zones in Chapter 4 on challenges links with the Emerging Researchers' reflections on getting out of their comfort zones to explore new challenges and their perceptions based on social constructions introduced and reinforced in their previous programme. Their potential collective learning does not invalidate the terms/experiences shared and instead highlights the importance of their lived experiences and perspectives.

Young people were invited to lead research with peers in their community. They identified priorities for the facilitation of research, developed action plans to lead research, led play-based research, reviewed themes in the data analysis phase, and were engaged in aspects of knowledge exchange (Cahill, Rios-Moore, & Threatts, 2008). However, due to the structure of a PhD, the young people's lived realities and competing priorities, young people's engagement was limited to 'pockets of participation' whereby they were active and had ownership in specific facets of the research process (e.g. leading play-based research activities with young participants) and then at other points in time this was less feasible (e.g. data coding and analysis of their own research) (Franks, 2011). Engaging young people in pockets of participation, due to a PhD researcher being required to complete the PhD board paper and ethics prior to engaging with young people and being sole author of the dissertation, was in tension with my epistemological stance to engage children meaningfully throughout the research; however, the research sought to actively involve the Emerging Researchers as much as possible (and as much or little as they wanted). In my future research, I intend to explore and disrupt constructs (e.g. defining a project prior to

engaging with children) that limit active participation throughout the whole research process. While it can be assumed that the main reason for young people to not be active as co-researchers or lead researchers is adult power and lack of invitation and lack of resources, it is also true that young people themselves, as in this research, have competing priorities, such as school and homework, work in evenings and weekends, personal life, and difficult family dynamics, that may impede them from being active in all components and/or they may not desire to be engaged in the level of depth that a lead researcher (who is engaged for a PhD or work) is. Additionally, in a Canadian context, it has been recognised through conversations with Canadian academic and practitioner colleagues that time is generally limited and that active young people engagement requires careful negotiation to effectively support the process. In my own research, I have found the limitations on young researchers' availability in Canada to be more constrained than research I have been involved with in Europe, East and West Africa, and the Middle East. The reason behind this is not documented in academic literature and warrants further reflection and research.

I had planned to engage the Emerging Researchers in documentation and data analysis. While the Emerging Researchers were keen and active while together, motivation/ability to write up reflections and/or do independent work outside the collective space varied greatly, with the majority having work, school, social, family, and other factors infringing their ability to do so. As such, we collectively decided to come together whenever possible during trainings, preparation for research, and leading and to really value and maximise the shared time and process. I had desired to follow up with Emerging Researchers independently as well; however, this was not possible due to the policies of the community-based organisation on 'volunteers' (which is how the researcher role was positioned to allow me access to working with the children and young people) not interacting with children and young people independently of organisational staff. While this allowed for easier direct contact and coordination between the partner and Emerging Researchers and supported me in focusing less time on coordination and

more on the research itself, it also posed some challenges. Without being able to directly contact the Emerging Researchers I was unable to quickly share information, respond to, or check in with the Emerging Researchers, and was at the whim of the partner. While the partner was incredibly supportive in coordination, they were also very busy preparing and leading multiple programmes and thus I was cautious not to over-ask them to connect with the Emerging Researchers on my behalf. Closer to the end of the research I acquired a few of the Emerging Researchers' emails and was permitted to email directly while copying in the research partner. Contact outside the times together included emails from the partner and/or myself while copying in the partner, as well as calls and texts from the partner to participants. In consultation with the young people they suggested emails from the staff partner was the best approach as well as Facebook message updates and text messages/phone calls where needed. While trust and respect between the Emerging Researchers and the local partner was evident, the partners' regular presence in all aspects of the research had potential positive (e.g. comfortability of Emerging Researchers) and negative implications (e.g. influence on ways of engaging) for the young people's engagement and the data generated.

3.3.3.3 Key Informant Interviews

Key informant interviews with international child and youth researchers, outside the scope of the field work, took place between January 2019 and August 2019. I interviewed key informants using a snowballing technique through connecting with colleagues and contacts who worked with young people as researchers. The insights from the key informant interviews were important for the design of the research project in order to build from expertise of young researchers globally who had been active in similar (yet different) methodologies (e.g. arts-based research, PAR, etc.). These key informant interviews were not included as part of the data set for the PhD data analysis itself but did act to inform the development of the participatory research process and relational ethics. For example, I integrated learning from my key informants about what was important for reciprocity for young

researchers, such as providing acknowledgement, sharing future opportunities, treating people with respect. Additionally, for the research process, I built in time for the young researchers to hang out together and develop ideas without always having a specific focus, which had been recommended by a few key informants.

3.4 Field Work Process

The fieldwork was conducted over a period of eight months, running from May 2019 to October 2019, with an additional follow up session in January 2020, and a certificate ceremony in June 2020. Preliminary relationship establishment with potential partners also occurred between May and June 2018, and January and May 2019. Phase one was designed to explore the context and to establish initial relationships with partners and stakeholders. Phase two involved training Emerging Researchers on the play-based research methodology designed for this project. Phase three was designed to create space for young people to plan and lead research. Phase four fostered space for deeper reflection, exploration of young people's reflections on the research process, and celebration. Throughout all of these phases, overlaps and intersections occurred. While the Emerging Researchers were trained using play-based research tools, the play-based research approach allowed for emergence of new forms of play and the tools themselves fostered time and space for play itself to emerge. My research was an exploratory process that used the space of gatherings, research workshops, the Emerging Researchers preparing and leading research, and reflection to explore the research questions of this dissertation.

3.4.1 Phase One: Engagement with Stakeholders and Partners

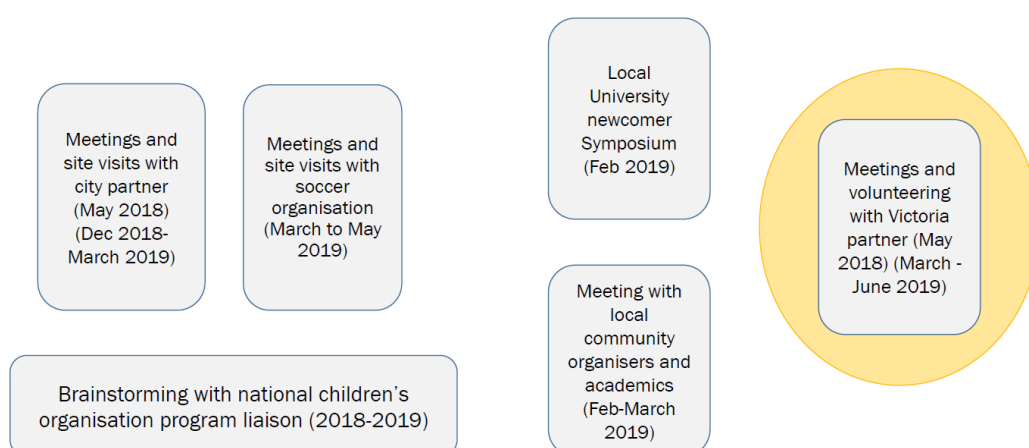
One year prior to beginning field work (May to June 2018), I travelled to Canada to coordinate a series of in-person meetings with potential community-based research partners, inclusive of non-profits, city programmes, and participatory research labs. Subsequently, I engaged in follow up online meetings to further discuss the project prior to returning to

Canada for field work in January 2019. The original intention was to work with two partners, one in Surrey, Greater Vancouver and one in Victoria, on Vancouver Island who work with newcomer young people. A strong relationship formed with the Surrey community partner and included meetings in the first phase and multiple meetings and site visits again in January and February 2019. Unfortunately timing and organisational circumstances impeded our ability to establish the research process at that time (although a relationship has been maintained for future opportunities outside the scope of the PhD). I thus met with multiple further potential partners in Greater Vancouver as potential collaborators. While my original intentions for research were centred around working with newcomer children and young people it became evident that, although I have worked with refugees and newcomers (people who have recently immigrated to Canada) programmatically, and have done research and practice projects globally, the complexity of researching with newcomers as a Caucasian settler without deep seated pre-existing and well established relationships in British Columbia with groups, was very present. As such, I continued to foster partnerships for future relationships and research but, for the PhD, focused greater intention on my Vancouver Island community-based research partner. While the partner had worked with newcomers (young people who are refugees or migrants to the country), a greater research opportunity arose working with young people with diverse lived experiences and adversities. As my research questions were not restricted by a specific demographic, the decision to shift to young people with varying strengths and adversities allowed me to maintain my focus while expanding scope to a diversity of young people.

As a programme committee member (committee as a subset of the community partner's board focused on providing feedback on organisational programme documents and contributing ideas for enhancing processes), for the community-based organisation my pre-existing relationship of two years fostered space for dialogue and understanding of one another. I discussed with the partner how to effectively separate out the researcher and

programme committee role. This included ensuring that the research was not for the programme committee or community-based organisation itself but was a separate piece of research conducted for the PhD dissertation. While this was agreed, I recognise there is always potential for pieces of work to interconnect (e.g. the programme committee asking me for an update during meetings to learn from the research process). A series of in-person and telephone meetings took place between March and June 2019 with multiple staff members to explore the opportunity of research, build a proposal, and envision what worked well for the organisation, the PhD, and the young people engaged. Prior to beginning the research, I volunteered in a wilderness day programme and familiarised myself further with the processes of programme activities.

Figure 3.1 *Engaging with stakeholders chart*

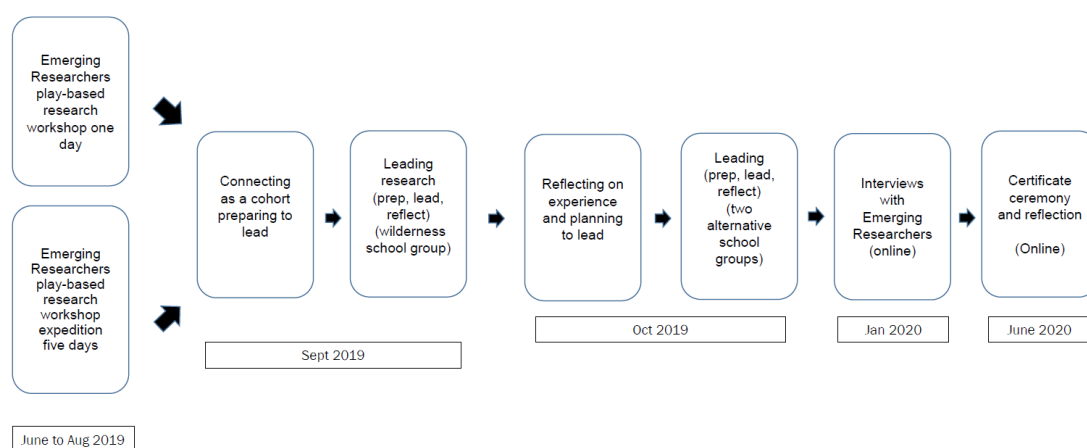


3.4.1.1 The Research Team

The research team consisted of the ten Emerging Researchers and myself. The local advisory team included an assistant professor at Royal Roads University with whom I had previously worked in partnership for participatory research and child rights work, three core staff members of the partner organisation as point people, and eight other partner organisation staff throughout the different phases and initiatives (e.g. facilitators at expedition, staff support during leading research). The Royal Roads assistant professor reviewed the tools and supported facilitation in the shorter one-day training

with the Emerging Researchers. Given her familiarity with the tools as well as her own work experience with the local partner, her role aided me to effectively tailor the methodology for the Emerging Researchers. I worked closely with the core staff to coordinate logistics and garner their support for the approach. The facilitators and additional staff were key in coordinating supplementary activities to the research workshops (e.g. paddle boarding), ensuring the Emerging Researchers could attend where possible (e.g. providing rides, sending emails and text messages), and providing access to the space for research to take place. They also provided valuable reflections and insight on their programme and their experience having worked with some of the Emerging Researchers previously.

Figure 3.2 Phase 2 to 4 Emerging Researchers



3.4.2 Phase 2: Preparing and Facilitating Research Training of Wilderness Emerging Researchers Team Members (June to August)

The Emerging Researchers were introduced to play-based research tools that combine physical play, art, theatre, and nature and connect with experiential learning models. Ten young people (four she/her, six he/him) started as emerging researchers with seven (three she/her, four he/him) being keen and having time to complete the whole research process. Two enjoyed the play-based research workshops but did not want to lead research. The third was active in the training and keen but unfortunately her work and personal life

circumstances impeded her engagement. The partner organisation and I attempted to identify ways she could still contribute outside of being physically present; however, she felt it was better to engage again in future projects instead, due to lack of availability.

Table 3.1 Emerging Researchers

Pseudonym	Gender	Age
*Donatello	He/him	15
Ocean	She/her	20
*Sydney	She/her	16
*Kodak	He/him	17
*D.	He/him	17
Tesla	He/him	17
*Rigby	She/her	18
*Cedar	F	15
*Cameron	He/him	18
Stoic	He/him	15

*Those who participated in the whole certificate

I facilitated workshops with Emerging Researchers on play-based research methods through two workshops with ten research activities that were developed specifically for this project and/or adapted from previously used tools. The two workshops included: 1) a one-day research session; and 2) a five-day research expedition. Both workshops took the Emerging Researchers through a research journey with a series of play-based research

activities that took place in nature. I reviewed play-based research tools in participatory research, inclusive of ones I had used or co-designed. I contextually modified, piloted, and tested activities from previous research activities I have co-designed and been engaged in, such as the International Institute for Child Rights and Development (IICRD) YouCreate Arts-Based Participatory Action Research Toolkit (developed with youth leading arts-based PAR on psychosocial wellbeing in Egypt and Iraq), ResiliencebyDesign Lab research certificate (a CAR training), and Right To Play participatory activities (adapted for research), as well as developed new activities. While some research tools that use play do exist that supported this dissertation, they are more common in third sector and international development settings across a few select play-focused organisations, and are not explicitly referred to as play-based tools in many pieces of academic research (as discussed in the literature review). I developed a *Wilderness Emerging Research Play Guide* (inclusive of the ten tools I adapted and designed) (see Appendix B) to train the Emerging Researchers. I shared the Guide with my supervisors at the University of Edinburgh, local colleagues at Royal Roads University, and my community research partner, for review. This review sought to ensure the proposed tools and methods were contextualised, relevant, and applicable to the young people and communities I intended to work with, and would not be likely to cause harm to the young people engaged in the research.

The workshops aimed to provide the Emerging Researchers with opportunities to explore concepts and experiences about play, psychosocial wellbeing (as wellbeing was central to their own research they were leading with young people) and meaningful participation, and to develop knowledge and skills in play-based research and tools, such as: wellbeing Jenga; object stories; visual explorer; semi-structured interviewing; reflective practice; participatory thematic analysis; facilitation; and knowledge engagement (see Table 3.2, and Appendix A and B for details on research activities). By providing a range of research tools I aimed to not restrict the research based on my preconceived notions of tools that would benefit young researchers'

interests and that of the research itself. I used a variety of tools that could be applicable to answering the research questions and for creating space for young people to engage with tools that best met their interests for their own research going forward. These activities also sought to hold familiarity to experiential learning play-based activities that the young people had engaged in their programmes prior to this training but that were new in their research-specific focus. A clear distinction was made between programmatic and research tools. For example, during the one-day research training, the community-based organisation support lead highlighted that she had used similar activities in the past and was curious what made them different for research. This was a pivotal moment to clarify play-based research activities' similarities yet distinction from programmatic activities. While there were many overlaps in style of the play-based component of the activities and sometimes in the questions that took place after activities during experiential learning programmatic activities, a distinction remained. Research activities were different in their approach to explore research questions, process, depth of observation, and in particular recording and documentation of ideas, stories, and images as data. The clarification on the differences and similarities supported the programme partner and the Emerging Researchers to feel more at ease with the sometimes seemingly daunting concept of 'research'.

3.4.2.1 Research Workshops

Through immersion in play, the young people further deepened relationships, fostered space to open up, and effectively engaged in the research itself. The Research workshops were a central component of my research for training Emerging Researchers in leading research, developing relationships, and exploring their own understandings, conceptualisations, and experiences of play and play-based approaches. While data was generated throughout the whole research process, much of the rich data emerged during these workshops.

- Workshop One: The one-day workshop established ground rules, explored five play-based research activities, and included time for a nature walk, canoeing, and collective lunch break.
- Workshop Two: The five-day research expedition introduced ten play-based research activities with opportunities to practice leading, and incorporated camping, hiking, paddle boarding, swimming, spending time in the between spaces

During the expedition, Emerging Researchers participated in and were trained in ten play-based research tools. These included: Opening Circle; Visual Explorer; Play Object Stories; Wellbeing Jenga; Walking Semi-Structured Interviews; Story Cubes; River Journey; Head-Heart-Hands-Feet; Rose-Bud-Thorn; Reflective Journaling; and Closing Circles (see Appendix A). The activities were sequenced progressively to develop and deepen relationships and research skills throughout the five-days. The Emerging Researchers had the opportunity to engage in and practice facilitating activities. Additional activities supplemented the research tools to support greater learning, such as active listening practice games and a magic carpet game (i.e. working together to flip a tarp that all young people are standing on together without getting off the tarp) as trust building activities. This approach aligns with young people in Houghton's (2012) research who highlighted the importance of fun and enjoyment in research, and its role in motivating and supporting young people to open up about experiences, and for continued involvement.

Table 3.2 Emerging Researchers' play-based research tools

Activity	Purpose	Approach
Opening and Closing Circle	To welcome participants and introduce the goal of the workshop; to get to know the other participants and the facilitator(s).	Participants stand in a circle holding a rope. They are invited to close their eyes and lean back together and lean forward. The activity explores trust.
Visual Explorer	To reflect on conceptualisations and understandings of play and wellbeing. <i>Note: Also used for debriefing some activities.</i>	The activity uses a set of diverse photocards spread around a space. Participants are asked to select cards answering a question (e.g. what does play mean to you) and then share their answer to the question to the larger group using their card.
Play Object Stories	To explore play and wellbeing through objects found in nature or brought from home.	Participants find an object that describes/means play and wellbeing to them. They then sit in a group circle and share their object in two to three minutes in a story.

Activity	Purpose	Approach
Wellbeing Jenga	Part 1: To explore wellbeing and what makes us feel well in relation to play and nature. Part 2: To explore any barriers to wellbeing, and ways to prevent and respond to barriers we face.	Each participant gets five Jenga bricks to write people/places/things that support them to feel well on an index card stuck to one side of the Jenga pieces. Participants build a Jenga tower and begin playing Jenga. They read the wellbeing cards as they pull out Jenga pieces. The game continues until the Jenga tower collapses. After this, the researcher facilitates a discussion to support participants to reflect on what makes them feel well, what aspects are play-focused, and what happens when you start to lose your foundations of wellbeing. They then explore ideas of ways to rebuild with different supports.

Activity	Purpose	Approach
Walking Peer-to-Peer Interviews	To informally explore the role of play in wellbeing through a trail walk.	Emerging Researchers go on a walk with participants and ask open-ended questions about their experience of play in wellbeing.
Story Cubes	To reflect on play experiences using story cubes.	Story cubes are a set of dice that have different images on each side of the die. The images are diverse and include images such as theatre masks, magnifying glasses, pyramids, lightbulbs, and other images that can depict stories and/or reflections. During the research the story cubes were used as a reflective debrief tool.

Activity	Purpose	Approach
River Journey	To explore the most significant changes that have taken place over the journey of the research process.	Participants reflect on an experience over a duration of time (e.g. research training expedition). The process includes collaboratively drawing/painting a giant river on flipchart. They write 'Past' (how they were feeling previously), 'Middle', and 'Present/Future' (how they are feeling now and looking into the future). Participants can draw their experiences and write words to express their feelings at the different stages of what stood out to them (strengths, challenges, particular experiences).

Activity	Purpose	Approach
Head- Heart- Hands- Feet	To reflect on what we learned or are thinking (head), how we feel in our heart (heart), what actions we want to take going forward (Hands), and what we want to stomp out and change going forward (Feet).	A drawing of a person including head, heart, hands and feet is posted on a flipchart. Participants use sticky notes to answer what they learned, how they feel, actions going forward, and things to change and place them on head, heart, hands, and feet.
Rose- Bud- Thorn	To reflect on strengths (rose), challenges (thorn), and areas for growth (buds). To close in community and explore our way forward.	Participants are given three different colour sticky notes to write strengths (rose) challenges (thorn) and areas of growth (bud) to stick up on a flipchart of a drawing of a rose.
Reflective Journals	To reflect on our experiences in the day.	Emerging Researchers were given journals to practice self reflexivity and write down their reflections throughout the research.

Through learning about, participating in, and practicing the different research tools and being introduced to a play-based research approach, the Emerging Researchers developed knowledge, experience, and skills in play-based research. Their experience with the play-based research tools introduced overarching reflections on different play-based methods and equipped the young people to be able to plan and design research with young people participants in their own research.

3.4.3 Phase 3: Emerging Researchers Preparing to Lead and Leading Research

The Emerging Researchers led three separate sessions using play-based research activities with children and young people aged 13 to 18 years, to explore their understandings and experiences of play and wellbeing. The subject was introduced to the Emerging Researchers and the researchers adapted activities to tailor their focus to explore play in nature's role on wellbeing. The first session took place over a weekend and was conducted with a wilderness school programme (ages 13 to 14 years) during a camping expedition. The second two sessions were half day sessions conducted with young people (ages 13 to 18 years) from an alternative school community-based partner of the organisation. Prior to the first and second research leading, two three-hour preparation sessions were held with the Emerging Researchers.

3.4.3.1 Preparing to Lead

The preparatory sessions created space for the Emerging Researchers to come together in community, plan out their schedule for leading research based on the play-based research approach and tools they learned in their workshops, practice, explore potential challenges and how to mitigate them, and reflect on their experiences, hopes, and concerns collectively. Both sessions took place after school, included a meal together, and sought to encourage mutual support across and between the Emerging Researchers and adult researcher and staff. Planning time together has been proven to be valuable across multiple studies, and can support researchers to feel a

'sense of being part of a "family" where they can feel safe and comfortable to talk and share' (Maiter, Simich, Jacobson, & Wise, 2008, p. 315). The first session included: an Opening Circle (to connect participants in unity); Visual Explorer; identifying activities to lead (through 'dotmocracy' (voting on activities with coloured sticky dots)); flipchart schedule planning for leading research; a pizza break; a brick wall of barriers (writing up potential barriers or challenges that may arise while leading on pieces of paper and sticking them to the wall); and crossing the river to build solutions to tear down the brick wall (to explore as a team how to work together to cross the river writing out solutions on paper and using the papers as a team to make it across the river (ground) without stepping on the ground); 'chill' time on a dock on the lake with stretching; and a closing circle to end in community. This session brought together Emerging Researcher members who had participated in the one-day workshop and who had participated in the five-day expedition. Both of the workshops introduced the play-based research activities with the Emerging Researchers who participated in the second five-day expedition, going into more depth with additional activities. As such, bringing the Emerging Researchers from the two workshops together created an opportunity for peer-to-peer learning and reflection across the groups on the use of and experience with the play-based approach. The play-based activities, such as brick wall of barriers, where participants built a wall of challenges and then a river of solutions to address them, supported Emerging Researchers to immerse themselves in planning for their play-based research. Furthermore, the relationships between structured (e.g. Visual Explorer) and unstructured (e.g. eating pizza while telling jokes, stretching on the dock) time allowed for specific preparation for research as well as fluid spontaneous play and dialogue through informal chats to occur. It stimulated space for peer-to-peer learning as they introduced new activities to one another and further explored individual strengths and challenges of each person.

The second preparatory session took place after the Emerging Researchers had led research with children, with one group. It included: reflection on the

first leading research experience through head, heart, hands, feet (reflecting on the experience of learnings, feelings, things to change, and actions going forward); planning for the next session; eating a meal together; practice in leading activities; and an introduction to a new game by Cedar ('tellustrations' in which players pass round folded pieces of paper with drawings and words). In the second session, greater confidence in leading was evident and the Emerging Researchers more rapidly expanded on their plans for the next two research sessions.

3.4.3.2 Leading Research

Three different groups of research participants each participated in one session led by Emerging Researchers. These ranged from a half day (alternative school nature programme group) to a weekend (wilderness programme group). The groups of participants ranged from nine to twelve participants in each session, with young people aged 13 to 14 years in wilderness school and aged 13 to 18 in alternative school. While the initial intention was to research with only 13 to 16 year olds, the alternative school did not want to exclude their older students and thus we opened the space to all those in the transitioning phase. The Emerging Researchers' schedule of research activities was progressive, beginning and closing in circle with land acknowledgements², and integrating playful games alongside the play-based research activities. As confidence grew, the Emerging Researchers also built in new play-based research activities, such as a spider web of strengths (tossing yarn in a circle to create a web of connection between all participants), and games, such as 'ricky ticky' and 'splat' (active humorous games that inspire movement and laughter), as part of the process.

² Land acknowledgements are statements that occur as openings at events in order to recognise and respect the First Nations, Métis and/or Inuit as traditional stewards of the land, the enduring relationship that exists between indigenous peoples and their traditional territories, and the colonial attempts to destroy those relationships. Land acknowledgements commemorate indigenous peoples' principal kinship to the land as the first peoples of Turtle Island. In the country named Canada, during colonisation, (where this research took place) land acknowledgements are practiced regularly at opening of sessions, conferences, talks, classes, and other spaces as a small step towards truth and reconciliation.

Furthermore, each session included programmatic elements of outdoor pursuits including camping over the weekend, hiking, canoeing, and trail walking. The nature-based play, outside the scope of the 'official' research activities, cultivated and enhanced relationships, encouraged challenge and growth (e.g. hiking along rocks and setting up camp in the pouring rain), as well as allowing between spaces for wellbeing and dialogue. The Emerging Researchers appeared to become more comfortable in their use of participatory research and conversations throughout the journey as exemplified through taking greater leadership in facilitation and being active in leading discussions while encouraging and supporting one another's growth.

3.4.4 Phase 4: Reflection and Certificate Ceremony

Reflection on the Emerging Researchers' experience and celebration was a critical component of the research process to enable me to answer the research question on the process of and approach to play-based research and for the young people's own development as reflective researchers. A one-day in-person session of reflection and certificate ceremony was planned to occur in the winter (but was cancelled due to Emerging Researchers' lack of availability) and then alongside a community barbecue in the Spring organised by the community-based partner. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, provincial health requirements and programmatic activity cancellation, the in-person event was not possible. As an alternative, I planned a celebration over an online platform (Microsoft Teams). The session included: a welcome and informal catch up; a play object activity exploring how the experience of being an Emerging Researcher impacted their lives; slideshow of photos from the research journey (including space for reflections on activities during the slideshow); a Sun, Storm, Rainbow activity reflecting on strengths of the experience, any challenges, and ideas they had for the future. It ended with a concluding certificate ceremony. Certificates and small gifts were dropped off at each of the Emerging Researchers' homes (adhering to COVID-19 safety protocol) that I had mailed to the project partner to share with Emerging Researchers.

Additionally, I introduced the key themes and sections of my PhD findings chapters for feedback and any recommendations for edits or additions. The Emerging Researchers present voiced no issues with the themes and agreed on what was shared. As the themes I found arose from the transcripts, observations, and dialogue, the themes I shared were intended to relate to the data and offer a conceptualisation of what the Emerging Researchers had originally shared. As such, their agreement that the data had been captured well was valuable for validation of our process together. However, I was disappointed that greater critical engagement or potential push back on the findings' themes or new ideas from the young people did not occur. In future research, more time to immerse in the themes and space for critical reflection on them could potentially bolster more critical reflection and revisions. While critique did not occur, I was appreciative of the opportunity to question the themes with the Emerging Researchers to support moving forward in the findings chapters, with their agreement.

3.5 Field Notes and Reflexive Journal

I kept field notes throughout the research process, as they are understood as a crucial element of qualitative research (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). For this research the field notes served a wide variety of purposes: most notably, they supported construction of 'thick, rich descriptions of the study context, encounters, and interviews' and research activities (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018, p. 382) as well as sought to enrich the participatory research activity data and shine light on any contrasting perceptions (Budig et al., 2018). In the research setting I chose not to write overt field notes while engaging in participatory research with the Emerging Researchers. While the Emerging Researchers were aware I was doing research, the act of writing while engaging, from my perspective, would have disrupted the fluidity of engagement and impeded free dialogue and process. The only times I took overt notes were during discussions where we were flip charting ideas and/or where the Emerging Researchers were sharing specific recommendations for next steps. In this vein, the act of note-taking more similarly replicated jotting down notes that would take place in any programmatic space the Emerging

Researchers were familiar with. The field notes enabled me to record verbal and non-verbal behaviour and my own insights and impressions from the observations (Maharaj, 2016). While taking notes after activities meant limitations in my ability to grasp depth of detail instantaneously/in the moment, I would suggest that it enhanced the quality of relationships between myself and the Emerging Researchers and created a space to build trust. When taking field notes, I was forced to make selections and interpretations of what I reflected upon and why, and then critically reflect on, and be aware of, the choices I made.

After each interaction with the Emerging Researchers and adults engaged in the research, I made sure to take field notes either the same day or on the following day to reflect on the setting, space, participants' interactions and body language, and the ephemeral experiences of play, and to write a critical reflection of the process (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). While on the research camping expedition I took many pages of notes in my tent in the evening with my headlamp, striving to capture the richness of dialogue, interactions, and spaces throughout the day. On a couple of occasions, I was also able to capture notes in the middle of the day while the Emerging Researchers were doing their own journaling at the same time. This hand written approach also suited the transition space between activities, whether in a tent, or during evenings after sessions with researchers on the bus and ferry rides home. When taking notes, I sought to include the everyday as well as situations that were surprising or that ruffled my frame of thinking (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). I re-examined my field notes after distancing myself from them one week later, to add further insights post immediate reflection. Critical reflection after each play-based activity, interview, and/or reflective meeting encouraged me to regularly assess my biases and feelings (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003) throughout the research and embed these both in field notes and my research journal.

While the research journal and field notes overlapped at points, they were distinct from one another in that my field notes had more of a structured

template for completion upon each meeting (e.g. location, time, number of participants, reflections on what took place during the meetings, key quotes/comments). My reflexive research journal included more overarching reflections, reflexivity, and space for thought bubbles, comments, and ideas in writing and images throughout the PhD research process that do not only pertain to specific meetings and interactions with young researchers, partners, and community members, but that also highlighted my anxieties, concerns, excitements, and ponderings on the PhD itself.

3.6 Semi-Structured Interviews to Supplement Participatory Research (January 2020)

I invited all seven Emerging Researchers who completed the research journey to participate in semi-structured interviews. Two were available to take up the opportunity. I conducted two 45-minute interviews over an online video platform (Zoom) after the Emerging Researchers had completed leading play-based research. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they provided the opportunity for participants to discuss, expand, and reflect upon their lived experiences (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, they create space for greater personal reflection and engagement for young people and adults that does not exist in narrowly structured interviews and/or quantitative surveys. Similar to Koller and San Juan (2015) but with older children, I integrated space for play-based techniques in the interviews (e.g. inviting participants to draw and/or play with art materials during the conversation).

These interviews supplemented the play-based research in order to further explore the Emerging Researchers' conceptualisations of play, the role of a play-based research approach, and to reflect on preliminary findings with them.

3.7 Data Management

Data management is a vital part of qualitative research in order for it to be successful (Lewis-Beck, Bryman, & Futing Liao, 2004) and as an important

element of ethics. I developed a data management plan that included an excel tracking sheet to label, categorise, and securely store my diverse forms of data. Audio recordings from semi-structured interviews were transcribed verbatim (including pauses of silence in certain spaces). Acknowledging silence respects it as an aspect of voice and recognises non-responses, pauses, breaths, and reflective spaces of young people being interviewed (Spyrou, 2016). Audio recordings from the training workshops and research team meetings were transcribed verbatim for specific activities (e.g. play object stories, reflection circles) and in summary for others (e.g. development of ground rules) and were complemented by the visual flipcharts, play and art objects, and material produced by young people to support the analysis of the written data. Direct quotes from the transcribed data and passages from the summative data were used in the data analysis and write up of the research. Detailed field notes and journal reflections were also written, stored, and used as data. The daily field notes allowed me to capture the ephemeral elements of play that were not spoken, as did the verbatim transcriptions that captured young people's verbal expressions and emotions of their embodied experiences of play. Image-based data (e.g. Visual Explorer image cards, pictures of the above mentioned play and art objects) was stored with transcripts of Emerging Researchers' explanations of the images. A systematic approach was developed to ensure that each type of data followed a similar pattern of transcription and storage (e.g. all interviews were transcribed and stored using the same transcription requirements and labelling), and securely stored in locked files (as further explained in the ethics section below) and One-Drive. A quality data management plan aided me to effectively review and analyse data and to share themes with the Emerging Researchers and my research supervisors to garner feedback and ideas.

3.8 Data Analysis

I used thematic analysis, a narrative approach, and a play-based approach to rigorously and systematically analyse the qualitative data (transcripts from the research sessions with the Emerging Researchers (trainings, preparing to

lead, leading research and reflections) visuals from activities, field note observations, reflective journal, and interview transcriptions). The data was analysed collectively whereby themes emerged from the wide range of data generated during the research process. I read and re-read the diverse forms of data connecting the interrelated themes and identifying the outliers. The diverse forms of data ranging from transcriptions to field notes had implications for analysis and the way that the verbatim words are interpreted in relation to field notes and reflexive journals. The analysis of transcripts, images alongside text, and field notes allowed me to explore both the verbal and non-verbal conceptualisations, experiences, and understanding of the young researchers and the ephemerality of play that occurred. Thematic analysis involves a search for themes that are important to the description of the phenomenon (Daly, Kellehear, & Gliksman, 1997) and pattern recognitions to identify categories of analysis. It required 'careful reading and re-reading of the data' (Rice & Ezzy, 1999, p. 258). I familiarised myself with the data, generated initial codes in Microsoft Word through highlighting and commenting on my data. I searched for core themes, reviewed and modified themes, and then defined themes through mind mapping that was further refined in the iterations of data coding. A play-based approach was also used throughout the analysis whereby I water colour painted the core themes emerging in a mind map and also moved around printed themes and quotes into categories. Additionally, I incorporated playful runs during analysis (e.g. loops around trees and over roots) and playing with playdough and other artefacts to support myself to engage in deeper reflection on the themes emerging in the data. I conducted the analysis independently alongside reviewing preliminary themes for the findings (Chapters 4, 5 and 6), with the Emerging Researchers during activities (e.g. Visual Explorer where the Emerging Researchers categorised conceptualisations of play after sharing their visual cards), subsequently with my supervisors, and verified themes and findings with the Emerging Researchers during our certificate ceremony celebrating their research after the data was analysed. As highlighted above, observational and transcribed data from the research workshops (e.g.

flipcharts, Wellbeing Jenga blocks, group work notes) semi-structured interviews, research journals, and field notes were coded and analysed. My analysis of the visual data was done in conjunction with the transcribed data from the sessions so that the interpretations of imagery were based on the Emerging Researchers' ideas and reflections and not my independent adult viewpoint.

In addition to thematic analysis and play-based analysis, I employed narrative analysis for semi-structured interview transcripts and selected meetings (e.g. reflective debriefs) and workshop transcripts (e.g. play object stories). Narrative analysis was used to gain further insight into ways that identities may be constructed (Shukla, Wilson, & Boddy, 2014). In doing this I paid attention to stories being shared and their role in identities (not just in particular themes). As narrative identities are shaped and 'co-constructed between teller and listener' this process required reflexivity and attention to the relational interactions within interviews and participatory spaces and the larger cultural and social conditions (Phoenix, 2008). I further explored the emerging findings to identify any apparently contradictory data. Combining a thematic and narrative approach aided in recognising the 'effect of particular narratives within the interview conversation' (Shukla et al., 2014, p. 22), and their relation to social and political contexts that have and continue to shape circumstances of young people's lives (Eastmond, 2007). Data from each of the Emerging Researchers was followed through, throughout the analysis, with some young people featuring more prominently in certain chapter sections based on their engagement in particular research activities and/or more active contribution on certain thematic areas of focus that emerged.

While the initial desire was to engage Emerging Researchers throughout the whole analysis process, this did not prove to be possible due to lack of availability of the Emerging Researchers and time implications for them due to work, education, family, and social involvement. However, a few of the Emerging Researchers shared their reflections on the themes during the semi-structured interviews (which occurred after they led research) and

certificate ceremony which was useful for quality analysis. For example, at the certificate ceremony, Rigby and Cedar expressed their agreement with the themes emerging presented, in particular around relationships in research, conceptualisations of play, and play in its role in exploring social issues. When asked, they had nothing further to add and stated confidence in the themes included. In future research, greater participatory data analysis with young people (e.g. learning how to code through candy and object sorting, sorting quotes, using sticky notes to find and sort key themes emerging, etc.) and innovative non-written approaches, such as audio collages, could support deeper analysis. This will be explored more in the Conclusion (Chapter 7).

3.9 Ethics

This research used both procedural and relational ethics. This section addresses critical elements of voluntary and informed ongoing consent, limited confidentiality, anonymity, do no harm protocol, and power imbalances between researchers and participants. All research was conducted in accordance with children's rights (UNCRC) and best practices in researching with children (e.g. Ethical Research Involving Children (ERIC)). The research was approved and cleared by the University of Edinburgh School of Social and Political Science Ethics and Research Committee. Ethics are also recognised as relational 'everyday ethics' with ethics going beyond rules and regulations, to be present 'in ways of being as well as acting, and in relationships and emotions' (Banks et al., 2013, p. 266). This research thus goes beyond procedural ethics (while recognising its importance) and integrates an ethics of care that recognises humans as inherently relational. The approach emphasises the importance of everyone being respected and listened to in the research process (Bussu, Lalani, Pattison, & Marshall, 2020), aligns with the epistemological position of this dissertation, and is further explored in the reciprocity section. Relational ethics respects ethics as a reflexive dialogue between researchers and participants (Meloni, Vanthuyne, & Rousseau, 2015).

The ethical considerations for this research focused on my engagement with the Emerging Researchers, and did not involve their ethics process in conducting their own research. Children who participated in the research led by the Emerging Researchers were still required to complete consent forms in case any of their sharing impacted the observations and discussions I had with the Emerging Researchers. Additionally, as the Emerging Researchers were learning about research methods facilitation, it was important for them to learn about informed, voluntary, ongoing consent processes. As such, my ethical considerations extended to engagement with the Emerging Researchers as they led research but was not centred on the Emerging Researchers' research participants.

3.9.1 Voluntary, Informed, Ongoing Consent

User-friendly, contextually appropriate information about the research was shared with Emerging Researchers prior to their engagement in the research project (see Appendix C). The information was reviewed by the local partner who recommended a summarised version to better recruit young people. A poster was developed that introduced the Emerging Researchers' programme and highlighted the purpose of the research. It incorporated dates for the initial sessions, why engaging could be of value to the alumni, and contact information to learn more. Once interest was shown, consent forms were shared that provided greater detail on the consent process, confidentiality and anonymity, contact details for questions and complaints, and further, including ethical, protocols. Emerging Researchers were invited to sign written consent forms and ask their parents/caregivers to sign prior to joining the research (if they were under 16 years of age as required in the province of British Columbia, Canada). I provided regular opportunities for the Emerging Researchers to opt out of research and sought to be mindful of verbal and non-verbal cues, ensuring ongoing informed consent throughout the project. I reminded young people of their right to withdraw without any detriment to their opportunities to engage in future programmes of the organisation. Although my research centred on the Emerging Researchers themselves, because we were audio recording and taking field notes of the

whole process, it was pertinent to ensure that all young people, including those who were involved in research led by the Emerging Researchers, and their parents/guardians (where under 16 years), were aware of the process.

One of the young person participants in the Emerging Researchers-led research did not consent to the research. As the research was taking place during one of their regular programme sessions he was still in attendance. As such, I removed any comments made by him on the audio recorder from transcriptions and avoided taking field notes about his reflections that impacted the Emerging Researchers attitudes, behaviours, reflections, and actions. While it was critical not to include his data I was cognisant that his presence and relations with the other young participants impacted the research process. Although he was not explicitly recorded or included in the field notes, his involvement could still arguably be critiqued as part of the research. I sought nevertheless to spend time chatting with him, and engaged him at times (although less so than with others) so that he did not feel alienated and so that my positioning as an ethical researcher was not merely principled rule following, but, importantly, ensured relational ethics of integrity and acting as a caring person (Banks et al., 2016).

During an evening campfire, a couple of the programme participants (who were participating in the Emerging Researchers led research) discussed how their parents had introduced the consent form, one as if they were research subjects engaged in an experiment, the other as a great opportunity for them to contribute. It was evident that parents had varying degrees of knowledge/understanding of research itself and their reasons for consenting for their children to partake in the process. I took time to clarify and demystify the research, and address any notions of the research as an 'experiment on young people'. Another female participant was intrigued to learn more and asked me several questions around the rationale of the research and validity (e.g. asking about play and nature to young people already exposed to and active in nature programmes) while walking alongside one another during the camping hike. As such, although the Emerging Researchers were leading the

overarching research with wilderness school participants for the weekend, I took time to answer her questions and seek her insights and advice on play research during our walk. In my role as an adult support for the Emerging Researchers (when they wanted or asked) I was able to respond to questions about ethics that the Emerging Researchers wanted further details on, for their participants.

In addition to the Emerging Researchers and young participants, a few of the programme partners who were active during the research training process asked to sign the consent forms as well. While this dissertation was not focused on their conceptualisations, understandings, and embodiment of play and play-based research, their positioning in the research had impacts on the Emerging Researchers' experience and sharing. Furthermore, their consent provided the opportunity to integrate some of their comments (e.g. reflections on the concept of research) into the findings.

3.9.2 Confidentiality

I sought to maintain confidentiality for the Emerging Researchers, young participants, and adults engaged. While confidentiality is critical, it was evident prior to inception that certain limitations would exist due to the relationships between the researchers themselves and the active engagement of the staff team. A community agreement was developed collectively in the first meetings with the Emerging Researchers and included confidentiality in what each other shared. However, given the participatory nature of the research, young people have scope to integrate learning from the sessions into their own lives and it was communicated that there was always the possibility of information unintentionally being shared by peers. I informed the Emerging Researchers that everything shared during the session was confidential unless anything they shared placed themselves or others at significant risk, then we would work together to find supports to refer to. Children and young people in the Emerging Researcher led research were also informed of this. Surmiak (2020) highlights how most researchers working with 'vulnerable' groups, such as children feel legally bound (and

ideally morally bound) to report cases and they therefore inform children prior to the start of the research. A clear child safeguarding ethical process was set up so that in the event that I were to suspect, witness, or a child or adult were to disclose violence and/or abuse, I would adhere to pre-established child protection reporting protocol with the local community partner and British Columbia's Child, Family, and Community Service Act. If a young person were to have disclosed violence and abuse, we would have sought the immediate safety of the child and would have informed them that we would need to share the case with someone else who would be able to respond to try and help them be safe. Additionally, the local partner had contact numbers and details of support services and referrals in the event that an activity was to trigger a young person and/or they had questions and wanted support information. I also had a list of the support services and if there were concerns of negligence or violence perpetrated by staff members I would follow up with child protection support services and senior management within the organisation.

3.9.3 Anonymity

In order to align with principles of anonymity and do no harm, pseudonyms were used. These were chosen by the Emerging Researchers themselves as I was cautious of the 'dynamics of power inherent in the act of naming' (Guenther, 2009, p. 412). The Emerging Researchers' pseudonyms ranged from alternative 'common' names to television characters, such as Donatello from teenage mutant ninja turtles. In a couple of cases, names were not chosen by the Emerging Researchers prior to the end of the research, and thus I chose names that aligned with interests of theirs that would not be identifiable (e.g. 'Kodak' for an Emerging Researcher interested in photography).

In participatory research led by young people, a sense of partnership between young people and adults is important and thus at points it is essential for participants to have ownership over the research and the shared experiences within it. Thus, while anonymity is critical for principle-based

ethics around this, the decisions that young people make, as to how they will share their recommendations outside the scope of this research dissertation in their communities, may vary. For example, one young woman integrated her learning into leading play-based activities in her summer camp job, whereas another planned to bring ideas into every day practice once COVID-19 restrictions changed. Additionally, the partner organisation's name has not been used through the dissertation. However, due to the details shared in the partner overview and aspects of the programme throughout the chapter, there is scope for readers to identify the partner. This has been discussed with the local partner, who is comfortable to be a part of the research and recognised the potential limitations of anonymity.

3.9.4 Power and Relationships

Adult young person power imbalances are considered one of the largest ethical challenges when including young people in research (Alderson, 1995; Mayall, 2000; Morrow & Richards, 1996). In this research, time was built to support relationship development between the young researchers, programme partner adults, and myself (Morrow & Richards, 1996). I sought to shift power imbalances through participatory methodology and to have continuous reflexivity and humility, fostering a reciprocal transfer of knowledge and co-learning. Intergenerational dialogue and play-based processes between myself and the Emerging Researchers was important to for 'more balanced and respectful relationships' (Collins et al., 2020, p. 5). While recognising this research was a short-term endeavour, I strove to cultivate space for young people to develop practice and recommendations they can enact in their own lives and introduce to their spheres of influence going forward. This is exemplified through the research training and the dialogue on social issues, relationships, and actions exemplified in the findings (Chapters 4, 5 and 6) through the process of play.

A few different approaches were used throughout the research relationship building and trainings. The first research training was conducted over one day with a small group where a couple of people knew one another and two

others did not. While we had a rich experience and participatory activities throughout, the initial dialogue felt nervous, as people slowly began to interconnect. As the day went on, and we built in playful 'non-research specific' space in the afternoon (e.g. canoeing and spontaneously jumping into the lake fully dressed), comfort grew. In the second research training group, I was invited to attend two pre-planning evenings whereupon I held no responsibilities for training in research. I was given space to introduce the research project and highlight how research training would be built into the next week of the expedition. I was able to begin to demystify the intimidating language of research through highlighting its similarities to experiential learning activities the young people were familiar with and exploring research as storytelling. During the evenings we spent time eating a meal together, chatting casually, doing a swim test in the lake, and starting to prepare for the following week. By taking *more* time for quality interactions for the second research workshop, I avoided 'jumping right into [the] research' without first taking time to 'establish those connections' (Key Informant 3, young person). The between space harboured fun and opportunity to begin to build relationships in a more comfortable format without directly starting with collecting/leading research.

Demystifying research was valuable not only for Emerging Researchers but also for the partner staff members themselves who would be programme facilitators during the week. One programme facilitator highlighted how she was a bit concerned about a researcher(myself) joining in prior to meeting, and was fearful of research reflecting on her own frustrating experiences writing research papers in her undergraduate degree. After an introduction to the participatory research activities she voiced their similarity to activities the organisation already does (e.g. opening circles, experiential learning reflective discussions), and began to feel comfortable as she expressed how research is really anything (with intention, reflection, and documentation after). By sharing her own reflection, she related to the young people and reinforced the value of research. This was also advantageous for the partner organisation's Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning team in the organisation

who were trying to integrate further monitoring and research into regular activities. We explored ways that some of the research activities could be modified and used for their own tools going forward.

While partner staff members were all incredibly supportive and contributed to the success of the project, it was evident that the dialogue style of a programme facilitator for young people and a researcher facilitator can differ. For example, when a young person shares that they feel proud of leading an activity, a researcher may probe further asking open-ended questions to learn more about this pride and what surrounds it. Whereas a facilitator may (and did at times) respond with a response that validated the young person and closed off the dialogue. Although this potentially encouraged confidence of the young people, it also limited their ability to further reflect and have ownership over their own reflections and emotions and can position adults as the knower. While the adults were well meaning their role in unintentionally exerting power through ending the reflection of the young person, it can have potential negative consequences on meaningful participation and full sharing by the young people (Lee et al., 2020). The intentionality of creating space for young people to speak, perceive, and further reflect on their own perspectives is more prominent in that of a researcher's role. Additionally, as the programme staff had previous relationships with the Emerging Researchers they sometimes answered questions about, or for, the young people.

While it is often suggested that adults hold hierarchical power, arguably the Emerging Researchers held great power too in their decision to engage or not engage in processes (while recognising the contextual factors that contribute to and/or impede these decisions). The research relationship between young people and adults is more relational and less 'us and them' as previously construed in some childhood studies literature. Power is complicated and ever changing, and young people also hold power to 'make or break the research by sharing or withholding their cultural capital' (Franks, 2011, p. 20). For example, the Emerging Researchers' decisions/abilities to

engage or not engage in the research (e.g. by attending sessions, responding to emails and texts by the partners) held more power at times for research to occur than my role as an adult researcher. While it is pertinent to not underestimate adult power in research, adopting a more dynamic and relational understanding of power and how it enact itself in research across young people and adults is critical (Davidson, 2017) to respect intergenerational partnership and begin to shift the way power is conceived, understood, and experienced.

Another potential challenge in power is multiple-power relations among young people themselves (Schäfer & Yarwood, 2008). While I was aware of my adult power, it was important to pay attention to power imbalances between the Emerging Researchers members and the Emerging Researchers and their research participants. I engaged in regular reflexivity assessing my role and power implications. Young people are not homogenous, and they act to 'resist, challenge, acknowledge [and] negotiate power amongst themselves' (Schäfer & Yarwood, 2008, p. 132). I was cautious to coordinate multiple forms of engagement so that both more dominant and quieter voices had the opportunity to share ideas verbally or written in a group and/or one-on-one. Additionally, I used games and activities to reduce power imbalances and create shared spaces for connection. I welcomed the Emerging Researchers to introduce their own games and ideas, and dialogued with the partner staff on previous activities that had best supported different Emerging Researchers (when they had been in the wilderness programme) to participate. I also took ample time to regularly listen to the young people to learn more about their passions and interests, and to create space for these to emerge during the research (e.g. Kodak taking photos of the play-based research activities due to his photography passion).

3.9.5 Reciprocity

Meaningful relationships in research are pertinent for quality research and ethical practice. Reciprocity is a valuable part of research process and can

further support relationships that are formed. McGregor and Marker (2018) suggest that Western concepts of reciprocity are often predicated around a binary of exchange that becomes a transactional, measurable, and time-limited approach and that seeks to avoid the relational vulnerability inherent in the complexity of qualitative participatory research. Alternatively to a binary exchange the research took a stance to weave reciprocity throughout the elements of design, partnership development, data collection, analysis and sharing (Trainor & Bouchard, 2013).

In this research, I sought to avoid a transactional construct of reciprocity and explore ways that the young people and myself were co-learning, sharing, contributing, and receiving in a circular process of engagement. Young people were not compensated monetarily for their hourly time due to preference of the partner organisation (who engaged them as part of a free wilderness programme) and budget available. While I would have liked to compensate the Emerging Researchers' time through payment, it was also valuable to go beyond monetary compensation (McGregor & Marker, 2018). Thoughtful reflection was put into ways to value and appreciate the Emerging Researchers' time, participation, and engagement in the research journey and to attempt to provide fun, playful, interactive reflection and learning opportunities. In doing so I sought to support a 'longer cycle of exchange' (Maiter et al., 2008, p. 322) to foster deeper relationships between young people themselves, their communities, the researcher, and the non-material world, as well as support young people to strengthen their own knowledge, skills, and opportunities going forward.

Furthermore, I sought to ensure that there would be no cost implications for the Emerging Researchers and thus we provided transport where needed to attend the research and were provided with meals and snacks during all our time together. The Emerging Researchers were also provided with new opportunities for engaging in outdoor excursions (e.g. paddle boarding, camping, taking a ferry boat to a new location). The Emerging Researchers received a continuing education certificate from Moray House School of

Education and Sport, University of Edinburgh for play-based research training and facilitation. Additionally, outdoor nature-based gift certificates as well as keychains from the University of Edinburgh were shared to highlight appreciation of the young people's time and contributions. While specific gifts were provided, drawing from research (Kuokkanen, 2007) it was important to recognise gifts as not static but as a continuous process and practice of reciprocation. As such, I also explored other layers of ongoing reciprocity, such as supporting with cover letters, activity and volunteer opportunities, and informal mentorship. I drew on wisdom of the key informant interviews that took place prior to the research; as one key informant expressed, reciprocity in research

'leaves an impact on that person because they no longer feel like just an animal in a pen that's being looked at. It feels like they are actually valued and someone respects their time in that sense like honouring their time in whatever mini capacity' (Key Informant 1, young person).

This key informant voiced that where monetary compensation is possible it is ideal; however, the informal forms of reciprocity of friendship and supports (e.g. sharing job opportunities, connecting on ideas) held greater value. Engaging with key informants prior to the inception of research with Emerging Researchers caused me to regularly reflect on respecting research as reciprocity. It was important to work with young people to identify what value being engaged in research can bring to their own lives and to build in different opportunities that support the Emerging Researchers' interests and needs wherever possible, as well as their overarching wellbeing. For example, two of the Emerging Researchers had birthdays during the leading research phase so I made sure to coordinate a birthday cake and a card with the other Emerging Researchers for the birthday celebrations. The organisational partner played a critical role in further layers of reciprocity due to their more regular contact and relationships with local services in the community. For example, one young person was linked to another facilitation training opportunity for LGBTQI+ young people. Additionally, when an

Emerging Researcher spoke about trying to coordinate camping for their sister but did not have camping equipment, the organisation invited them to borrow supplies for the weekend to support the trip. The Emerging Researchers also contributed to the organisation through reflecting on the organisation's programmes and supporting them to enhance children's meaningful participation in programme decisions.

Reciprocity took many forms throughout the research in respecting and valuing one another. This research engaged on a relational level considering 'reciprocity as a journey, and not a fixed point' and appreciating one another in the process (McGregor & Marker, 2018, p. 325).

3.10 Reflexivity

Emotionless, passionless, abstract, intellectual, academic, research is a ... lie, it does not exist. It is a lie to ourselves and a lie to other people. Humans – feeling, living, breathing, thinking humans – do research. When we try to cut ourselves off at the neck and pretend an objectivity that does not exist in the human world, we become dangerous, to ourselves first, and then to the people around us.

(Hampton, 1995, p. 52)

Reflexive research demands researchers to be aware of personal, cultural, and social contexts and how academic and non-academic experiences impact the construction of knowledge (Davis, 1998; Etherington, 2004). As a researcher I sought to be clear and honest about limitations and affordances of reflexivity and hold myself accountable for my subject position's effects on research and those engaged within it (Absolon, & Willett, 2005; Al-Hardan, 2014). I move beyond a static notion of self and positionality. I suggest there is scope for a transformational process moving my positionality to become one of fluidity and transition. I reflected on what the changes in my perceptions were, when, and where they took place, and how they impacted the research trajectory. As Denzin (2001) asserts, a researcher is 'not an objective, politically neutral observer who stands outside and above the study

of the social world' (p. 3). As such, my positioning and its fluctuations require particular attention with recognition of the different social identities that I bring and how aspects of identity are co-constructed and transformed in research.

The process of engaging in 'reflexivity [was] full of muddy ambiguity and multiple trails' as I 'negotiate[d] the swamp' of ceaseless constructions and deconstructions, self-reflection, and self-analysis (Finlay, 2002, p. 2009). Similar to Jacobs (2009), I intended to blend 'systematic, multimodal data analysis [alongside a] mindful, reflexive engagement with the process of research itself' and the impact on both the researcher and the participants (p. 100). As Finlay (2002) suggests, reflexivity should begin at the beginning of research and continue throughout the whole process. I engaged in reflexivity during research question design, data collection, analysis, write up, and knowledge exchange. For example, when I conducted interviews I considered what I chose or did not choose to emphasise or leave out and 'bec[a]me aware of [my] own reactions to [the] interviews' and my potentially resulting thoughts, emotions, and triggers (Berger, 2015, p. 221). When I coded data, how did my own subject position and perceptions of the data impact my decisions on themes? Although involving the Emerging Researchers and my supervisors in the coding process and reflecting on themes brought in other subjective lenses, I am cognisant that my perspectives impacted the decisions made on research themes and the process of analysis. Thus, each day at research I paused and questioned my situated knowledge and subject positionality during the process. To facilitate regular reflexivity, I established research journals and techniques that took diverse forms of online note-taking, reflective hand written journaling, arts-based doodles, and long trail runs, to constantly reflect on the research process. Journals are considered an effective tool for reflexivity, as they can lead the researcher to a state of openness where prior assumptions, beliefs, and attitudes are recognised and understood (Dowling, 2006). Additionally, in my research with young people and community partners, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, I introduced the idea of research journaling to create space for them to engage as reflective researchers alongside me. The

Emerging Researchers were invited to share their journals as part of the research data if they chose. As lead researchers with the young participants, and co-researchers in the project, the Emerging Researchers positionality and reflexivity in the research was particularly important.

I sought to ask the Emerging Researchers to constantly question my assumptions. By taking a reflexive approach 'researchers can foster transparency and honesty about the relational nature of the research process' (Blaisdell, 2015, p. 89). Throughout the research journey, I engaged in self-reflexive practice being ever mindful of my positionality and where it was static and/or fluid over time.

3.11 Conclusion

The chapter introduced the ontological and epistemological framing, and has provided the rationale for decisions that were made about the play-based research approach as well as my reflexive experience. The approach sought to gain a deeper understanding of young-people researchers' conceptualisations and experiences of play and play-based research approaches. A participatory approach supported relational development with the young people and opportunity for deeper engagement and learning from them through verbal and non-verbal forms. The dynamic and flexible approach provided an opportunity to follow up with Emerging Researchers and spend time in different places further exploring their everyday understanding and experiences. The play-based approach was used in design, training of young people in play-based methods, Emerging Researchers planning research, research led by the Emerging Researchers, and reflective space and focus group discussions. Further, this chapter has provided an overview of ethics from a procedural and relational approach highlighting the complexity in ethical engagement with young people. Finally, the chapter concluded with an overview of reflexivity embodied and practiced throughout the research.

Chapter 4 Play in the Lives of Young Researchers

This chapter draws on young people's understandings, experiences, and embodiment of play within their own lives and that of their peers to further develop an understanding of what play entails. As highlighted in the literature review, there are many diverse definitions, perceptions, and conceptualisations of play and this dissertation does not seek to define or categorise play. Nixon (2017) states that the term 'mode' can indicate a variety of something, a style of expression, or a way of 'doing' something. I use the term 'modes of play' to draw attention to the many ways play can be conceptualised, 'done', and embodied. This chapter will introduce modes of play that were found in the research with Emerging Researchers. This chapter draws on participatory research activities, peer-to-peer interviews, interviews with Emerging Researchers, field note data, and research journals. The chapter also alludes to the mental health dimension of wellbeing that will be explored further in both Chapter 5 in relation to the role of Emerging Researchers' relationships and in Chapter 6 with regard to play fostering dialogue on social issues.

In this chapter, I discuss how Emerging Researchers conceptualise, experience, and embody play. I highlight how societal norms and processes manifest in young people's perceptions of play and how they negotiate these norms. Akin to Harker (2005), I explore how playing is an embodied experience. I begin by introducing modes of play that were present in the data: play as a challenge and play as humour. Play as a challenge, contrary to 'expectations' of play conceptualisations, was prevalent and significant throughout the data. I then move to exploring the relationship between 'choice' and access to play in 'making time' and 'taking time' that impacts young people's opportunities for and experience in play. The socio-economic, identity, and mental health contexts and diverse lived experiences of the Emerging Researchers generate particular stories with implications for how

play is understood, felt, and experienced by the Emerging Researchers individually and collectively.

4.1 Modes of Play

4.1.1 Play as a Challenge

Play is often romanticised as carefree, joyous, and positive (Fink, Saine, Saine, & French, 1968) with little consideration of the significance of challenge and its role in play. Although some adventure and outdoor wilderness programme literature exists on play as a challenge (e.g. Harper, 2017; Houge Mackenzie & Hodge, 2019), there is a dearth of literature on challenge in other forms of play. Play as a challenge provides new insights into explorations of play being a space to engage in uncertainty and provides critical insights into older children's diverse perspectives on play itself. While outdoor natural spaces may lend themselves to adventure play, risky play can also happen indoors ((Dodd & Lester, 2020) and play as a challenge could arise anywhere.

This warrants reflection on prevalent perceptions of a relationship between wilderness play and challenge and domestic forms of play as carefree and joyous. Play can also be seen as deliberate creation of uncertainty (Špinka, Newberry, & Bekoff, 2001) where children and young people are 'being in control of being out of control' (Gordon & Esbjörn-Hargens, 2007, p. 216). Play can act as a parody for emotions where people are able to play out challenges and vulnerabilities that they may face in their regular lives, while having control over their context of play (Sutton-Smith, 2003). This idea of uncertainty aligned with control interconnects with the idea of play as a challenge particularly in the debates between safe and risky that were present in the research. The consideration of play as a challenge explores the way that Emerging Researchers in this study conceptualised, experienced, and embodied play as a challenge in their lived experiences prior to, during, and after the research. I provide an overview of the overarching dialogue on the theme of play as a challenge prior to discussing the ways in which conceptualisations of play as a challenge manifest in

relation to 'comfort zones', achievement, trust, life difficulties/struggles, and balance for the Emerging Researchers.

4.1.1.1 Comfort Zones

Phrases about comfort zones, such as 'getting out of your' comfort zone, 'playing on the edge', and 'growing', fore-fronted the Emerging Researchers' conversations when asked to share what play meant to them during the research activities. The majority of Emerging Researchers' statements in relation to comfort zones included the possibility to go beyond the zone of comfort. For example, one Emerging Researcher expressed his feeling that 'if you get out of your comfort zone, even if you're just getting a little bit out of your comfort zone ... every time you get a little bit out of your comfort zone it kind of makes your comfort zone grow and you can improve on it' (Tesla). Similarly, another Emerging Researcher argued the importance of playing 'around the edge of a comfort zone if not slightly beyond' when at play, for the opportunity to do things that may not 'normally happen' or that one does not get to do as much as one would like (Kodak). These statements corroborate to present a contrast between a comfort zone (and one's everyday normal) with something on the edge, unknown, and slightly beyond the zone. The first quote also shows the desire to constantly 'improve' and better oneself through the process. Play is thus separated from the normality of everyday life while additionally striving to go beyond one's comfort zone and ordinary abilities.

Emerging Researchers reflected on going beyond comfort zones to engage in new activities. For example, Sydney reflected on the value of 'unleash[ing] your wild side', seeing play as out of the ordinary and an understanding of outdoor play as something that is out of the ordinary in its wildness, separate from the 'regular' world. The Emerging Researchers exemplified play's role in getting out of their comfort zones when trying new activities during the play-based research training. For example, several of the Emerging Researchers spoke of their fear of paddle boarding prior to paddling down the rushing river and their desire to push themselves past the edge of comfort. Tesla spoke of

transitioning from 'like I can't do that' to 'yeah I probably can actually do that'. He further shared the value of little shifts over time to make one's comfort zone grow and improve in challenging situations. The act of going outside one's comfort zone could be perceived as something stressful or unpleasant, as was evident in my own initial research journal reflections around play being something safe within comfort. However, several of the Emerging Researchers expressed getting out of the comfort zone as a positive element of play, with Rigby stating 'I enjoy pushing myself out of my comfort zone and trying new things'. The Emerging Researchers' reflections reinforced each another's statements of understanding and valuing play as a challenge alongside the importance of little steps. Their reflections on comfort zones from their previous wilderness school programme, where the idea of moving beyond one's comfort to explore new experiences was discussed, has potential implications for their reflections on going beyond comfort to stretch themselves in challenges of play. The data suggests that being slightly on the edge to experience risk and new things while having a certain proximity to comfort within a challenge is important in play.

4.1.1.2 'In the Moment' Value of Play as a Challenge

Play as a challenge was also discussed as something that had intrinsic value for being in the moment. This was exemplified during play-based research activities the Emerging Researchers engaged in. For example, during an object story sharing activity, one Emerging Researcher using used her hair tie to express that 'play to me is like challenges':

... and like when stuff's getting hard and you're really into something or you're really playing around you put your hair up, like get it out of the way and then you're just, you're just in on the activity and what's going on around you and you don't have to worry about everything else and like in that sense you don't have to worry about your hair. You don't have to worry about anything else you're in on the activity. You're getting down and dirty but like ... *present*. (Sydney)

The excerpt above shows Sydney's perspective on embracing challenges and the power of being present outside life's other competing challenges. This excerpt was chosen because of its unique exploration of play and challenge in the moment, and its relation with other findings that are expressed across modes of play in this research. Sydney's hair, similar to her mind, is something she values at times and at other times is in her way of play. The excerpt suggests that her desire to tie her hair back and get it out of the way connects with her desire to get her worrying mind out of the way and just be fully present 'in' activities. It highlights a mind/body split, removing her worrying mind from her immersion in a play space. In these moments of playing around she speaks about getting down and dirty, *active* in the process, yet maintaining a sense of *presence*. In doing so, her statements align with Russell, Lester and Smith's (2017) argument for play in the moment to be valued for its own sake. Sydney's embodied motion physically while moving away from her worrying mental space fostered a sense of presence and value of the intrinsic. While play is often explored as constantly moving, the role of being present and static in embodied movement and its value during the moment is important to further explore in young people's play.

4.1.1.3 Instrumental 'Achievement' Value

Emerging Researchers also conversely conveyed play instrumentally as something to work towards or 'something to achieve'. There was an emphasis on play as an advancement or progress towards development. The conceptualisation that play connects to achievement was discussed and observed across the Emerging Researchers. Sydney expressed how 'every day can be a challenge sometimes' and highlighted the importance of the 'smallest [play] goals' in play to carry on and to think about achievements each day. Play was also noted as a challenge and something to achieve each day in relation to one's home space and the regular daily tasks of life. In this vein, Sydney and Donatello shared daily goals in play which focused on the instrumental value to achieve an outcome.

Another Emerging Researcher expressed the desire to prove to herself that she could overcome a wilderness challenge (Cedar). During Cedar's multi-day hike challenge, she was offered peer support to balance the weight of her bag to support her physical ability needs; she chose to not take the support and to keep hiking. Telling the story during walking interviews on play, the experience was connected with conceptualisation of play. Although she kept 'falling in the mud' she 'was like I can do this' and shared that it made her feel 'amazing' (Cedar). Her word choice of 'falling in the mud', while ambiguous, may imply feelings of falling down in her ability and her goal. However, she felt the desire to persevere to 'conquer' the challenge resulting in her feeling proud of herself and a sense of 'amazing'.

Play as an achievement also takes many different forms that do not need to be outdoor or risky play focused. This goes outside the normative perception in literature that play as a challenge is situated in risky play and/or adventure/wilderness play forms. For example, while one young woman spoke often of her passion for the outdoors and of hiking as a form of playing (as something to achieve), she also spoke of other acts she conceptualised as play such as finishing a book. Her play was not limited to one form and was experienced and expressed through different aspects of her life and interests. Similarly, Donatello spoke of play as being 'when you try something new and personally challenge yourself as a goal'. In a follow up interview after the research, Donatello shared how learning to drive and getting his licence was an example of a play challenge to achieve a goal with specific steps to get there. While getting a licence may not be commonly perceived as an act of play, for Donatello, his understanding of new challenges that could foster something positive (e.g. driving to a hike) was linked with getting his licence, which would create independence and greater access to play spaces. Additionally, as Donatello had previously voiced excitement for cars and driving, he considered driving to be playful (while at the same time serious). Play as challenge to achieve was understood as something of everyday life to achieve that was both outside and within outdoor adventure

play and the everyday mundane routine of life, yet (importantly) not akin to it, as it fostered something new.

4.1.1.4 Play *in* the Challenge

While play was expressed as a challenge, it was also discussed as something significant when *in* a challenge and, in juxtaposition, as something that when in challenge can be difficult to do. For example, one Emerging Researcher shared his regular sense of pessimism as a challenge in daily life and his apprehension to engage in some activities (D). The idea of being in the ‘challenge’ of one’s own mind and overcoming it was prevalent in discussions around play as exemplified by Donatello’s comment on ‘feeling strength in your own body, overcoming your own mind’, with the advice to slow it down when ‘your head is really busy’. He shared the importance of play in the challenge through describing play as a bright yellow dandelion (during an object story activity) in its ‘nice uplifting colour’ and its ability to adapt as it faces struggles.

Figure 4.1 *Dandelions where Donatello sat as he shared dandelions as his object.*



Donatello proclaimed play shows us ‘we can both have a bit of struggle but also kind of have fun at the same time’. The data demonstrates that challenge in the Emerging Researchers’ lives was recognised as having the emphasis on striving to still have fun and play when possible while in the challenge.

Play as a challenge was also connected with mental health (which will be explored further in Chapters 5 and 6), and the relationship between mind and body, with the majority of Emerging Researchers expressing that they define/understand wellbeing as mental health, primarily. While several of the Emerging Researchers spoke of physical aspects of play, they felt that the physical supported the mental and that, without the mental, the physical act of play could also sometimes not be realised. Their perspectives reinforce Pink's (2011) position that embodiment has the potential to dissolve or challenge distinction between the rational mind and the 'sensuous experiencing body' (p. 345). Humberstone (2011) argues that 'despite the centrality of embodied experience with sports' (p. 497) (and arguably play), little research has been able to communicate the complexity of the emotional and sensual aspects of the experience. Wheaton (2010) further argues that research has been unable to communicate the entwined nature of the 'acting, perceiving, thinking and feeling body' (p. 1071). The Emerging Researchers' statements show acknowledgement of the relationship of minds and bodies in concert and in opposition between their own minds and bodies, for example, in the idea of overcoming your own mind. This aligns with Cartesian dualism which saturates Western culture making mind a 'matter that is distinctive from the body' and favours the 'rational mind' over one's irrational body that needs to be contained (Lester, 2019, p. 43). Findings in this PhD research recognise the embodied selves of the Emerging Researchers and how those selves are constructed through the Emerging Researchers decisions to either resist or 'fully experience their moving bodies' (Azzarito & Sterling, 2010, p. 212) in relation to their mental health.

The tension between fully experiencing one's body and the push and pull of listening to one's body and mind collectively and separately was prevalent across Emerging Researchers. For example, Sydney expressed that sometimes 'like you gotta just face things with a smile' and 'just keep going, just keep pushing yourself' when facing difficulty at play. Her comment was in relation to hiking as a form of play when she was feeling tired, anxious, or her asthma was at its worst. Here she embraced her body in her desire to keep

moving, that may have been connected with entrenched societal expectations, and embraced her mind when striving to persevere while experiencing anxiety and other health challenges. In masking her anxiety with a smile, Sydney opposed both her body in seeking to control it to push through, and her mind in controlling it to push beyond. Her peer, Ocean, shared a similar desire to push against/beyond when she spoke of how she felt herself slipping and feeling the worry that she 'can't do it' when describing a play experience of hiking during a Story Cube reflection circle. She further expressed the importance of stopping 'getting into [her] head' and 'putting [herself in her] way' (Ocean). The data shows a desire by the Emerging Researchers to get out of their heads and to engage in the body while opposing/critiquing themselves for being in their own way. The competing thought process of the Emerging Researchers in relation to their engagement in body and their 'rational' mind presents a complexity in their own desires for their mental health and relationship with their bodies and minds, and the competing societal norms that have constrained/supported their ways of thinking and engaging with themselves.

As a researcher, I am aware of how my own perceptions and experience of play in relation to 'getting into my head' interconnect with that of the Emerging Researchers as expressed in my research journal:

... while running ... my clearest thinking comes in these moments and also [as] moments of not thinking at all, 'just' reflective space. In running I trust myself. Trust my feet. Trust my legs will take me there. (Research Journal)

In contrast, I also reflected in my research journal on the importance of 'remember[ing] to get out of my head, or not panic when head is ... full' in less playful spaces. As such, my own lived experience and my desire to interconnect my body and mind through embodiment of play while at the same time opposing my mind when it is not 'cooperating/on my side' suggests both a connection with and separation of mind and body (Research Journal). My personal experiences and understandings of play embodiment

relate to and deviate from the Emerging Researchers themselves in the diverse expressions of play in the challenge. As such, I am cognisant of needing to continuously reflect on how my own perceptions of embodiment may impact my analysis of the data.

While the Emerging Researchers expressed a need to ‘push through’ and persevere in order to move past their mental health challenges they also spoke of the days where that is not possible. For play to be realised and the challenge and achievement to occur was sometimes also *contingent* on mental health. Sydney noted that, for her, mental health is huge, and if your mind is ‘not in it the rest of you isn’t either’ and if you’re feeling ‘like good that day you’re in the right mind set for things it’s a lot easier to achieve your goals and to play’. Findings of this study have shown that young people felt a certain level of personal responsibility in making decisions in relation to play and their mental health. Emerging Researchers internalised their individual responsibility for their own health to push through.

Although there are many benefits for young people to have a role in their own mental health, I caution a neoliberal notion of individualised responsibility within Western societies that can be internalised which emphasises ‘coping, competence and success’ (Bottrell, 2007, p. 334). Neoliberalism, as a societal and not only political-economic force, calls for individuals, including children and young people, to be responsible self-sufficient participants in civil society and in the market economy (Kennelly, 2011; Taft, 2019). While there was an individualised notion of mental health, the support systems that existed around the Emerging Researchers, such as extracurricular programmes (including the one they were immersed in) and friendships, were also referenced in relation to the play experiences discussed. Emerging Researchers expressed value for and challenges with their spheres of influence and systems of support (or lack of support) yet placed greater emphasis on their own responsibility than social structures. They, as evidenced in this research, felt responsible to independently excel and felt guilty when they did not overcome their mental health in the challenge and

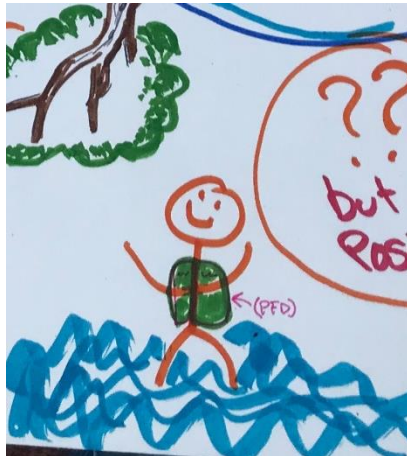
fulfil performative norms. Additional research to examine social structures for mental health through the use of play-based research would be beneficial to engage more with the complexity of internalised guilt and individualised notions of responsibility the Emerging Researchers expressed. This will be further explored later in this chapter addressing 'taking time and making time' as well as in Chapter 6 discussing play and dialogue on social issues.

4.1.1.5 Safety and Trust

Although several Emerging Researchers expressed appreciation for play as a challenge and play *in* the challenge, the challenge space appeared to be valued more when there was an element of safety and trust, such as during the Emerging Researcher expedition workshop. The data suggests that establishing trust through play (with less challenges initially) contributes to developing non-threatening environments for young people. As one Emerging Researcher stated: 'I trust that these guys aren't going to throw us into the jaws of death' when he was speaking of his general pessimism and his apprehensiveness prior to a new challenge (D). With trust, he engaged in a new challenge, paddle boarding down a river, that became one of his 'favourite activities of the whole trip ... beautiful' (D). In sociological literature there is a vast array of conceptualisations of trust that range from trust as the property of individuals, social relationships, or social systems (Misztal, 2013). This dissertation does not intend to delve deeply into trust literature, and uses the language/perceptions of trust as shared by the Emerging Researchers as they engage in reflexivity on feelings and embodiment of trust and its role in their play. Because D had gained trust with the group through previous experiences of safety and connection he was able to trust that the future experience would not be intentionally life threatening. This can be likened with Green and Denov's (2019) research that used the art (a form of play) of mask-making as a nonthreatening team-building activity to foster trust. The emotional element of trust can be under-recognised and under-valued, yet it is often considered 'very important to young researchers' (Cuevas-Parra & Tisdall, 2019, p. 9) and young people in general in group dynamics. This was evident in Emerging Researchers' data. For example,

during a river journey research activity, one Emerging Researcher drew an image of a person wearing a lifejacket and explained that the image was her: 'it's me, now I know to jump in the water with my safety [life jacket] instead of just jumping in WOOO hoping for the best. Now I'm jumping with help to know that I can float' (Sydney).

Figure 4.2 *River Journey image of an Emerging Researcher wearing a life jacket (PFD)*



This quote showed new-found confidence due to acquired skills to plunge into a play challenge with both a sense of safety and trust in her own ability to float (with a personal flotation device keeping her up) to be able to take on future challenges, and in trust in the group and community to be able to support her. This example connected with other Emerging Researchers' desires to engage in play as a challenge that was reinforced by trust they felt in their Emerging Researcher peers and adult supports to make it through a new challenge. Trust was explored in relation to the relationships among the Emerging Researchers group itself, adult supports, and in trust that they held or did not hold at times in their own selves as expressed through mental health conversations. As such, trust was conceptualised as relational and individual for the Emerging Researchers; a feeling that people and/or the partner organisation were sufficiently trustworthy was necessary for engagement to occur (Davies, 2019). An experience of trust and its relation to safety and challenge in play interconnects with ideas of mental health, as explored above, and of balance in play, further expressed below.

4.1.1.6 Balance Between the Easy and the Challenge

Although play was valued as a challenge, it was also communicated as part of a balance between the easy and the challenging as the Emerging Researchers navigated their liminal roles of being children in a state of transition to adulthood. Ocean articulated that ‘play is just about balance – it’s about experiencing those really fun easy childlike activities. You know something as simple as finger painting but also about experiencing those more challenging ones that result in a really cool outcome’ (Ocean). This idea of the separation and interrelationship of play between easy and challenging was further shared as ‘that balance between the *childlike* and the challenging’ (Ocean). In this reflection, childlike was equated with easy, and the historical societal perception of childhood as innocent, happy, and free (Valentine, 1996). While Ocean’s own experience of childhood was complex, her overarching perception (and similar to others in the group) for children’s play was that of an innocent playful space. In contrast, perspectives on play as a challenge were more prevalent for young people. This reflection aligns with literature that suggests that young people may infantilise play as it is positioned as younger child activity and not respected for adults (L. H. V. Wright, 2018). In this research, play as a challenge appeared to give play credibility for young people on their trajectory to act as ‘productive’ contributing members of society. Although the data indicates that play as a challenge was deemed more acceptable for the Emerging Researchers, the balance of having a relationship with the potentially more deviant (for older children) childlike, carefree alongside the challenging was expressed as important across the Emerging Researchers. An aspiration to appear adult-like with a concurrent desire to maintain childhood play was evident in the liminal space between childhood and adulthood in the data.

The idea of balance was also brought in when exploring challenge alongside safety and risk. The Emerging Researchers passionately expressed diverse perspectives on the role of risk and safety in play from risk aversion to active risk engagement. Risk was posed as a challenge while safety was explored as both a foundation, for some, to engage in a challenge while at the same

time as the 'easy' akin to the childlike play highlighted above. Ocean shared her boyfriend's reckless nature while out hiking that contrasted with her desire for safety during play. During the same activity, Kodak spoke of how he could relate to the desire for recklessness in play as he used to do free running – until he fell off the side of a cliff. McDonnell (2019) suggests that engagement with risk in play is implicit, and inspires thrill in testing one's body and boundaries. Kodak's desire to test his own boundaries in risky play shifted after being injured. While he was still keen to engage in play that evoked some risk, his accident pushed him to engage in 'safer' forms of risky play. While some Emerging Researchers enjoyed an element of risk, others expressed the need for safety in juxtaposition to risk, and others explored the connection of safety and risk in tandem. 'Safety, Risk, Balance' were drawn on the poster by the Emerging Researchers during their conversation on these areas with images of visual play cards around it to display the interwoven relationship.

Figure 4.3 Visual Explorer Cards describing play and wellbeing for each Emerging Researcher with descriptive words and images



As one Emerging Researcher stated 'you gotta know where you are and know the risks but also not be so, what's the word, hesitant, yeah paralysed by it' or not do something "cause you think like oh I'll get hurt' (Sydney). Here, Sydney voiced respect for practical safety while at the same time not

wanting to be entirely risk adverse. Play was thus understood, experienced, and expressed along gradients of safety and risk, and across easy and challenging spectrums. The level of balance between childlike and challenging, and between safety and risk in challenge for each Emerging Researcher held similarities and yet were distinctive based on their lived experiences, gender, child and adult positionality, and notions of play.

Play as a 'challenge' was thus expressed and experienced in diverse forms across the Emerging Researchers with an exploration of the intrinsic and instrumental value of play alongside perceptions of challenge, comfort zones, safety and risk, trust and relational belonging, and mental health. Play was expressed both as a challenge and explored *in* the challenge. While literature infrequently explores play as a challenge, outside of adventure literature, play in this research highlighted the critical mode of play as a challenge and in the challenge in young people's conceptualisations and experiences of play.

4.1.2 Humour as a Mode of Play

Humour is closely related to play (Loizou, 2005). The humour component of play interconnects with play as a challenge in its role in the difficult spaces of, and at, play. Humour can be considered as a type of playful activity existing between people who have already developed a relationship (McGhee, & Goldstein, 1983), but can also be used in relationship formation. Humour is also recognised as 'a form of intellectual play' in a way to play with ideas (McGhee, 1984), which counters the idea of play as trivial and frivolous, and suggests that humour as a mode of play can play many different roles. This section explores how modes of humour were conceptualised, embodied, and experienced as play through, during, and in the between spaces of the research. The data explores the ways in which humour is expressed in relationship building, coping, and as an avoidance/transition space.

Humour was prevalent throughout the study and in particular during the Emerging Researcher expedition, research preparation sessions, and during the weekend with the wilderness programme year two cohorts led by the

Emerging Researchers. Humour occurred more commonly in spaces where safety and trust had been established, similar to play as a challenge, and was less immediately present at the start of activities/meetings where young people were first meeting one another. Although it was used a couple times to break the silence upon first encounters, it deepened and was used more frequently once relationships had formed. Humour was expressed verbally and as non-spoken verbal interactions and operated in different forms that impacted relationships, coping, and wellbeing of the Emerging Researchers. A few of the Emerging Researchers explicitly spoke to the role of humour *in* and as play; while others expressed their experience of humour as play through their body language. Mannell and Mchmahon (2009) suggest that humour is a 'shared form of playfulness' and an ingredient for social encounters (p. 152). While humour includes playfulness and positive components, it is also recognised as not always positive/fun and can invoke a challenge for young people, as will be shown below through the findings. Humour as a form of play can include dark elements that serve to mask and/or perpetuate pain, frustrations, and anxieties. Procter and Hacket (2017) call for a reconceptualisation, recognising that play, and emotions are part of a 'complex tapestry' that allow for darker emotions to be played out and exposed.

The dark elements exposed in this research recognise that humour is not always carefree and positive and can be a space to play out and, as Mullen (2014) argues, expose discrimination and act as destructive instead of constructive. As in other aspects of play, there is a potential for both extraordinary relationships and ideas to emerge and for exploring and exposing darker aspects of the everydayness of life.

4.1.2.1 Humour as Relationship Building

Humour fostered, deepened, and also separated relationships in the research study. Humour became more prevalent as research relationships started to form and also acted to further build deeper relationships between

participants. Humour was observed through laughter, shared jokes, and games that evoked different emotions, entanglements, and connections.

4.1.2.2 **Laughter**

When speaking of humour for and in relationships, laughter was prevalent and significant for engagement. As Ocean stated, during a closing circle, 'I'm thankful for the laughter. I don't think I've laughed this genuinely in a long time. And I have a very full bellied laugh so thanks for bearing with that you guys'. Ocean further demonstrated her appreciation of laughter and 'funniness' in groups when she proclaimed to D: 'you're very funny and it takes witty folk to be funny' to which D responded 'I love you [Ocean], please never leave me, you're so nice to me'. D's response evoked laughter among the whole group. While an element of humour and joking existed in his response, a level of sincerity of his feeling valued and cared for was evident in his statement and body language. This was embodied through his small pleased smile with cheeks flushing as would happen in moments of pride or value for D throughout the research. As laughter is often shared, Norrick (1993) notes the interactional space can aid to construct 'smooth' social relationships, as was evident in D and Ocean's interactions. The act of laughter and the space for humour to occur further deepened the relationships between D and Ocean, and those who witnessed and played part in the space. Acknowledged humour supported validation among peers and respect for one another. Tesla further communicated the importance of laughter and humour in the same conversation in summarising quite simply that 'yeah, humour is good'. Tesla's simple statement aligned with his way of using few words to communicate important issues during the research and corroborated the impact of humour and laughter observed and expressed in the research.

4.1.2.3 **Jokes**

Humour allowed 'insider' jokes to be developed and shared, furthering cultivation of the unique relationship of the group. For example:

D asked 'What is a dog sniffing out drugs called?' 'A barkotics officer'. He shared how he had told that to someone else and they had told him it was not funny. I laughed and said I thought the joke was very funny (and I did, as I do love quality cheesy jokes). When he relayed the joke again at the bottom [of the hike] and another day to others they all said his joke was funny [further] validating his humour. (Field Notes)

This excerpt resonates with many other field note observations that showed the importance of sharing and validating jokes in conversation for relationship formation. Being able to share jokes and have them laughed at and valued resonated with Emerging Researchers' sense of belonging and confidence in the group. D brought up multiple times that when he had previously shared the 'barkotics officer' joke he had been told he was not funny 'seriously that guy shredded into me [stating] that it was just too much of a reach'. His perpetual sharing of this experience highlighted the deep impact being told he was not funny had on him as an individual who frequently used humour for relationships, coping, and transgressions during the research and in his personal life. In contrast, his Emerging Researcher peers continued to validate his humour each time he shared his joke. For example, Sydney stated 'that actually is a fantastic joke by the way' and Ocean reinforced Sydney's statement with 'it really is'. The affirmative statements propelled D to engage in further jokes and also created space for others to trial out humour to the jokes. For example, statements of 'shred the gnar' and 'balla' became insider jokes for the week and continued into further gatherings. Neither had specific meaning, yet both emerged from joking terminology present for the age demographic in their local communities. Through joke sharing the Emerging Researchers also developed collaborative group jokes to share, further deepening the group's connection. The use of jokes and reinforcement of one another's jokes supported relationship formation and sense of belonging across Emerging Researchers.

During a weekend where the Emerging Researchers led research with a younger cohort, insider jokes among the young participants were also used to build relationships and create distinctions between relationships. The

cohort had developed a family structure with nicknames such as wifey, favourite son, sister, brother, and others.

For new people, the researchers, we were welcomed in as second cousins or distant cousins [with] sticky note name tags to wear on our foreheads ... Some of the cohort appeared closer than others, embracing the deep laughter of the family joke while others appeared to more oblige to this process. (Field Notes)

While facilitating research the Emerging Researchers were thus recognised as a part of, yet separate from, the group of wilderness programme child participants they were leading research with. Here the insider jokes were used to solidify the group identity of the wilderness programme child participants, while concurrently allowing for partial integration of the Emerging Researchers. This both welcomed the Emerging Researchers and ensured a boundary existed between the two groups. Additionally, as highlighted in the excerpt, a few of the cohort members appeared less close. This was exemplified through different forms of distancing themselves, such as, by moving their chairs further from the larger group, choosing to disengage from certain jokes, and deciding not to attend external events coordinated by peers in the group (e.g. movie nights). It was apparent that some of the insider jokes and humour had built community across the participant cohort while leaving others at the margins. McDermott and Lenters (2019) note the role of humour in social relations that can forge relationship and/or act as boundaries. This showed up at other points in time through seating arrangements during transit and meals, and through who was listened to and spoke most frequently during the weekend. As such, the playful nature of jokes served to both deepen relationships and create distinctions among young people.

4.1.2.4 Games

In addition to the telling of jokes or exclamation of humorous statements, I observed that collaborative games that were both structured and impromptu allowed for whole group humour and further cohesion with the Emerging

Researchers. With regard to structured activities, Tesla reflected on how team-building activities in the form of games, such as acting out a movement that describes oneself in an introduction, 'felt awkward and nervous at first but [that we] started to laugh and communicate once the games began' (Field Notes). The Emerging Researchers further discussed how because everyone looked 'silly' it allowed for a shared sense of embarrassment, laughter, and resulting connection. These 'forced' spaces while at first awkward and nervous challenged the Emerging Researchers to embrace a new uncomfortable space and begin to connect. While activities [or games] themselves do not always equate to 'fun' or humour (Fincham, 2016), when experienced relationally they can generate deeper opportunities for humour to arise and connection to form as exemplified by Tesla's reflection above.

Additionally, unstructured impromptu games occurred that allowed for Emerging Researchers to introduce their own forms of humour through games in the research space. These included a range of games and activities designed and/or shared by the young people. Here, young people were given space and room to play and find themselves (Aitken, 2001) outside the container of adult structured play spaces.

As we sat by the campfire one evening:

A game of 'would you rather' sprung up ... Would you rather sweat cottage cheese or cry hot sauce? Would you rather pee chickpeas or cry cottage cheese? Others jumped in as well, would you rather have donuts for elbows or knees? Would you rather be able to fly an inch of the ground or turn invisible but when nobody sees you? Many of the 'would you rather' fostered fully belly laughs after reflection on our answers. (Field Notes)

The same evening another new game was introduced:

Where you choose one word, and then everyone asks you questions and you must always answer with the same word without laughing. For example, fruit loops. What do you like to do for fun? Fruit Loops. What does

your boyfriend look like? Fruit loops. Where do you work? Fruit loops. The game spiralled into much laughter, with others laughter abound usually making the person trying to keep a straight face smile. (Field Notes)

Each game led by the Emerging Researchers lacked intentional seriousness and fostered space for frivolity, creativity, and an air of 'fun'. While the games were not intentionally serious, the first allowed for reflection by the Emerging Researchers on their own identity and level of comfort and perspectives on life. While humorous, reflections on comfort levels of having hot sauce as tears or cottage cheese as sweats fostered conversations around what level of pain and embarrassment different individuals felt and experienced. Additionally, donuts as elbows or knees contributed to dialogue on abilities and mobility as well as personal play and work needs for one's arms and legs. The latter game encouraged laughter both forced and natural in order to push a straight face to smile. Through the humorous process, participants learned more about one another's perspectives, ideas, feelings, and experiences.

As both games took place around a night-time campfire, the light amid the dark enhanced the intimacy of the space and also encouraged deeper conversations on the margins of humour. The campfire acted as a central connecting space for the Emerging Researchers to sit around and draw their attention, too. The warmth and light appeared to bring comfort among the researchers while the darkness surrounding them brought them closer together. Additionally, seeing one another by firelight while being immersed in darkness appeared to allow for Emerging Researchers to share experiences with one another without feeling as exposed as they might in daylight. For example, two Emerging Researchers sitting next to each other at the campfire quietly began to talk about anxiety and the relationship with exercise to clear their mind when difficult things were happening in home and school life. This was the first time that one of the Emerging Researchers, who normally only spoke about positive things, spoke of anxiety and life challenges. The next day the same two began to chat more, with the younger

male, Donatello, starting to sit more often with the larger group than he had earlier in the week. He also began to gain confidence in his relationships with his peers as exemplified when he invited the group to attend his birthday in two months' time. Birthday invitations can be a significant sign of friendship validation and are often used as a tool to welcome or separate young people. Donatello shared how he usually preferred to sit back and quietly listen and observe, and yet as his relationships grew he maintained the quality of being an active listener while concurrently becoming more engaged (both physically by shifting his physical space from outside to inside circles and emotionally through deeper conversations with peers). The originally light-hearted games of humour thus inspired shifts in engagement to build deeper relationships across Emerging Researchers.

4.1.2.5 Belonging and Connection

Humour fostered space for feelings of acceptance and belonging through connections formed. Feelings of belonging were shared and/or alluded to during reflective activities. Upon reflection of the research training expedition, one Emerging Researcher wrote on her rose, during a rose-bud-thorn activity on strengths, challenges, and future ideas, that what meant so much to her was connection. During the expedition she 'approached people [she] might not have before and chose to *connect* with them' (Ocean). This feeling of connection links with humour as when writing the rose, she further wrote 'LAUGHING' proclaiming that she could not remember the last time she laughed so much and so genuinely her 'cup feel[ing] full of smiles' (Ocean). Ocean further stated 'yes that's cheesy but the fully belly laughter is such a gift' particularly when with others. Ocean's continual reflection of 'fully belly' laughter as opposed to any other laughter highlights the embodiment of laughter and its implications for her own physical and mental wellbeing and sense of belonging while with the group. Here her body is a part of/a site of play acting in 'itself as a mode of playful engagement' (Vasudevan, 2015, p. 5). In the same reflective 'rose-bud-thorn' activity, another Emerging Researcher wrote of the 'amazing love and support of the group' and the deep appreciation for people who were 'so tolerant of [his] goofy, visible trans

and ADHD ass' (D). The recognition that people valued his laughter and goofiness and accepted him for who he is, was central to feeling a sense of belonging and support from the group that he did not feel in some other spaces in his life. Feelings of belonging through humour were also recognised in observations in shared spaces. For example, during our closing circles, as we continued our 'pattern of mingling jokes and full bellied laughter with serious dialogue and deeper sharing' ... 'I notice[d] that the lightness of laughter created space for people to feel comfortable sharing more depth of their hearts and personal experiences' (Field Notes). Laughter with humour was evident throughout the research in structured spaces of play such as the play-based research activities and reflective circles, and on the margins of the between spaces (e.g. when singing Mulan Disney songs from childhood in the partner organisation's van as we drove to hikes during the research expedition and joking by the fire) to further build a sense of belonging and to develop relationships.

The theme of humour in relationships recurred throughout the research process, where humour was constantly being used to reinforce the sense of collective identity and to create space for complex conversations (as will be explored below in humour and coping). The Emerging Researchers on a whole demonstrated humour as a tool to develop and deepen their relationships (which will be explored further in Chapter 5 on Emerging Researcher relationships). Akin to McDermott and Lenters' (2019) work on embodiment, humour in this research is recognised as an embodied affective practice that is 'locally articulated and produced within the dynamics of broader social-material configurations' (p. 6) and contributes to as well as impacts belonging, relationships, and ways of engaging with self and others.

4.1.2.6 Humour as Coping

Humour as coping/sharing difficult experiences was evident among the Emerging Researchers in their way of engaging with themselves and those around them. This was expressed in different overt and covert forms throughout the research. One Emerging Researcher in particular used

humour often to share difficult life experiences and to reframe those experiences. For example:

D shared about transitioning and how he had to have a gender counsellor as was under 18 before he could begin taking testosterone. He jokes and makes 'light' of his journey and experience as he shares significant life moments. The counsellor asked him each time they met, out of 1 out of 100, how much do you feel like a man today? He spoke of if others could imagine being asked how much of a woman or man they felt regularly who were not transitioning. He felt a need to perform as more masculine when in those sessions. He joked about how he would perform this role through examples of what he would wear. Another of his friends' experiences too had highlighted how they would dress a certain way when in the appointments to support their ability to be able to receive testosterone/oestrogen. The group shared expressions of extreme frustration on his behalf. (Field Notes)

This field note excerpt illustrates the significance of use of the discourse of 'joking' and humour in the Emerging Researcher's approach to share challenges faced in his life. Here the joking communication did not evoke humour but instead was used as a discourse to present hurtful experiences. The use of joking and humour created space for D to introduce his experience and to feel comfortable providing greater detail. It also showed that the 'supposed' expert medical adults were 'laughable' in the story – laughable in a way that was offensive with profound impact on people's lives through potentially 'wilful ignorance'. While D and his peers laughed as he spoke, the introduction also fostered anger and frustration by his peers on D's behalf. Through use of humour D was able to express himself without greater concern of judgement, with laughter acting as an intermediary/buffer for his story. In observing this dialogue, I paused to 'continuously ponder if [humour] is a way to mask/disassociate from experiences that are difficult' (Research Journal) or if it is a 'positive' coping mechanism taking the edge off a challenging experience that may negatively impede mental health and wellbeing. Comparable to Robinson's (2009) research on smoking and motherhood, this research shows how anecdotes about serious subjects in

humorous forms provoked laughter and created space for peers to participate in difficult discussions as well as encourage the sharer to feel comfortable in their story. Thus the act of humour as a form of play for coping interweaves with the above section on play as a challenge (particularly play in the challenge) where humour allows for the Emerging Researchers to engage in a challenge and have control over the stories they are introducing.

Similar forms of expression that used humour as coping were also articulated by the participants that the Emerging Researchers led research with. During a wilderness school programme weekend where the Emerging Researchers led research activities, a few participants spoke of humour explicitly as a tool for responding/coping to challenges. For example, during a conversation on bullying in schools, one young person shared how they are ‘always bringing jokes into spaces. When people are mean [the participant] strove to make it seem nice through [playful] jokes [and] would also respond in joke format when picked on’ (Field Notes). This was an act the individual had been using since they were eight years old as a coping tool to respond. When the young person spoke of being told repeatedly by another child that they wanted to shoot their knee caps, Emerging Researcher D joked ‘wow, that’s serious if it was just shooting you, but why your knee caps?’ (Field Notes). Instead of engaging in a more serious conversation, as I myself desired to do, about being targeted and told that someone wanted to shoot the young person, D retained the joking nature of the conversation in order to maintain a space for the young person to further express their feelings and experience. Humour used to explore difficult life experiences could be seen as what McDermott and Lenters (2019) refer to as a jolt, ‘embodied and causing pause’ to ‘reorient ourselves to our worlds’ and move beyond complacency at the way things are within young people’s lived realities (p. 13). Thus this data demonstrates that the relational entanglement of sharing and responding to challenging experiences through joking allows for greater depth of conversation to emerge as a jolt to reorient experiences while being ‘protected’ in order to cope through the role of humour.

During the research expedition week when Emerging Researchers were learning about play-based research, a discussion on the role and value of laughter arose in relation to humour, highlighting the impact of humour on the Emerging Researchers' individual and collective wellbeing in times of coping. Akin to McDermott and Lenters (2019) the data suggest that humour and laughter are at points entangled and co-constitutive, rather than separate entities.

I think I also just like to laugh a lot so I might just do it a little overkill. (Ocean)

'Cause I want – 'cause I want to laugh. (Sydney)

It's nice. (D)

I laugh at everything you know; it makes my life much more pleasant. (D)

I fricken agree. (Sydney)

(River Journey)

The above excerpt highlighted how laughter (and arguably humour) for several of the Emerging Researchers makes life more pleasant. For D, in relation to his ongoing humour to expose life challenges throughout the research, laughter was further recognised as a mechanism to enhance life and make it more enjoyable. His peers agreed with the idea of laughter making life more pleasant through responding with 'I fricken agree' (Ocean) and through collective nods of acknowledgement. The spaces of 'laughter' D, Sydney, and Ocean referred to were jokes, games, and between spaces where humour was present. Humour arising in laughter fostered space where challenges were more freely shared and support was expressed. Additionally, through laughter interactions took place that allowed for the recognition of collective challenges and coping process to coalesce.

4.1.2.7 Humour to Avoid/Transition

Humour was also valued for its ability to ease tensions. D spoke of how 'humour is good to diffuse awkwardness'. He referred to his personal facilitation of a circle activity and how he had integrated jokes to shift the energy and transition away from feeling awkward into a new space. While diffusing awkwardness can also support relationship development and coping and is thus interconnected with the above sections, in this circumstance it was expressed as a tool to transition into a new conversational space.

Humour was also used by several Emerging Researchers to avoid difficult conversations for themselves and for their peers. For example, when one female Emerging Researcher was speaking of the seriousness of her limited participation in choice and decision making in her childhood, another Emerging Researcher shifted the conversation to hummus (which we were eating at the time) with a statement of 'I have a hummus addiction and you guys are totally enabling it' (D). As a result of the statement, witty banter on hummus addictions and favourite types of hummus arose. The tactic of humour to stop a conversation or transition to a new one was repeated by young participants who the Emerging Researchers engaged with when leading research. Several times when there were critical moments to probe and delve deeper, participants and the young people would 'quickly shuffle to another conversation or story [with joke filled transitions] each seeking to get their point or their voice in' (Field notes). The introduction of a topic with a 'quick shuffle' suggested a desire to introduce difficult experiences and yet to avoid going into depth. The transitions allowed for avoidance of getting deeper into challenging conversations while at the same time fostering relationships of sharing across the young people as they begin to expose things that were of concern in their lives.

As a researcher seeking to support Emerging Researchers leading the research process, in these moments I often would reflect on my own positionality and role in encouraging the conversation to go deep or allowing space for the flow to take place: 'do [I] pause and allow for between space

flow [of conversation] or redirect back to pertinent topics at hand?’ (Research Journal). I grappled between wanting to foster depth of dialogue, being cautious to do no harm if young people were not ready to go into a certain level of depth, and wanting to allow for a natural flow that avoids adultist imposed structure.

While likely unintentional, humour in these circumstances also acted as a form of control that silenced others’ abilities to talk about serious things in a more serious way (Robinson, 2009, p. 272). This was apparent when one Emerging Researcher started to deepen her story on childhood decision-making (as mentioned above) and another on her sister’s autism anxiety attacks and outbursts that resulted in her choosing to ‘[go] to bed without dinner while her parents were “dealing” with her sister’ (Field Notes). As an adult researcher and person concerned about the wellbeing of young people, I personally felt that these conversations warranted more depth in the moment, yet at these pockets of time other young people chose to change the subject rapidly through a joking story that were sometimes related, and sometimes completely contradictory (e.g. hummus addictions) to the conversation. While the transitions supported those who made them, the impacts on the individuals telling their stories is less known. While in both cases the young women appeared to engage in the humorous conversations that moved forward, it is uncertain whether they felt differently from how they presented themselves in the moments. In these instances, humour as avoidance of hurt/challenge and transition into a lighter subject was evident and intersects with concepts of power between young people and elements of humour as coping, from the above section.

Humour was used to establish, strengthen, and subvert relationships, and as a tool for coping, and for avoiding some topics, by transitioning to a new topic. I explored how the Emerging Researchers performed their individual and collective identities through humour as a mode of play. While humour may not always act as a mode of play, the data on humour in this research showed humour as a form of play that evoked positive elements of mental

health and relationships that readers may typically equate with play; it also exposed darker sides of play both in fostering space for young people to engage with and express their difficult experiences and in its ability to silence and leave out others. In this section I have further drawn on humour in exploring the everyday interactions of the Emerging Researchers during training and preparation sessions, and while they led and reflected on research. I have shown how the Emerging Researchers have experienced, conceptualised, and embodied humour in both overt and covert forms as playful and serious modes and acts of play.

4.1.3 Play: ‘Taking Time’ and ‘Making Time’

Play can be dependent on access to/awareness of opportunities, funding, resources, and time for young people and on how certain avenues of play are not always available for all young people due to systemic inequalities. I begin by introducing the Emerging Researchers’ reflections on making time for play in their personal lives, and then transition to exploring making and taking time in relation to work responsibilities, societal perceptions of play, and available resources. I conclude with a summary on the complexity of making and taking time for young people with diverse lived experiences and in relation to socio-economic status, ageism, sanism, and societal norms.

4.1.3.1 The Value of Making Time

Throughout the research journey the Emerging Researchers spoke of the value of making time for play in their lives. While several factors could impede their ability to do so, the Emerging Researchers’ desire to engage in play and the importance it had on their lives was evident in the findings. The Emerging Researchers were asked what play meant to them during their peer-to-peer interviews and through other research activities.

Play:

Makes me feel more calm, I find myself very ... I get anxious all the time so I find if I do *make the time* for myself ... just five minutes just minutes, ten minutes, but then I come back. (Sydney)

but you *make that time*. (Ocean)

and it just makes me feel *better*. (Sydney)

(River Journey)

Sydney's reflection on making the time for herself to play, even just 'five minutes just minutes' made her feel calm and reground in herself when feeling overwhelmed. Her peer re-emphasised making the time, to which Sydney responded 'and it just makes me feel better'. Her awareness of her own mental health needs in relation to play and her role in making that time for her health was evident in this quote and throughout the study. Similarly, Ocean expressed how, for the research trip, she 'chose to make the time' with people she cared about in the outdoors, and how it 'uplifts you' so it is important (Ocean). For her, making the time was a 'treat' for herself in her everyday busy life, full of work and personal responsibilities. Play was not considered a normal everyday right for older young people and was positioned as a 'treat' in juxtaposition to everyday adult-like responsibilities. Making time to play supported her and several Emerging Researchers to feel more grounded and with a 'passion [for] life' resulting in 'things [feeling] worthwhile' (Ocean).

Similarly, D highlighted the value for him of creating time and space to engage in play without having to be good at things or serve others' needs or expectations:

So the picture I chose was these dudes making sculptures while rich people wearing fancy clothes stare at them ... um ... mostly I picked it because the statues look kind of cool, but mostly what I was thinking was what [I] like to do in my free time is make things. But like for my job I cook and I make things for people and that's my job. And it's nice to *just have time and space* to make things for myself and they don't have to be good and they don't have to be for anything, they're just something that I can have for me just to make.

(Visual Explorer)

Figure 4.4 *Visual Explorer Card describing play by D*



D used a picture from the visual explorer card image set to depict what play meant in his life. Through the picture, as shown in the above excerpt, he expressed his passion for cooking leisurely, in his own time and space, outside the structured requirements of his work place. Another day he shared how ‘a plum tree grows in the co-op [he grew up in]’ and how he ‘made plum jam from it’ which was different from work cooking as he had ‘space for creativity’ (Field Notes). Although playful elements could arguably be built into his cooking at work, as a line cook his opportunity for freedom of choice in what to cook was limited. In his personal space he had flexibility to be creative, engage time, and enjoy himself. Furthermore, his relationship with the food he chose to pick and cook, such as the plums in his community, allowed him to immerse himself in a flow of play that differed from the requirements imposed in his work space.

4.1.3.2 Taking Time: Work and Income

In early childhood, play has been considered ‘children’s work’ by Montessori (1972) and other early childhood practice bodies; as children become older and transition into young adulthood, play becomes less valued/respected (L. H. V. Wright, 2018) and is often put on the backburner in relation to more ‘credible’ adult-like activities of work and life responsibilities. This connects with the above section on Emerging Researchers equating play with a treat and/or luxury to make time for, outside their work responsibilities. Wyness

(2006) claims that nostalgic associations of childhood and playfulness have had the 'effect of trivialising both childhood and children's play' (p. 171). Play is positioned as frivolous/immature and in opposition to 'rational' adulthood endeavours (McDonnell, 2019). While research on adult play is limited, play for adults is becoming increasingly recognised as pertinent for wellbeing, creativity, curiosity, and innovation outcomes (e.g. James & Nerantzi, 2019; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). However, play for adults is often used to 'achieve' productivity and thus could be critiqued as instrumental, 'using' play for work outcomes. For older children and young people, play is often separated out and infantilised in comparison to the importance of work and life responsibilities; play is thus no longer valued for the act of play itself unless linked to forms of productivity that can contribute to neo-liberal outcomes. The separation of work and play results from 'an ongoing attempt to *repress* the sensuous, imaginative-concrete-engagement with the world that typifies play [in order to] channel activity to instrumentalised ... work or labour' (Ferguson, 2017, p. 120). Furthermore, play is seeing an increase of intentionality in adult spaces (Proyer, 2017) for adults to start re-engaging with play; yet there appears to be a gap with regard to play of young people who are children transitioning in a linear trajectory to adulthood with neoliberal constraints. In the research, several Emerging Researchers spoke of play as secondary to work and the associated need for income. For example, Ocean stated that:

Yeah, I think something I realised when we had our little sit spots [quiet space to reflect] that when you enjoy these times to have fun to go on adventures to play with people you know. It usually comes so secondary to work and life responsibilities. (Ocean)

Ocean's statement on play as 'secondary' to work and life responsibilities resulted in a longer conversation about an economic driven society which D referred to as the 'the capital'. Ocean agreed with D and further proclaimed 'it's natural, exactly. You get caught up in that [work] race right' (Ocean). This dialogue highlights the recognition of the transition from childhood into adulthood and of 'that race' of work that is positioned in opposition to play.

D's emphasis on, and use of, the term 'the capital' pertains to his perspective on the neoliberal prioritisation of economic development that supersedes social relations and development, which he referenced at other points in time during the research. Older children and young people, such as the Emerging Researchers, are required to regularly 'negotiate between their more expansive, playful subjectivities and the denial or repression' of these (Ferguson, 2017, p. 130). The prioritisation of work over play was also evident in the challenge of finding times to bring all the Emerging Researchers together for meetings, trainings, and celebrations. Service industry work with low seniority required young people to have limited freedom for scheduling days off. Additionally, those still in high school with homework alongside part time jobs had barriers to actively take part. For example, Kodak was proud of himself for pushing for time off and amazed he was able to do so for the research expedition, yet later on he picked up extra shifts to cover for peer workers. While he was able to have time for play (and perhaps a form of play that was research so could be disguised as work when seeking time off) he was obliged to cover other people's work to make up for his time at play. As such, play was allowed to take place, yet with the recognition that work was more 'important' to fulfil. A socio-historical approach suggests that fun (and arguably play) was constructed as trivial, disruptive, and lacking sophistication and that only the working class had fun (Wright et al, 2021). Fun is often likened with play, both having the opportunity to occur at any time, yet being positioned as separate from work and adult-like productivity (Fincham, 2016; Sutton-Smith, 2001). Fincham (2016) notes commodification of acts of leisure have been associated with youth culture, in the idea youth are those who do not have to work. This dissertation contradicts the assumption that young people do not work and are always at play. The majority of Emerging Researchers who had just completed high school were in full time work and those that were still in high school had part time jobs with little time to play fully; when they did it was considered a 'treat'.

Two of the Emerging Researchers who both held full time jobs in the service industry in restaurant kitchens highlighted how they had limited-to-no time to spend with friends outside work:

I don't have time to hang out with friends, I don't have time to do things for my enjoyment, but the thing is, if you're not doing things for your enjoyment, it kind of gets to be like what is the point after a while. You know. *Making that time.* (D)

I was literally working to the point that I didn't have *time* to spend the money I was making (Kodak)

'Cause as great as that is you're making bank it's still like kind of pointless (D)

yeah (Kodak)

like working 13 hour days for a burger (Kodak)

'cause like you're making money but you can't spend the money so it's like it doesn't exist (D)

(Magic Carpet)

Here Kodak and D expressed frustration over work impeding their ability to spend time with friends and to do things for enjoyment. While work contributed to their economic stability, it lacked meaning for them to have money if there was no opportunity to play and enjoy monetary compensation.

Additionally, D spoke of how 'even when you do have time, just being so busy all the time, it's like even when there is time, there kind of isn't just because you're exhausted'. D and Kodak expressed the desire to take time for play alongside the feeling of being too exhausted to engage in playful actions when small amounts of free time did arise. This highlights an important recognition that people need rest and between time alongside the productive driven space of work and play time. Other Emerging Researchers echoed this feeling in relation to their full and part time work positions. This

recognition evoked both frustration and guilt in the Emerging Researchers who were frustrated at the inability to engage in play and felt guilty that they were not maximising their minimal free time with things they enjoyed. While they felt a need to generate income in order to have money to make contributions to their families, meals, rent, and personal interests they were aware of its infringement on their opportunity to play and its impact on their own mental health and wellbeing. Their feelings of guilt when ‘doing nothing’ also highlighted the internalisation of societal norms of productivity and individual responsibility to both maximise time and contribute to their own ‘self-care.’

4.1.3.3 Making and Taking Time: Resources

In addition to limited *time* to engage in play, the Emerging Researchers spoke of a dearth of resources for young people between the ages of thirteen and twenty-one in their community, relative to younger children, enabling them to engage. The Emerging Researchers voiced their concern that this pivotal age was essential for having programmes and activities providing time to play as they transition to middle school, high school, and into adulthood. Ocean expressed that ‘children when they’re young they can still build and adults can change their patterns, but that between stage is really lacking any sort of support’ and it is when we really ‘need the development the most’. This data highlights not only the lack of resources but also the greater need for older young people. Children in high school had more opportunities to play than when they had graduated. However, these opportunities to play were articulated as more traditional forms of structured institutionalised forms of play, such as sport for older young people with some opportunities to engage in outdoor education programming, depending on the school of attendance or if they signed up for an outdoor recreation programme and obtained a spot. As Cameron shared: ‘I used to play a lot of sports and when I stopped playing sports ... That was a big part of my play’ lost. Once he stopped, it was difficult to find other opportunities to access different types of play, freely. While a gap in resources was identified, the Emerging Researchers’ programme and programmes run by the nature-based research

partner, were mentioned as strengths for young people in the community. Programmes such as the partner's programme are often funded by private donors, foundations, and government and act to fill a gap for young people in the community. However, there are limitations in how many exist and who has access to them. Additionally, as the Emerging Researchers had participated in an outdoor nature-based programme prior to being Emerging Researchers, their own creativity in, and knowledge of, additional opportunities had enhanced, in that they were able to tap into play spaces. Through their relationship with the organisation, they were provided with opportunities to borrow camping and hiking equipment for free after they had graduated from the programme giving them avenues to play in outdoor forms without hidden costs. While the Emerging Researchers had this opportunity they recognised that others in their community might not have the same relationships and ability to access equipment or transport needed to engage in certain outdoor forms of play.

Further resource gaps were in relation to socio-economic status and discrimination as stated by Donatello: 'if anyone's in poverty or something they can't afford to do this stuff or maybe it might be because of their race or something or gender'. This statement recognises that young people are not a homogenous group and that each young person is comprised of a multiplicity of identities in relation to race, class, gender, and socially constructed differences (Aitken, 2001) that impact their access and opportunities. These axes constitute 'multiple transgressive and transformative features of identity' (Aitken, 2001, p. 7) that go beyond normative notions of young people in the Western world. Similar to Donatello, Sydney expressed concern for young people of low socio-economic status by highlighting that some free programmes exist for play in nature, yet they are not accessible for a lot of people due to high hidden costs. As a result, young people can 'feel like they're *trapped* in the city' without supplies to participate in certain forms of play and resources to travel to spaces that provide greater play opportunities (Sydney). Feelings of being 'trapped' and being unable to partake in similar opportunities as other young people resonates in hidden poverty literature for

children. Treanor (2020) argues that children go to great efforts to mask their poverty due to shame and embarrassment, as well as feeling ashamed of being embarrassed by their family's experiences of poverty. This can be detrimental for children in gaining access to additional services and spaces of play if they are ashamed to verbalise their needs and concerns. Sydney's personal experience of not growing up 'with a whole lot of money' caused her to reflect on the difficulty of not being able to do certain things. She expressed the fact that her passion for outdoors pushed her to get out and explore and that she would do the same hike all the time 'and it was great and awesome'. However, she wished she could have explored more if she had the funds to do so. While much advocacy exists on recognising play in every moment several hidden costs are often still embedded in seemingly free play spaces, such as running shoes and hiking boots for nature walks, sport and art materials, and taking time off work to play.

The Emerging Researchers also noted that a sense of wellbeing and 'play really falls through the cracks' when there are financial barriers (Ocean) as other rights of children tend to supersede play and the opportunity to play is deemed less of a priority. This aligns with research that suggests that the right to play is regarded 'as a luxury in comparison to other rights whose violations bear visible, and spectacular consequences' (David, 2006, p. 17). As evidenced by the Emerging Researchers, I suggest that this challenge is particularly heightened for older children where play is less respected, researched, and supported. Older children's realisation of their right to play tends to decline with barriers and a push into adulthood that reduces their engagement in play.

Access to and opportunity for making time and taking time in play were discussed in relation to Emerging Researchers' own experiences of barriers as well as their perspectives on their peers' and wider community's access. Making time and taking time were expressed both as an individualised ability to take action in one's own life and as part of a greater social ecological framework of children's spheres of influence (e.g. peers, family, school,

government, and greater society) that contributed to (e.g. nature-based programmes) or inhibited (e.g. work, poverty, resources) the opportunities to engage in play. Temporal restrictions, the reduction of time for young people to play, was emphasised in relation to work and other competing priorities during a transition to adulthood (Finney & Atkinson, 2020). Recognition of the social ecology of play access and opportunity was reflected by Emerging Researchers as well as highlighted in Cameron's journal reflection that play research activities foster an 'environment that draws people together, and a space where participants in the programme can reflect on the importance of a broader ecosystem of support'. While literature is ripe on access to play in relation to early childhood, with a particular emphasis on play spaces and children's geographies, less exists on young people's access to play with a focus on their work and resource opportunities alongside their own role and that of societies. As such, this research contributes to a dialogue on limitations in play in contrast to work for older children. Woodyer (2012) recommends that we liberate play from only being considered a child's activity. In reducing binary linear constructs of children's play and adults' work and recognising the value of play across generations, there could lie potential in greater respect and opportunity for older young people to play.

4.2 Conclusion

This chapter commenced with an introduction on how Emerging Researchers conceptualise, experience, and embody modes of play in relation to their lived experiences. I highlighted how societal norms and processes in the spaces of young people's lives (experientially, aesthetically, morally, and socially) manifest in young people's conceptualisations and embodiment of play in their everyday lives and how they negotiate these norms and processes. I began by introducing two different, particularly unique, modes of play that were expressed in the trends of data, play as a challenge and play as humour. I then moved to exploring the relationship between choice and access to play in making time and taking time that impacted the Emerging Researchers' opportunities for and experience in play as children in the transitional space of childhood and adulthood. The findings suggested that

the socio-economic, identity, and mental health contexts and diverse lived experiences of young people have implications for how play is conceptualised, embodied, and experienced. Modes of play were perceived and experienced by Emerging Researchers in multiple ways and were impacted by societal, economic, gendered, and ageist markers of diversity, as well relational forms of connection.

The Emerging Researchers' conceptualisations and experiences of play as a challenge contradicted much literature that focuses on the romanticised notion of play as carefree and easy. The conceptualisation of play as a challenge was particularly interesting in its positioning both within outdoor risky play and in activities that may not typically be positioned as a play challenge, such as learning to drive or reading a book. Challenge as play, in play, and with contingencies in mental health to play, highlighted the complexity of the interplay of play and challenge. This conceptualisation and embodiment of play as a challenge has implications for expanding play theory, particularly for older children and for further exploring the challenges that are exhibited within play. Humour as play, or as used in playful forms, supported Emerging Researchers' wellbeing in formation and enhancement of social relationships, coping and sharing processes, and comfort to switch topics. At the same time, humour acted as a tool for creating distinctions and fostering transgressions that at times impeded deeper sharing and entanglement among young people. Thus the lightness of humour as more often equated with play contributed to both light-hearted relational development, as well as exposed the dark possibilities of play in coping, power, and distinctions.

Access in relation to young people's meaningful participation also has implications for play realisation for young people enabling them to engage in formal and non-formal acts of play. The making time and taking time section highlighted how young people's liminal positioning, between the social constructed ideals of childhood and adulthood, limits their access to either space fully, and presents difficulties in terms of play experience and

engagement. This connects with play as a challenge, in recognition that older children striving to be more adult-like appear to take on more outcome-oriented roles that can be linked with taking on particular challenges.

Chapter 5 Play-based Research: Relationships

‘Play-based research’ in this dissertation is the use of any form of play utilised, expressed, experienced, and that emerges in the research process to facilitate research and to gather and interpret data. As highlighted in Chapter 3 on methodology, the play-based research approach in this study was designed and facilitated by myself as the PhD Researcher (in designing the tools and approaches introduced the Emerging Researchers) and by the Emerging Researchers in their facilitation and engagement in play, as well as being emergent during the research process. Atkinson (2006) argues that playful research techniques create rich information in unexpected ways and support relationships between young people and adults. The structured and unstructured between spaces in a play-based research approach are particularly important to explore in order to gain further insight into the role of diverse modes of play-based research and young researchers’ relationships.

Exploring whether play assists young people to engage meaningfully in relationships was central to the research. However, little exists on the experiences of the young researchers themselves and their relationships with one another. As such, the aim of this chapter is to present the data to contribute to the broader literature on the process and experiences of participatory methodologies led by and with young people, with a particular emphasis on how a play-based research approach effects their experiences of and approaches to relationships.

In the first section of this chapter, I analyse the relationships that Emerging Researchers had with play-based research methods and tools and how these were understood and experienced. I explore their relationships with the play-based methods themselves and in relation to experiences of play. In the second section, I analyse relationships with people in the research with an emphasis on the Emerging Researchers’ relationships with one another, relationships with adult researchers and facilitators, and relationships with community members. This section fosters further exploration of the human-to-human relational component of research. Finally, I analyse young people’s

reflexivity and relationship with and respect for themselves as young researchers. The chapter concludes with implications for play-based research going forward.

5.1 Relationship with Research Methods

In this section I explore the relationships the Emerging Researchers have with play in play-based research. I begin by sharing the Emerging Researchers' views of play in research and then go onto explore the impact of play on the researchers and the research itself.

When asked about the role of play in research, Rigby proclaimed that 'it definitely supported our research and the activities we were leading'. Rigby suggested that 'play can be [used as] a bit of a distraction ... in a good way'. Here Rigby highlighted its value on the process for the Emerging Researchers leading activities and for the research itself. Data from Rigby was selected as it offered a particularly focused account of the role of play in research and resonated with informal dialogue that took place with others throughout the research. In an interview with Rigby, a play-based activity as a distraction was articulated as a good thing as it supported the children and young people participating in the research activities led by the Emerging Researchers to engage more deeply:

People can often just clam up or not really want to talk about stuff ... um ... or they just feel uncomfortable having one-on-one conversations and I think having like an *activity* or something to *distract* ... or to have an activity that you're having as a group so that everyone is kind of doing the same thing at the same time. It kind of takes the pressure off the conversation and kind of redirects it a little bit. I think it makes it easier for a lot of people to have more challenging conversations or go deeper into a conversation if you having something that you can relate it back to which is an activity or a game.
(Rigby)

The role of play-based activities as something as a support to *distract* was emphasised in this excerpt. The relationship with the play-based activities acted to reduce/alleviate pressure in conversations and to support young

people to feel comfortable in a less demanding setting to engage in 'more challenging conversations' and/or to get deeper into already complex dialogues. As explored in Chapter 4, play and the concept of challenge were interconnected and thus a play-based methodology can provide an opportunity to distract initially in order to then engage in challenging dialogue with group interaction. Several Emerging Researchers expressed their appreciation of the challenge in play, as examined in Chapter 4, as something difficult at first, but with the value of being stretched outside 'comfort zones' to engage in something new to overcome. Through embracing challenges in play, the ability to embrace challenges in dialogue could perhaps increase. Similarly, through building trust and relationships in play, through initial distraction and engagement, the data suggests an increased comfort of Emerging Researchers in engaging in play-based research and challenging activities and discussion.

Additionally, play-based research games and activities were also recognised as something that could link ideas and concepts through being able to relate back and explore difficult issues through a symbolic and experiential process. When the Emerging Researcher group members were playing among themselves and with the younger cohorts they were leading research with, Rigby felt that play fostered space to 'see different emotions and things that are coming up for people'. The embodied play experience allowed young people to express themselves and reflect on their experiences in different ways. This was both shared in conversation and observed during the play-based research activities. Play was central to creating/strengthening space to share. Several of the Emerging Researchers also highlighted that the reflective discussion component that occurred alongside play allowed young people to go more deeply into issues that were important for them and to engage more actively in the research. Sydney reflected that if there are 'too many games then you're like what are we really doing here ... and if you have like too much reflection it's like okay you guys you don't need to know everything about me'. The blend between play-based research games and dialogue allowed for the Emerging Researchers and participants to engage in

difficult dialogues (as discussed in more depth in Chapter 6) while having a space to play. Furthermore, 'jumping straight into' play as soon as you start research instead of beginning with academic talk, was recommended for greater conversations and process' (Rigby) to reduce awkward tensions and aid participants to feel at ease. The idea of jumping straight into play created space for embodiment with the playful encounter and shifted from an academic dialogue that was less comfortable to something that connected with the Emerging Researchers' lives and supported them to engage in difficult issues and express their experiences and ideas.

5.1.1 Demystifying Research

Another relational value with play as a research method was its role in demystifying research from the overtly academic to something more relatable for the Emerging Researchers and research participants. Connecting research with previous experiential activities that Emerging Researchers were often exposed to in non-formal education settings aided in demystification and supported the Emerging Researchers in building an embodied relationship with the methodology. Donatello voiced his appreciation of being able to 'just see that research can be done almost anywhere' and that there is creativity in how research is done. His previous understanding of research, akin to several of the Emerging Researchers and staff members of the partner organisation, was of searching for articles online and being required to write high school assignments. The majority of Emerging Researchers' experiences and resulting perspective on research made the idea of engaging in research daunting and/or unexciting prior to learning about what play-based research entailed. Given that several of the Emerging Researchers spoke about their challenges in the mainstream education system which did not create space for diverse ways of learning, formal academic research was considered intimidating. For example:

[Sydney] did not like school and did not do well with traditional forms of learning as [she felt she] did not retain information that way. She [shared how she] went years feeling stupid. She would work so hard and her

peers and friends would do well and she wouldn't. She felt that things like research papers and writing weren't her thing but [she] could learn through doing.

(Field Notes)

This excerpt aligns with the majority of the Emerging Researchers' experiences of formal education. Research papers and writing connected with Sydney's feeling of being 'stupid' and thus did not warrant immediate excitement for research. Sydney's negative relationships with more traditional rote forms of learning had implications for her perception of research. Her experience of previously being a part of the research partner's wilderness programme supported her in becoming aware of play-based experiential learning and led her to value her own ways of learning, in order to respect herself in that 'she was someone and could do things' (Field Notes). Her relationships with play and experiential embodied processes aided her to gain confidence and place value in herself. As such, play-based research had similarities with experiential learning and was something that related to what she and the other Emerging Researchers and research participants were familiar with and valued, based on their lived experiences in the formal school system and non-formal education outside of school. In experiential learning, the Emerging Researchers were involved in education that took a dialogical approach rooted in real experiences (Kolb, 2014).

Children and young people with diverse lived experiences and backgrounds may have difficult relationships with, and experiences of, traditional forms of education that are critiqued as a traditional banking of education, treating students as empty vessels in which to deposit adult knowledge (Freire, 1970). As such, this research highlights how play-based research activities created opportunities in which Emerging Researchers felt more comfortable and excited to engage than more traditional forms of research.

Donatello again shared his appreciation after the training that research can be anything and that 'it can be recording things and stuff ... it doesn't have to be like writing a paper or anything like that'. The ability to shift away from

writing papers which can be intimidating to a process based on different learning styles and to engage in creative practices was valued across Emerging Researchers. This was important for Donatello, and other researchers, in feeling confident to lead and introduce their own creative and personal strengths into leading the play-based research process.

5.1.2 Games

A wide array of play-based activities and energiser games were introduced to the Emerging Researchers and by the Emerging Researchers during the research process. The Emerging Researchers' introduction of their own games fostered space to bring in their own process as recognised above. The games played many different roles from introducing themes, to establishing comfort, to acting as transitions and energy boosts between activities. The game 'watermelon', a game that includes standing in a circle and making slurping sounds while metaphorically passing slices left, right, and beyond, was 'a good game choice' because it allowed everyone 'just being dumb together [which was] good' (D). While emphasis was placed on the peer relationships (which will be discussed below), the relationships with the play movements (e.g. slurping) shifted the group's energy to support their peer-to-peer relationships. The opportunity to play – without having to be 'smart' or to be concerned with looking dumb (or silly) and being embarrassed – was valued by researchers and participants. Being 'dumb' together allowed for camaraderie to form and comfort with looking silly and awkward collectively. The play-based process allowed for an embodied relation with the game itself and one another. The Emerging Researchers introduced their own games, such as 'ricky ticky' and 'spider web' which were both short energisers, and longer activities for energy boosts and deeper reflection. The short energising games, such as ricky ticky, fostered laughter, built cohesion, and created an entry point to other activities. Months after leading research, during the certificate ceremony, Cedar expressed that her favourite research activities were the opening and closing circles because they helped to 'break the ice' with 'a little moment to share something with everyone' without having to have a full conversation to start. The mid length

to longer play-based activities introduced space created for 'breaking the ice', deepening relations, and holding conversations on the research thematic areas.

Play-based research tools were used to reflect on play and wellbeing with, and by, the Emerging Researchers when they were introduced to the methods and when they led with their research participants. During the research training expedition, Emerging Researchers reflected on their experience participating in a visual explorer activity. In the excerpts below, the Emerging Researchers reflect on the use of visual explorer cards (a pre-made set of over 200 photographs to support reflective conversations) (Center for Creative Leadership, n.d.) to contribute to their deeper engagement with concepts and their own perspectives:

Do you feel like you would have had a similar or different kind of response ... um ... without pictures?
(Me, PhD Researcher)

I think I would have too, because seeing the pictures made me think of how they connect to play with me. (Ocean)

Because I think without the picture I would have gone quite literally to playing and more like being outside and being active. (Sydney)

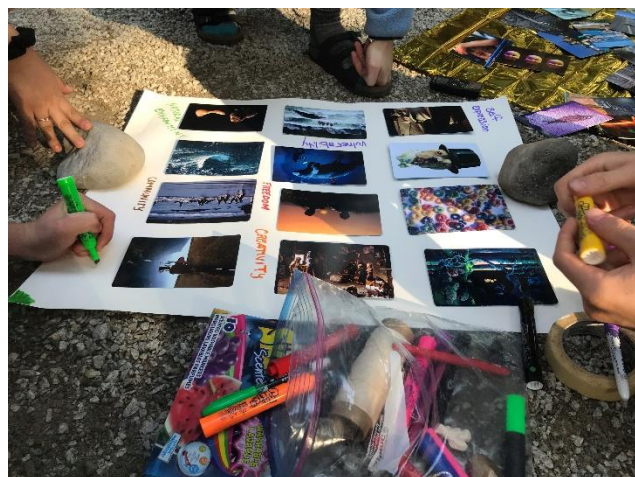
I would have been like doing fun stuff, yeah, but with the pictures you forced us to kind of reach because none of them are from our like, relevance. (D)

Like what does it actually represent. (Ocean)

So like you actually have to think about it. (D)

(Visual Explorer)

Figure 5.1 *Emerging Researchers participating in visual explorer*



The Emerging Researchers highlighted how use of the visual explorer play research activity supported new ways of thinking about play in a creative format (metaphorically, abstractly, and/or intuitively) (Fletcher et al., 2016). The pictures on the cards inspired the Emerging Researchers to think about play more broadly, moving from their typical 'literal' response, and encouraged them to 'kind of reach' their imagination and ideas to 'think about it' more deeply. The idea of deep thinking and assessing what an image actually 'represent[s]' encouraged critical thinking and reflexivity through play-based approaches across Emerging Researchers. One Emerging Researcher voiced how she would 'never do something like this' on her own and that the different perspective and 'cool methods' broadened her own way of thinking (Ocean). The physicality of touching the picture cards and visually engaging with them supported a relationship with the physical cards as well as the symbolic imagery shown on each card. As Ocean expressed, the interaction with the cards 'like connected the dots'. Linking the dots connected the physicality of the cards and Ocean's emotive reflections from play. The interest in the method was further evidenced by D's proclamation that often such experiential activities feel 'kind of pointless' as people are all 'saying things that you all kind of already know' yet this one 'felt legitimately insightful' to him. This exclamation that often experiential research and practice activities are asking what young people feel to be already known, is important to reflect on when exploring how young people are engaged in

research processes and the meaning it does/does not bring to their own lives. D's statement: 'with the pictures you forced us to reach' suggests that young people are often 'forced' to engage in certain activities that they may not find valuable and at other times these activities result in a positive experience in recognising new understandings for themselves that they may not otherwise have the time and space to reflect on.

In addition to play-based methods a couple of conventional qualitative tools were used. Interview techniques were introduced to Emerging Researchers in both a traditional peer-to-peer format and a playful walking interview process. For the group engaged in the more traditional interview, mixed reflections on leading and participating were apparent. One young person stated that the process felt difficult and that they 'did not like it'. When probed, the young person shared mixed reflections around confusion and value for the process, stating:

Like how do I interview someone and do it well? What the fuck even is this? So like, yeah, you know like, I think it was a good experience to have. Now I've conducted an interview so you know (D).

Sydney also reflected uncertainty yet she felt 'pretending like she was a real interviewer' to 'fake it till you make it' supported her process. Both D and Sydney's statements suggest a disconnect with their own identity and experiences in trying to form a relationship with the interview process as an interviewer alongside a recognition of a value in the learning process. D's proclamation of 'what the fuck even is this?' highlighted his uncertainty with the practice and yet his statement about thinking it was a good experience perhaps is similar to the idea of overcoming a challenge, which has been expressed as a positive element of play in Chapter 4. While the formal elements of asking interview questions felt strained to some, other Emerging Researchers expressed a feeling of calm while conducting peer-to-peer interviews due to them being coordinated outside and because they had the opportunity to take time so as to not rush and to engage more in the process. This latter appreciation of the process highlights the significance of quality

time and space, and the impact of the non-formal component (e.g. leading in an outdoor space where play had previously occurred) of the traditional tool. Data from Emerging Researchers' feedback on the interview experience demonstrates that the informality of sitting in the grass or on a bench by the water alongside a peer connected the formal interview, which felt unnatural, to playful embodied spaces that had evoked different experiences. Additionally, the diverse reflections on the interview process recognises that different methods suit different people based on their personal experiences and interests.

When planning to lead research with research participants, the Emerging Researchers reflected on whether or not to include interviews based on the benefit it would bring to the participants and research. The Emerging Researchers who had received traditional peer-to-peer interview training during the research expedition (as described above) felt that although the technique could be useful it should not be used for their participants. Several of them felt it was too structured and would not be comfortable for the participants who they would just be meeting. Additionally, a couple of Emerging Researchers voiced that peer-to-peer interviews would not flow well with the play and nature based focus of their planned research and activities. However, those who had been introduced to an informal walking interview (during a one-day play-based research training) felt it could be beneficial. The more everyday approach of engaging in a playful walk and exploring a few key questions felt less intimidating and allowed them to have 'something to do when there was an awkward silence between questions' providing something to connect with when young people were thinking of answers (Cedar). Having an activity acted to shift attention to the relationships with the activity and away from 'awkward silences'; this gave the interviewees time to reflect and gave both the interviewer and interviewee space to feel comfortable in the silence, without the intensity of the direct gaze that more formal sit down interviews can entail. The walking interview can strengthen rapport as the place itself thus becomes a co-producer of dialogue ((Lyndsay Brown & Durrheim, 2009) and reduces pressure of the

interviewer and interviewee. This allowed for contemplation to be welcomed during the interview and highlights the significance of play and movement to allow for spaces of silence. Two Emerging Researchers also reflected that it generated deeper conversations than they would have typically when first meeting someone. Consequently, play-based interview approaches that exhibited differential spatial movements supported Emerging Researchers and research participants to build a connection. This was recognised as more beneficial for the young people and the research than a full interview with more semi-structured questions.

The Emerging Researchers' relationships with play and engagement in the embodied walking process were valued over a more formal peer-to-peer interview process. In the end, the Emerging Researchers decided not to use peer-to-peer interviews at all and to use more play in their research facilitation to associate with activities which their participants were familiar with, in order to support the participants' comfort and relationship building. This highlights the Emerging Researchers' prioritisation of, and belief in, the relationships with more play-based research tools over traditional forms for the type of research they were conducting. While some of the Emerging Researchers expressed enjoyment in the traditional peer-to-peer interview process, the majority also felt that it was best suited to particular times once comfort was already built between peers. For a longer-term research project, such as my research with the Emerging Researchers, interviews that integrate play-based elements could still be valuable once the relationships have been established through play-based activities to allow a dialogue style interview to coalesce. However, for shorter research, such as the three-hour sessions and weekend sessions the Emerging Researchers were hosting, play-based activities were preferred by Emerging Researchers and appeared to allow for greater relationships, process, dialogue, and experience for those engaged.

5.2 Relationship with Play in Nature

The relationships with the play in nature was an important part of the research process for the Emerging Researchers. While this research is focused on play-based research approaches, the research itself occurred in nature-based settings with structured and unstructured methods incorporating and engaging with nature, and thus a small section on relationships with nature is warranted. The Emerging Researchers' embodiment experiences with the nature around them was thus evident throughout the research process through experiences that took place and through reflections on their childhood as part of research activities.

Through object story sharing while sitting in a circle on the grass, the Emerging Researchers shared objects they had found in nature, in particular the forest, river, and trails surrounding them, or that they had brought with them camping to introduce what play meant to them for their own wellbeing. Sharing during this activity suggested an embodied relationship with nature. For example, Kodak shared that he was looking for:

A piece of wood that's been carved by like the insects have eaten, that create those markings in the bark. When I was much younger I used to stare at those for hours and hours and occasionally I would see how the bugs would eat through the wood to make that happen. And I was able to just look at the intricacies of how that was put together without any human interaction, and because I did have some social issues shall we say up until joining this programme. That was a relatively good escape to look at things like that and occasionally carve a few myself. (Kodak)

Kodak was able to engage with the wood and the intricate patterns the bugs had formed which supported his own wellbeing when social interaction with the human world posed challenges for him. By both observing and playing with the wood, when he 'carved[d] a few [him]self,' he fostered a relationship with the non-human bodies of wood and bugs he communicated with. In addition, through his 'hours and hours' of observation of the wood and bugs

relationship, the data illustrates that he developed and appreciation for the relationships between nature-based objects.

Another Emerging Researcher used ‘two really cool rocks’, one ‘perfectly spherical and the other ... rounded and worn’, to express balance in play (Ocean). She expressed the embodied relationship with the rocks as she ground them together ‘smoothing them down’ and that ‘the dust that it produced was really cool’ and once wet transformed into a paste. Ocean’s statement about the ‘earthly objects’ generating ‘a lot of thought’ and meditation, supporting her to feel grounded as she ‘roll[ed] them around in [her] hands’ indicates a physical relationship with the natural materials and her experience of play. Furthermore, the non-verbal observational data of Ocean rolling the rocks between her hands further highlights the importance of data that is present outside verbal communication (such as observations of embodied experiences) and the embodied data that is not always captured in analysis, yet here can be seen as pertinent to relationships with nature.

Others spoke of the feeling that being outside brought to them, whether sitting in one space or in movement. In a peer-to-peer interview, Sydney expressed that being outside made ‘like my whole body just feels good,’ and that for her ‘wellbeing and being out in nature go hand in hand’ whether it is connected with movement or just ‘breathing fresh air’. Thus, her body’s relationship with nature as she breathes in air and immerses herself in nature-based spaces suggests relationships that nurture physical, emotional, and mental wellbeing. This relational connection with nature was further exemplified by the calm that young people highlighted it brought them while on their research training expedition and during walks through the forest. The data connects with a growing body of literature that argues connection with nature can be beneficial for young people’s mental health (e.g. Birch, Rishbeth, & Payne, 2020) and young people’s understanding of nature. Outdoor nature places that allow for respite from everyday pressures that young people face with a sense of freedom are recognised for playing a ‘vital role’ in psychological and social needs of young people (Dovey, 1990).

Djohari, Brown, and Stolk (2018) posit that comfort with nature environments emerge from relationships with the natural world highlighting the embodied practice of young people's social worlds. The space of nature during the play-based research was recognised for its impacts on the mental health and relationships of the Emerging Researchers. While limited analysis of nature in this dissertation is due to its direct focus on play, future research could explore further the relationships between nature, play, and relationships in research.

5.3 Relationships: Peers, Community, Adults

Participatory research with young people is a 'relational process which involves generational and power differentials' (Horgan, 2017, p.247). Play can act as a leveller to deconstruct generational and power differentials between adults and young people, and between peers themselves. The role of relationships in peer-to-peer child and young people researchers is evident across the child and young person led/co-led research sector yet there is a dearth of literature that explicitly focuses on the relationships between young researchers themselves. The literature is replete on the power dynamics and relationships built between young people and adults, with less focus on the relationships between the young researchers and their relationships with diverse communities, such as their school, non-formal learning spaces, peer networks and neighbourhoods, in their lives. This section explores relationships Emerging Researchers have with their peers, adults in the research, and their communities. As Reich and colleagues (2017) suggest, developing meaningful relations in research is both messy and challenging and thus the sections below will explore the complexity alongside the strengths in these processes.

5.3.1 Relationships between Peer Emerging Researchers

Research on relationships between young people leading research is limited. This section explores the relationship development between peer Emerging Researchers during research training, leading, reflection, and in the between spaces.

The activities allowed for relationships to form between Emerging Researchers themselves. While some play-based activities were introduced as collaborative from the start (e.g. a unity circle where Emerging Researchers leaned back together around a shared circle rope), others were introduced with options to be collaborative or individual activities. For example, when invited to participate in the final river journey activity during the research training expedition, the Emerging Researchers were provided the opportunity to draw a river collaboratively as a team or to draw individual ones. One female voiced a desire to 'do one big collective river' with scope to still 'write our own things' too (Sydney). The rest of the group rapidly agreed to draw a 'collective' river, drawing out their experiences from prior to the research expedition, midway through, at the end of the week and beyond to the future. This highlighted their desire to work together while bringing in their own ideas to the collaborative space. While the team was working together Sydney stated: 'we have a collective now, we are the [partner's name] collective'. The power of being a collective arguably extended the concept of individual relationships to collective relationships between the researchers and brought them to a new form of group relation. Furthermore, it moved them beyond relationships between individuals to a sense of community and group relationships. This new community was further evidenced by the majority of Emerging Researchers voicing preference to reflect in group dialogue and activity in other research activities and reflective spaces instead of writing sticky notes to independently share ideas. While both were used to allow for different ways of thinking and engaging, collaborative play and dialogue spaces were considered more valuable by the majority of the group.

After participating in collaborative research activities during the intensive play-based research training expedition, the majority of Emerging Researchers expressed a desire to stay in touch with their peers beyond the scheduled follow up times for preparing and leading research. For example, D proclaimed that 'we should actually hang out. We should do stuff ... I'm willing to try to put in some effort if you guys do. ... So taking forward like maybe like these relationships that we've kind of been able to rekindle

almost'. D's statement to put in effort if others would highlighted his desire to maintain relationships going forward. The value of relationships between peer researchers was further reinforced by Donatello when he shared his take away from the week as 'yeah just the relationships that I have made'. While Donatello also referenced the skills and competencies acquired he finished his sharing with honing in on the relational value of the process. For him, relationships deepened through the playful dialogue, games, and activities that occurred throughout the week. The social element developed through play acted as a key factor for his involvement, and could be valuable to consider for researchers on a broader scale conducting research with both children and adults.

It was evident that a desire to spend time with each other was also based on the support that the Emerging Researchers felt they received from one another. As emphasised by D and reinforced by Kodak, something that really helped was 'having the support of the group you know' (D). D further shared his appreciation for the group being 'down [with his] shit ... and finding the support of the group' but it not being a 'support group'. The emphasis on, and distinction between, the support *of a group* and a *support group* highlighted the importance of peer-to-peer support and care without being a formal organised space for mental health or addiction that Emerging Researchers, such as D, had previously been engaged in. Support that respected one another's 'shit' and unique identities was particularly valued across the Emerging Researchers. While in some spaces young people are required to play performative roles and feel a need to mask their identities and their 'shit', the open play-based relational space was considered one where 'shit' and identities could be more readily shared and respected. Outside the group time, one of the researchers spoke of social isolation when he had limited free time because of work (as highlighted in the previous chapter), and thus this group space fostered connection and the reminder of the value of relationships in the Emerging Researchers' lives.

Another key element of the relationships between peers in the play-based research process is the between spaces of play outside the structured research times coordinated with the adults. While not part of the research 'plan', the Emerging Researchers exchanged phone numbers and social media details in order to stay connected with one another outside the research meetings. For example, a few of the Emerging Researchers met up at a board games café one afternoon, and another couple got together to look at photography. While these were not orchestrated by the adult researcher or by the Emerging Researchers for research purposes, they were key play moments to deepen further peer-to-peer engagement and enhanced relationships. The board games café allowed for play to take place while 'hanging out' without a specific targeted outcome and for the researchers, who may not have come together in other circumstances, to deepen their interactions. The terminology to 'hang out', as used in the paragraph above by D reinforces the recognition of diverse language of play, such as hanging out, for older children and its importance in relationships. Unfortunately, 'hanging out' is often troubled as antisocial disruptive behaviour or behaviour that lacks purpose across adults in society. Davidson (2012) exposes the challenge of the negative 'hanging out' narrative for young people's interactions. As such, young people's opportunities for hanging out can be limited, thus disrupting their spaces to express themselves and informally play with their peers. However, contrary to negative societal perceptions of 'hanging out', in this research the concept was respected by peer-to-peer researchers and adults and thus was welcomed during and outside the research. The value of getting to know one another through spending time outside the formal research has been exemplified by Reich and colleagues (2017) in research with indigenous young people co-researchers where time spent together over informal meals supported building relationships. The findings in this section reinforce the idea that meaningful engagement in non-formal formats has the potential to produce better research and build relationships (Liebenberg, Sylliboy, Davis-Ward, & Vincent, 2017). While 'better' research can mean many different

things, here it highlights how the relationships which developed helped the research activities to take place and the Emerging Researchers to share more during the research.

Due to the value of relationships, the Emerging Researchers were also more committed to attend research sessions to be able to spend time with one another. On one of the preparing to lead session days, D arrived first looking brighter and more refreshed than previous days. D 'had taken a cab from his house to get to [the venue]' which he reflected was something he would never do again as he had just paid such a large amount. He shared how he had been 'looking forward to this for like a week and was excited' to come. (Field Notes). He mentioned how at other times in the past he had not been able to attend because he did not have a ride to the pick-up point and the bus felt like a long journey. As such, his decision to pay to take a cab to avoid the excursion and time of bus while investing a large amount of money he had worked for highlighted his desire and commitment to attend. At this point the programme partners asked him to let us know in the future so that we could coordinate a ride for him. However, the act of taking the cab, connected with his excitement to spend time with his peer researchers alongside the adult partners. D shared how he did not have the opportunity to engage in the same kinds of conversations with peers in his regular daily interactions. Other acts of commitment for relationships between Emerging Researchers were highlighted through Emerging Researchers trading work days (when this was possible), asking for rides from their parents/guardians, and occasionally motivating themselves to complete their school homework earlier in the week (or later in the evening) in order to be able to spend time with their peer Emerging Researchers. As such, the types of relationships that coalesced, where both play-based humorous interactions (as highlighted in Chapter 4) and depth of dialogue (as will be explored in Chapter 6) occurred, were important in the commitment to, and appreciation of, the relationships themselves.

Relational reciprocity and care for one another became apparent as the research time together continued. Relational care was evidenced during birthdays of Emerging Researchers as highlighted in Chapter 3 on methodology and methods. For example, during one of the leading research days:

The morning began with Donatello as the first to arrive. He walked in with a beaming smile (as often plastered across his face). It was his birthday and he brought gluten free vegan chocolate cake and sparklers his mom had purchased for the alumni crew as he wanted to make sure [there was] something everyone could eat.

(Field Notes)

Earlier in the week I had emailed Donatello's mom (as I did not have access to Donatello's email) checking in to see if he still wanted to attend as the leading research was on his birthday. She shared that Donatello felt isolated at school and when she had asked him who he wanted for a birthday he could only think of the Emerging Researchers and some of the people from his previous wilderness programme cohort who made him feel welcome. Donatello's excitement for sharing his birthday with his fellow researchers was evident in the way he presented the cake and his thoughtfulness, on his own birthday, in ensuring it met everyone's needs (e.g. gluten free for Cedar, vegan for D and Sydney). When reading the card, we shared, smiling at the balloons and eating birthday cake, Donatello had a calm and satisfied expression on his face which further exemplified his feelings of belonging and relationships in the group. In addition to Donatello's birthday, the last leading research session was scheduled for Rigby's nineteenth birthday. Similarly, I had expected Rigby would choose not to join, with the age of nineteen being a significant birthday year for Canadians, yet Rigby voiced a desire to be a part of the research on her birthday. She was excited to come back together with the group one final time to lead research and to celebrate with the research team. On her birthday, a cake and a card were also shared to celebrate her significant day and the success of their work as researchers. In

both cases, the inclusion of a play-based pause to celebrate with singing, laughter, and birthday cheer and value special moments acted to deepen reciprocal relationships.

While research can be constructed as separate from the personal elements of young people's lives to maintain a distinction between research (work) and the play-based space, emphasis on taking time to learn about young people (e.g. their birthdays) and taking time to celebrate their moments with them is important as an ethical imperative of reciprocity and to deepen commitment to and engagement in the research. Play-based research goes beyond methodological tools and engages in the margins and between spaces. Authors, such as Davidson (2017) highlight the critical importance of 'hanging out' in trust and relationship building between adults and young people, which is valuable for relationships between young researchers themselves. There is a presumption sometimes that one can separate out the work/professional experience of research from the more personal. But young people, as this research shows, do not see such divides. Ergo, creating space for the messy realities is important for meaningful relationships in research (Reich et al., 2017) and for developing research that supports a process not just a research outcome.

5.3.2 Relationships with Adult Researchers

In addition to relationships between peers, relationships between young people leading research and the adult researchers/'allies' in their space were explored. While not underestimating the significance of adult power in research settings, the data highlights the value of adopting a more dynamic and relational understanding of power and voice and how they intersect with method for young people led research (Davidson, 2017). Based on the data in this research, this section proposes a relational model of participation between Emerging Researchers and adults (Ergler, 2017). By recognising that humans are 'fallible', 'imperfect and naïve' rather than 'fully formed, rational, competent, and autonomous agents' the distinction of power between the adult and young people researchers has the potential to be

unsettled (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008, p. 111). In titling the researcher (myself) who is above thirty years of age as an 'adult' researcher in this section, it is not intended to suggest a hierarchy of distinction between adults and young people; it is used to support clarity on different roles in the research study and research across generations more generally.

The Emerging Researchers shared their perspectives on adults' roles explicitly when asked and also implicitly through their verbal and non-formal communication throughout the research. For example, when asked about the type of role an adult researcher should play, Rigby suggested 'kind of just a support role'. She further explained that:

I think it was helpful to have the adults in our group as part of our activities. We could lead our activities but if they were part of them when we needed something it was super easy to ask. (Rigby)

Rigby shared appreciation for having adults participate in the activities to be available if the Emerging Researchers needed anything. However, she vocalised that the group of Emerging Researchers 'could lead [their own] activities'. Therefore, it was important that the Emerging Researchers' leadership and capacity to lead was respected. This excerpt alongside other data highlighted how it was helpful for young people be able to ask for help if *needed* with the understanding that young people can lead their own processes. Rigby asserted that adults need to be able to 'step back enough' but 'still be there' and reflected that this can be a difficult balance to find. This was particularly relevant for partner organisation staff who were used to playing active supportive roles that brought in their adult ideas and thus required a shift in the style of support shared. Rigby's assertion aligns with child and youth studies scholars who highlight the challenging interplay of stepping back to create space for young people to step up while still being present. As Richards-Schuster & Timmermans (2017) explore in their research, it is not always easy to take a step back but it is crucial for young people's leadership and young people–adult interaction. Furthermore, in alignment with Rigby's statement, Richards-Schuster & Timmermans (2017)

highlight the value of young people knowing that adults are available to 'step back in if need' and recognising the trust and understanding of young people and adults to negotiate these roles. The balance can be difficult for adults themselves and for Emerging Researchers in communicating what they want and need during their research. Rigby felt that adults may have important information, ideas, and experiences that the young people would want to hear so that it was useful to allow adults' opinions to be heard; yet that it was crucial when sharing that young people are not 'necessarily [made to] do things the way [adults have] done them all the time' (Rigby). It was recognised as important to give children and young people space for 'their own ways of doing this' when leading play-based research. Rigby's position on not being made do to things is critical for meaningful participation of young people in leading research processes.

As an adult researcher who is passionate about children and young people taking leadership and meaningfully participating in their own research, I recognise my situated knowledge and perspective in the ways I engage with the Emerging Researchers. Yet even with my positioning as someone who greatly values meaningful participation, I am still an adult researcher who has been socialised in adult spaces which may cause limitations on my ways of seeing and engaging. Accordingly, my subject position and situated knowledge had an impact on my relationships with the young people and my different roles as trainer, support person, and peer.

After having facilitated workshops in a 'trainer' role to support the Emerging Researchers to develop knowledge and skills to plan and lead play-based workshops, my role transitioned to being a supportive adult researcher who aided in order to hold the space and be present if the Emerging Researchers had questions or sought out support for resources or process. I also sought to engage in play-based processes as a participant and peer to support the Emerging Researchers' leadership. In my 'support' role, as an individual who is regularly concerned about young people's wellbeing, I was cautious to be reflexive and block myself from jumping in to 'rescue' situations when young

people lead research. For example, when D led his first opening circle with the young participants, he introduced how to participate in the opening circle itself, yet then fumbled on asking the reflective questions after the circle itself. I stood silently in the uncomfortable quiet space (or perhaps it was just me that felt the disquiet) and awaited D's leadership. After some silence, he looked to me with a flushed concerned face in what appeared as desire for me to break the silence and debrief questions. Upon the non-verbal request of D, I went ahead to ask a few reflective opening circle questions. I had considered speaking sooner to support D in his process yet was cautious to not impede the young person lead process at the same time (Field Notes). Furthermore, I reflected on the importance of the Emerging Researchers' development as play-based researchers over the 'perfect' articulation of probing questions in the research activities. Additionally, I sought to practice a principle of 'go where invited' in my role while Emerging Researchers were leading.

During a debrief on leading research, D highlighted how he felt he was bad at leading activities based on his experience leading during the day but when complemented by his peers, he shared he felt he was getting better. While the experience of leading 'imperfectly' initially made him feel uncomfortable others, such as Cedar, voiced the value of the imperfect space as she felt it made participants feel more comfortable and the relationships more natural. Experiences of play that occurred between the Emerging Researchers during the research were far from perfect, yet were valued. The potential for play to foster reflexivity on moving away from perfection and valuing the imperfect could be further explored. By highlighting the value of imperfection, D appeared more at ease with his own facilitation and other Emerging Researchers were able to reflect on the importance of each person having their own unique playful style. As such, the adult role to step back and then forward when invited has the potential for young people's learning and leadership, as well as different forms of facilitation that can bring diverse benefits to those engaged.

Similar to D inviting the adult researcher for support, Cedar shifted between confidence in her own leadership to showing uncertainty and desire to have adult support at moments in time when leading research. For example, one afternoon Cedar volunteered to lead a game during a canoe ride. The canoe Cedar sat in included herself as the researcher, young people research participants, an adult partner programmer, and myself. During the canoe ride 'she would whisper questions or ideas about activities' to me asking what we should do as well as asking me to garner approval from the programme partner before she led (Field Notes). While her comfort to whisper to me highlighted the relationships we had formed over the project, her desire to have approval from the programme partner, alongside her checking in with me, suggest perhaps a hampering role of the adult researcher and supports in the space. I pondered in my own reflexive journal, does having an adult present unsettle young people's belief in themselves to take leadership? Does it contribute to or inhibit their role? Was Cedar presenting internalised adultism that she had been subjected to societally? Lee, Currie, Saied, and Wright's (2020) research with youth researchers and adult allies explored adult allies' reflections that youth may be 'more comfortable following the "mould" of certain performative roles', as was evident in Cedar's interactions, and as such were more nervous and less keen to take on new forms of leadership (p. 9). Furthermore, the internalisation of an oppressive suggested lack of competency of young people can impede young researchers' opportunities and actions to feel confident in leading with adults present. While asking for support and seeking approval could support Emerging Researchers', such as Cedar's, growth, it also runs risk of reinforcing internalised narratives of limited competency that negatively impedes action and leadership.

On another occasion, Rigby was leading a wellbeing giant Jenga research activity. She started to pass around the cue cards to write factors of wellbeing on Jenga blocks for the young participants to tape their ideas to.

Figure 5.2 *Rigby leading Wellbeing Jenga*



One of the adults present, Donatello, and I jumped in to hand out tape. At first I cautioned against handing out the tape, not wanting to impede Rigby's leadership 'yet [also considered it may be] a backup role' so that Rigby 'could continue to lead effectively' (Field Notes). Here, my own feelings of discomfort were expressed reflecting the adult role the community partners and I held in the space. Akin to Richards-Schuster & Timmermans (2017) I chose to take a role of 'sustaining and gluing' to support day-to-day tasks for the young people to be able to focus on leadership and facilitation in this scenario. Donatello and I thus as Emerging Researcher and adult support researcher who were not lead facilitators were able to work together to provide logistical support that would allow for Rigby to continue to take leadership without the need to deal with tape as well. While there could be critique for invading the Emerging Researchers' leadership, I also recognise that in adult facilitation spaces with trusted colleagues, it is common for a second person to aid in back up roles, such as, handing out papers, passing around tape, and reducing the load for the lead facilitator. As such, respect for young people as people and their leadership is important. While advocating for young people lead research, I reflected on my engagement with romanticised notions that youth should lead every aspect of the research, and recognised that this may actually impede their ability to excel (Lee et al., 2020) by not respecting them as humans with the desire to have

support (akin to adults) at different points in time. Here, similar to how adults may call on others for support, they refer to logistical aspects that can be supported by adult allies where invited. The data shows relationships between adults and young people can support Emerging Researchers, if invited and respecting their leadership, without impeding their strengths and opportunity to lead.

5.3.3 Relationship with Family and Community

In addition to the relationships between researchers, the play-based experience also enhanced and/or altered the Emerging Researchers' relationships with people in their own communities (e.g. peers, family, colleagues) through leading research and through their everyday engagement. For example, one young woman spoke of how the activities she engaged in with family and friends after completing the research 'changed a little bit' (Rigby).

The other day I took my sister and we went to the park. And my sister is 16 and I am 19 and we just played at the park because it was an easy activity to do and we both wanted to be outside doing something. And I think just being able to realise that that's still okay and we are allowed to do playful things. Just enjoy our time together and outside. (Rigby)

Here Rigby spoke of her realisation that it is okay for older children, such as her sister and herself, to play. The excerpt illustrates that through a new understanding of play, she became more comfortable introducing play to her younger sister and freely playing together in a park. When probed how her sister felt about the experience she stated that her sister really enjoyed the chance to be playful and reconnect with playground experiences of her younger childhood. Rigby also expressed how she has been able to convince more people in her life that 'we don't just need to be having a conversation in a coffee shop ... we can go out and do fun things'. When she would initially recommend activities like hikes and beach hangouts, there was some hesitation, yet over time her friends really appreciated these outdoor experiences instead, too. Due to her play-based research experience, Rigby

not only shifted her own practice but also contributed to more playful forms of engagement with older young people she interacted with, such as her sibling and peers. Rigby's quotes on relationships are used more frequently throughout this chapter than some of the other Emerging Researchers due to her being one of the two Emerging Researchers interviewed after the research was complete, with space to reflect more explicitly on the role of play in relationships. Other Emerging Researchers' reflections and embodied interactions were also central to the themes explored in this chapter.

Similar to Rigby, D highlighted more play in his relationship with his younger sister and brother. After engaging in the research expedition, D felt a reconnection with nature and play, and more confidence in his ability to camp independently outside without the partner organisation and researchers. He thus coordinated what he deemed as a successful camp trip with his younger sister and intends to continue to do so with his whole family going forward.

Outside relationships with siblings and close friends, the Emerging Researchers also shared changes in relationships with colleagues and volunteers in their community, such as those coming into the store where one of them worked, and their desire to be more active in contributing play to society. For example, Kodak expressed a desire to support the partner organisation going forward through sharing his form of play, photography, with them and aiding in photograph taking. A few of the young people, such as Cedar, spoke of their intentions to incorporate more of the learning and skills into their lives. Several months after completion of leading research, Rigby highlighted her plans to 'adapt and kind of change things I learned' with the research programme to use 'some of those activities with like younger groups and for summer camps' she would be working in as an inclusion leader over the summer. Rigby's intentions to adapt continuously and build on her learning as a researcher and practitioner going forward suggests a valuable role of play-based research techniques being able to contribute to both participatory research and practice for community engagement.

While often literature on community impact from young researchers focuses on larger community projects and specific outcomes, the subtle shifts in daily interactions with family, peers, and colleagues in community should be further explored. The ripple effects of the relationship with play-based research contributed to transitions in relationships that have potential to foster further transitions in individual and collective lives within and across communities.

The data shows that the relationships between Emerging Researchers and their peers, adult researchers, and community members were developed, enriched, and/or altered throughout the play-based research process. In arts-based research with young people the powerful role of the arts based research medium in relationship building and cohesion is recognised (Denov & Shevell, 2019). As such, the recognition of play, both formally constructed in research activities and play in research on the margins, the between unintended spaces, is important for participatory research with young people going forward. The complex formations of peer-to-peer and intergenerational partnerships can be further formed through these play encounters.

5.4 Relationship with Self: Researcher Reflexivity

This section explores the Emerging Researchers' reflexivity in their relationship with themselves over the research process. The data shows that young people's relationship with self was effected through their experience in, and leading, play-based research methodologies and through the relationships they developed with people, places, and things. While young researchers' development of social and emotional life skills has been explored in previous research (e.g. Lee et al., 2020; Shamrova & Cummings, 2017), exploration of their relationships with reflexivity in relation to that of the methodology and social spheres around them warrants further analysis. Therefore, I consider the Emerging Researchers' relationships with self reflexivity through their verbal and non-verbal expressions and communication during play-based research, because reflexivity engages all the senses and is valuable to explore on multiple levels. In exploring

relationships with self the findings showed pride, leadership, and confidence. When reflecting on leadership, this research understands leadership as relational and collective, and, akin to authors such as Allan and colleagues (1998), it looks at the web of relationships and conditions that create change, and respects that quality leadership is about relationships (Etmanski, Fulton, Nasmyth, Page, 2014).

Several studies with children and young people aspire that young people engaged in participatory research will develop/strengthen confidence, self-esteem, leadership, and other pertinent life skills (e.g. Iwasaki, Springett, Dashora, McLaughlin, & McHugh, 2014; Lee et al., 2020). Others suggest a performative element where growth and transformation could be displayed or transformed (e.g. McMellon, & Mitchell, 2017). While it is assumed that young person led research enhances 'empowerment' and wellbeing, there is still a paucity of research that actually measures and evidences these claims (Graham, Simmons, & Truscott, 2017). Additionally, developmental research highlights the role of play in strengthening emotional, social, and cognitive competencies (e.g. Burghardt, 2005) yet does so less from childhood studies, and an interconnection of the role of play and research together with regard to young people's reflexive relationships with self does not exist. As such, the data's exposure of the what and how of a relationship with self reflexivity is interesting in relation to methodology and reflexivity of young people themselves.

In an interview with Rigby upon completion of the research she highlighted her enhanced skills in reflexivity and reflection on her own life:

Um I think personally I have gotten better on reflecting on the things that I am doing ... Um ... And about everything that I have been doing. I think I have learned to take things in better like when I have been doing things I have reflected back on what we said about everything is research and taking it all in as data and being able to like reflect on that a lot and I've noticed in just my day-to-day life in doing things. And it's been strange to notice for sure ... Um ... but like that I am

able to do it now. And I think I value things a lot more from being able to reflect back on them. (Rigby)

This statement highlights Rigby's enhanced reflexivity of her experiences and daily interactions. Through play-based reflective research activities Rigby acquired skills to reflect on more critically and analyse experiences. While at another point in time she highlighted that it at first felt uncomfortable, over time she began to value reflective thinking and noted on a few different occasions its impact on her life. Other Emerging Researchers also suggested greater personal awareness through statements made throughout research activities. For example, Sydney spoke of her anger and frustration with herself and a desire to gain greater acceptance and care.

Um ... I would like to leave behind anger. I find I get angry with myself and frustrated and just like it's a whole lot of why do I feel like this, why am I like this, why do I do this to myself. And yeah. And so I just find myself getting angry with myself all the time. And so moving forward I would like to take with me acceptance. It's okay to feel like that sometimes, it's okay to be unsure, it's okay to not be happy with yourself. But know that it is okay. And just accept yourself and accept your feeling and that's been a big thing for me my whole life and it's okay to feel that way. (Sydney)

Sydney's critical self-reflection on the negative implications of her self anger and her desire to accept herself had a profound impact on her during the close of the research expedition and fed into future actions during the research process. While acceptance is not instantaneous, the exploration of her emotions along a spectrum of negative and positive was important for her own growth. Her reflection that it is okay to not be perfect and always happy pushes against the neoliberal narrative of perfection and positivity. Furthermore, Sydney highlighted during a River Journey research activity that the research experience fostered growth, pride, and acceptance in relation to herself and her relationships with peer Emerging Researchers.

Through reflective play-based research activities, the Emerging Researchers were also able to reflect further on their experience leading research with

peers and the strengths of the process. In doing so, feelings of individual and collective confidence and pride were highlighted. For example, Sydney shared that during the research:

One of the boys wanted some water so I had to show him where the cups were. And he's like well how do you like working at [partner organisation]? And I was like I don't even work here, but thank you, you think I work here. That's awesome. So the fact that he couldn't even tell the difference for me just being here to me working here was kind of cool. (Sydney)

Sydney beamed pride when she shared how one of the young participants in the research had assumed she worked at the partner organisation. For her, Sydney felt that this highlighted she was a strong facilitator and that she had the qualities of the staff who worked there. Sydney had mentioned a few times during the research how the staff at the partner organisation had 'changed her life' and her appreciation for them in believing in her so that she could believe in herself. The 'fact that [the participant] couldn't ... tell the difference for her just being here' to working at the organisation was impactful for her [Sydney]. The comment 'just being here' could suggest her feelings that a participant as a young person who is just present has less importance than adult working there. As such, to be recognised as an employee for her was 'kind of cool' as she felt it was a more important role than her own. While this level of value placed on roles needs to be troubled, the recognition of appearing similar to people she admired shows pride in her own abilities. Several other Emerging Researchers also expressed feelings of pride in their own development in facilitating research over the course of the research process. For example, Donatello stated how he felt proud of his play-based facilitation style as he was 'not rushing through things in a way' and 'seeing things at a slower pace'. Here, Donatello both expressed pride in his facilitation as well as respected his own ways of doing things as someone who tends to employ a slower pace. He further highlighted and showed pride when stating 'I am most proud of how I have grown and learned a lot about play and research by being in this programme' (Donatello). Donatello's own

reflexivity supported him to gain further respect for himself and his learning in the research process.

While confidence was enhanced for several of the Emerging Researchers, the findings illuminate how confidence is not static and that it is fluid and changing for the Emerging Researchers in the research process and in their own personal lives. This was exemplified by Cedar's shift in confidence throughout the duration of the research training, leading, and reflection months. It is important to highlight that confidence and relationships are impacted by a wide variety of variables in each young person's life within and outside the research. For example, Cedar took part in a young leaders' camp (not part of the research) while engaged in the research which resulted in a notable shift in her posture and communication with others. However, as a researcher Cedar would often shift from exuding confidence to appearing nervous and fearful to share her ideas and expertise. For example, she led a spider web game exploring participants' strengths and relationships in the group, where she used 'bracelet making tweed string ... [and] invited young people to share' (Field Notes). On the same day, Cedar stumbled into whispers, hunched shoulders, and nervous glances to me for support when attempting to lead another play-based research activity. While play and her own confidence in her understanding of the play-based method for spider web fostered confidence, when she led another play-based activity she exhibited uncertainty in her ability to lead.

While some Emerging Researchers saw their own achievements and expressed pride in themselves, others needed greater support from their peers to recognise their personal growth. This is exemplified through D and Sydney's interaction after leading research.

I think you did really good at speaking today D.
(Sydney)

Thanks for saying that. You're lying but I appreciate it anyway. (D)

I've seen your growth over quite a few years. (Sydney)

[Laughter] you're like yeah it's bad but it's better okay.
(D)

So I can say, it's good now. (Sydney)

Thank you, you know like. It definitely wasn't ideal. But I tried ... also like I was watching you guys lead like games or activities or whatever and stuff and I'm like oh that's how you did that ... and it's like you know I can really get good at stuff once you do just a really bad job at it a bunch of times. (D)

(Sun, Storm, Rainbow Activity)

In the excerpt above, Sydney took time to highlight D's strengths and growth in his facilitation. As these two researchers had participated in the same wilderness programme together prior to the Emerging Researchers programme, they had had the opportunity to observe each other's growth over a few years in even further depth than other Emerging Researchers had during the research. As such, Sydney was able to highlight D's evolving leadership capacity. While D denounced the complement repeatedly, his body language and final comment suggested his pride and appreciation of the recognition of his growth. Additionally, his comment about the strengths of his peers further suggests relationships with self being tied up in relationships with other, and the experiences of leadership, pride, and confidence in conjunction with peers. This was further exemplified by statements of Emerging Researchers that married their own skills with that of their peers. For example, Rigby expressed how 'everybody was able to lead an activity and do it pretty confidently' and that all the Emerging Researchers she felt were 'competent in leading activities, now'. These relationships were woven together with one another, not linear individualised concepts to be built upon independently.

Individual roles in one's life actions have value, and yet a social ecological framework shows the entanglements and relationships of the Emerging

Researchers between peers, community, and society (Gal, 2017). Through exploring relationship with self reflexivity (instead of development of self) of the young people, this chapter highlights fluidity and the non-linear components of young people's identities and their critical reflections in their experiences as Emerging Researchers.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter commenced with an introduction of play-based research relationships. It focused on relationships that the Emerging Researchers had with the play-based methodology itself and their reflections on the relationship with play-based processes that the young people they researched with experienced. I highlighted how relationships can go beyond human-to-human interactions and can be experienced and explored through embodied connections with spaces, materials and nature. This embodied connection has useful learnings for the participatory research sector and the role of play-based methods themselves. Next I explored relationships Emerging Researchers had with people, with particular emphasis on peer researchers, their communities (family, friends, colleagues) and adult researchers/ allies. I gave attention to how explicit play-based research tools and implicit play-based emergent spaces impacted relationships between Emerging Researchers and their relationships with other community members. My findings explored the messy realities of research relationships and the recognition that in participatory research relationships are fluid and not compartmentalised to researcher and participant. While research on power dynamics between young researchers and adults is more prevalent, these findings add further insight into the complexity of relationships and the roles that young people want for adults in their space. Additionally, it exposes some of the internal dilemmas of adult researchers while striving to foster meaningful participatory spaces.

The final section of the chapter briefly explored the relationships that the Emerging Researchers had with themselves based on their own reflexivity and reflections of pride, confidence, and leadership throughout their research

journey. Findings highlighted that while expressions of pride and confidence pertained to individual experiences, these individual experiences connected with their peers' experiences and relationally. As such, the emotions and relationships between the Emerging Researchers and those in their social ecological model impacted their own relationships with reflexivity. This connects with emerging literature on collective notions of emotions and the way they are expressed and experienced (Wright et al, 2021). Although common themes arose in relation to perspectives on the role of play-based research, the diversity of participants' experiences and relationships should be taken into account.

While writing this chapter, the world was experiencing a global health pandemic (COVID-19) that required government mandated quarantine, lockdown, physical distancing and isolation of citizens. Although the majority of the data collection took place when social interactions in person were still permitted, the importance of relationships has grown substantially in understanding connections in person and online, and also in understanding and further exploring relationships people can have with places, play, and creativity in their lives. As one Emerging Researcher spoke of the challenge of social isolation (the data occurring prior to the pandemic), the importance of play for relationships whether in person or online is significant. Thus, the relationships with research methods themselves poses a unique possibility for how research when in person or if online could foster and support relationships for young people in their lives.

This leads to a conclusion that play-based research has the potential to play a significant role in relationships in research allowing for relationships with people, places, and things to deepen and be experienced in different forms. It also further exposes the messy realities of relationships in research through play. An exploration of the messy realities and complexity of play in relationships between people, places, and things provides further insight into relationships in research and the potential role of play-based research approaches in those relationships.

Chapter 6 Play Fostering Reflective Dialogue on Social Issues

‘Play can be the beginning of a conversation (dialogue)’ (Berger & Zezulakova 2018, p. 67) in everyday spaces on critical social issues. Zimmerman and Morgan (2011) suggest play ‘arises a dialogue that invites us to elaborate our capacity for expression’ (p. 50) and opens up possibilities for dialogue that has the potential to go beyond other forms of research. In this PhD research, unexpected findings emerged that showed how play opened up dialogue that led to Emerging Researchers engaging in discussions on social issues linked with oppression and discrimination that they and others in their communities experienced. Dialogue³ in this dissertation is understood as an exploration of meaning making through words and relationships with people, materials, and nature and allowed space for critical everyday dialogue to explore values, beliefs, and ideas on social issues.

The embodied everyday hidden spaces of disempowered people, such as young people, have often been overlooked and need to come to the forefront (Wood, 2014). While the everyday can seem trivial, it is pertinent to recognise that it is ‘neither static nor necessarily mundane’ (Pink, 2012, p. 13) and holds valuable insight into lived realities of young people’s experiences and perspectives on social issues. Researchers who engage with young people have started to work ‘more strategically to allow the everyday – its noise, randomness, and interruptions – to interface in the research encounter’ (Wood, 2014, p. 218). Arguably these play and playful ‘interruptions’ allow for more porous dialogue that is often left behind and unrecognised in the research process. Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to contribute to broader conversations through presentation of data on the role of play in dialogue in powerful everyday conversations on social issues.

³ Dialogue originates from the Greek word *dialogos*, *logos* meaning ‘the word’ in a broader sense of meaning making and *dia* meaning ‘through’ (Bohm, 2007).

The chapter is divided into three sections. The data in this chapter was unanticipated during the research methodology design and warranted further exploration and analysis. In the first section, I analyse the role of play in fostering dialogue on critical social issues in everyday spaces. In the second section I use the different types of social issues explored among Emerging Researchers as illustrations of the role of play in dialogue on pertinent issues for young people. While a broad array of topics were discussed by, and with the Emerging Researchers, the data was most prevalent in education, LGBTQI+ and gender rights issues, political perspectives, and climate activism. In the third section, I explore the role of play in everyday experiences and dialogue around mental health through a critical and mad studies lens with particular examination of conversations around anxiety, depression, and alcohol use. Mental health has been woven through all three findings chapters both explicitly and implicitly; this section further explores the role of play in dialogue on mental health in everyday spaces. The chapter concludes with a summary of all three sections and reflections on the potential role of play for powerful everyday dialogue on social issues.

6.1 Play's Role in Fostering Reflexive Dialogue on Social Issues in Everyday Lives

Limited research on play highlights its role in exploring social issues through children's acts of play, whether through playing through emotions, exploring gender roles, playing out discrimination, and/or developing social-emotional life skills (Collins & Wright, 2019). However, less research exists on the role of play for older children and young people in fostering reflexive dialogue on social issues, and on the exploration of play as dialogue itself and its ability to create space for complex conversations to more readily take place.

Meanwhile, art is often linked with expressions and experiences of, or as a space to engage with, social (in)justice 'action' (Goessling, 2020; Keifer-Boyd, 2011). As such, this section explores the role of play in fostering dialogue and connection for older young people to explore important social issues in their lives.

Structured play-based research tools are designed to explore key questions through play-based modes, fostering space for young people to develop relationships, engage in the play space, and then explore questions that pertain to social issues. Such activities have been recognised for the value they contribute to children's social and emotional wellbeing (Bradshaw, Hoelscher, & Richardson, 2007), critical dialogue, and opportunities to engage. As explored in Chapter 5, the data from this research highlights how play-based research activities act as a fertile ground for young people's relationship formation and deepening. This chapter further engages with the types of dialogue that emerged on critical social issues that were both 'planned' in the forms of questions asked, and that emerged out of the structured and unstructured spaces of play.

After reviewing emerging unanticipated trends on play for dialogue on social issues in the data, I conducted two follow-up interviews with two of the Emerging Researchers who were available and interested. These interviews included a question on the role of play in fostering space for dialogue on social issues.

Rigby highlighted that:

Play can be distracting. I think having those conversations in not such a structured or formulated way can make it easier to have conversations like that. And I think if you're able to connect with someone with play and not necessarily just over those controversial concepts right away then it's easier to have those conversations if you have a basis of understanding of who these people are beforehand or you have something else that you can connect with. (Rigby)

In this excerpt Rigby stated the value of play as a *distraction* and a space to allow for unstructured conversations to take place. Cox and colleagues (2017) elsewhere have highlighted the importance of hobbies, sports, arts, activities, music, and activities that can be cathartic and act as distractions and opportunities to grow further. I recommend that the type of activities explored in Cox and colleagues' (2017) study should be categorised as play

and/or playful in order to show further insight into play's role in the everyday for distraction, as well as space for dialogue. Rigby's statement that people are 'able to connect with someone with play' before a dialogue on social issues may also suggest that play itself can be a dialogue for relationships between bodies without verbal interaction. Rigby emphasised that conversations arising from play have more depth when less structured and not formulated. This reflection was further evidenced, as mentioned in the previous chapter (Chapter 5), by Emerging Researchers when they spoke of feeling uncomfortable in more traditionally formulaic interviews than in free flowing play spaces. Through experiencing play, young people, Rigby notes, develop an understanding of one another that fosters connectivity and allows for greater ease in engaging in 'controversial topics'. This reflection speaks to the importance of trust and connection and the ways that trust and connection are created through play prior to engaging in conversations on social issues. It also relates to the Chapter 4 findings on play *in the challenge*. Social issue dialogues, while a space to galvanise positive energy, can also act as a space where 'challenging' conversations emerge where diverse perspectives and ideas are surfaced. In this context, play during the challenging conversations (or just before) was recognised as supporting people to experience and work in, and through, challenging moments, such as 'controversial topics'. This aligns with research that suggests that play and creative activities provide children and young people opportunities to communicate personal experiences, interact with others, and express their feelings and emotions (Tyrer & Fazel, 2014). With regard to play as something to connect to people with, the data suggests that a relational interaction can form which aids in engaging in listening spaces with one another and which works through challenging concepts and issues collectively. When asked if similar conversations would have taken place without play during the research, Rigby expressed that it might have been possible but would have taken longer without 'play as a ground to build up from'.

While at points, play and then complex conversation were sequential in this research, for example, a structured game was followed by a reflective discussion, at other times they were less linear and more of a woven process travelling outside structured temporal alignment of relationship between play forms and dialogue. The different forms and process of play and dialogue allow for ongoing co-creative processes that respect fluidity over fixedness, and embrace a constant flow disassembling and reassembling (Bright & Pugh, 2019). Bright and Pugh (2019) suggest that rhizomatic spaces enable people to reimagine social (in)justice in collaborative processes as bodies come together in assemblages. Furthermore, as rhizomes have multiple entry points, so does play in its different forms for supporting dialogue on critical social issues for young people.

Play in the margins and between spaces of the structured activities also opened up avenues for messy conversations whether during the playful moments or after time spent together through acts of play. For example, a conversation on systemic discrimination of persons with disabilities in formal education emerged during an early morning discussion around the breakfast table and a dialogue on respect for political choice in relation to human rights emerged next to a fire after a day of play-based research and everyday interaction. The between spaces, such as meal times, unplanned walks, car rides, and in waiting, were moments where dialogue of creative and powerful forms were birthed and flowed. While a reader may question why mobile spaces and transitions are situated in a chapter on play's role in dialogue, the data suggests that the acts of play throughout the research in the between spaces fostered a fertile environment for these conversations to emerge during moments of and between play. In the analysis process, I thus recognised and listened to these between conversations taking time to 'attend to the everyday' narratives as an important part of the research instead of deeming them as something that is 'polluting or interfering' with the data itself (Wood, 2014, p. 218). This allowed me, drawing from concepts in rhizomatic analysis, where all aspects of the data are open to be explored, to

focus attention on the Emerging Researchers' experiential data that could have been overlooked or prohibited from quality fruition (Work-Slivka, 2017).

Figure 6.1 *Ocean's two rocks she used to express what play means to her*

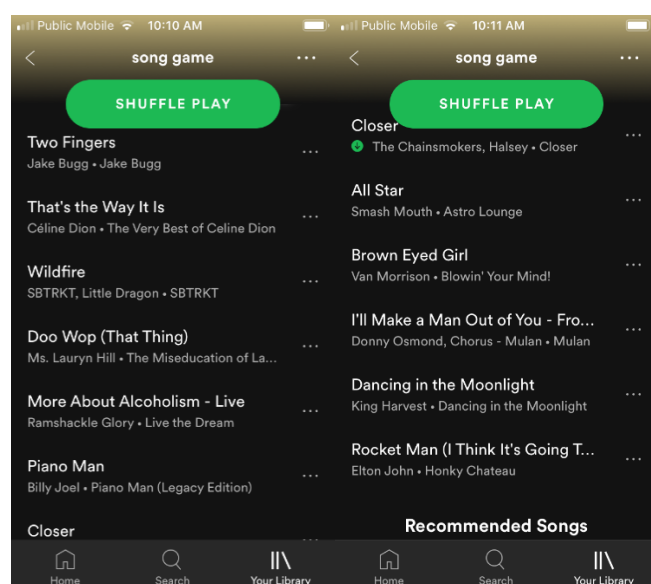


As noted above, several social issue dialogues arose during and around meal times⁴. Whether during preparation of meals together, eating, and/or cleaning up, meal times added opportunities for the discussions to emerge. As Emerging Researchers, programme coordinators (from the partner organisation), and adult researcher prepared meals together, play was interspersed during meal making, eating, and cleaning up. This allowed reflection to occur fluidly in the interwoven space of 'hanging out' between Emerging Researchers themselves and between the Emerging Researchers and adults in the space. Two of the Emerging Researchers and both the programme coordinators had expressed how cooking for them was a form of play. The playful form of cooking alongside 'hanging out' contributed to creative and serious conversations. Additionally, the travel times in the van contributed to play, such as collective singing along to our 'songs about us' playlist and Disney songs that reminded young people and adult researchers of childhood. The van acted as a vehicle for reflective discussion post play-based research activities and outdoor adventures (e.g. to and from the lake,

⁴ As the Emerging Researchers signed consent for the whole research experience (inclusive of between spaces) and were involved in ongoing voluntary consent processes the dialogues that took place in the between space at the research expedition, during planning meetings, and reflection spaces were ethically included as data.

the hike, the campground) in addition to being a space of play itself. Informal conversations on social issues thus emerged during the unplanned dialogue. This connects with Quijada's (2009) experience of messy car conversations and Ross and colleagues (2009) reflections of mobile methods being a critical space for conversation with young people. While Quijada (2009) and Ross and colleagues (2009) provided examples of conversations with young people from an adult to young person format, this dissertation highlights how travel and playful mobile methods can be a crucial space for peer-to-peer young people researchers as well.

Figure 6.2 *Songs that describe us playlist*



Furthermore, 'hanging out' and 'chill spaces' as explored in Chapter 4, which have been recognised as play for older young people, were significant for playful encounters and conversations. Kodak and D chilling on the floor of the clubhouse while waiting for the other Emerging Researchers to arrive inspired a conversation on political perspectives and engagement in their communities. The unprescribed chill space amid their usually full days, as both worked long hours in restaurant kitchens, provided fertile ground for reflective dialogue. Recognising the value of chill time, the Emerging Researchers expressed the importance of integrating non-structured time when they were planning to lead research with the younger cohort. Pyry

(2015) suggests that hanging out is a form of play and should be recognised accordingly. The everyday of play with its familiarity and ‘ordinariness can also be recognised as lively and extraordinary’ (Lester 2019, p. 57). As such, exploration of gradients of play, such as hanging out, and the ongoingness of it in everyday can deepen our understanding of play’s role in critical dialogue on social issues in young people’s lives.

A space for emergent unplanned dialogue through structured and unstructured play was valuable for the Emerging Researchers to explore social (in)justice and other social issues pertinent to their lives. Grace (2019) argues that play is not merely for frivolity of childhood, and that it is the way humans can find flow, alleviate stress, explore critical concepts, and understand and reflect on the world around them. Art forms have been used to ‘generate dialogue by creating temporary or permanent social spaces’ to connect in ways to change the ways we see ourselves and social situations to raise social consciousness (Bell & Desai, 2011, p. 289). The data in this research suggests that play, both with and without an agenda, fostered space for dialogue on critical social issues.

Significant social issue dialogue that was prevalent in the data included topics of education, gender and LGBTQI+ rights, politics, and climate activism. These social issues were linked with oppression and discrimination the young people had personally experienced based on their own subject positions and/or that their peers and others in their communities were experiencing. This section does not set out to go deeply into the pertinent social issues listed above, as a few paragraphs cannot do justice to the complexity of each issue. Instead its intention is to engage with these issues as examples of play’s role in fostering space for dialogue on social issues.

6.1.1 Education and Inclusion Spaces

Dialogue on formal and non-formal education and inclusion during and after play allowed young people to express their views on education and share ideas with one another. For example, as mentioned above, one morning

during the research training expedition, before breakfast, sitting around the breakfast picnic table at the campsite, a conversation on inclusion arose. At this time Ocean expressed her concern around the lack of quality support and respect for young people with disabilities in the public school system. She shared that her middle school had been ‘terrible [in] the way people were treated like caged animals’ with teachers she felt who were unequipped to effectively support students with greater needs (Field Notes). As a person with respect for animals and nature, the likening of middle school students with disabilities to caged animals highlighted how unsettling witnessing the treatment of students in her school had been for her. As caged animals the students with disabilities were unable to express themselves and were confined to act a certain way within their school space. She further expressed that the young people who were not being respected had unique traits to contribute that were being stifled. In contrast, Donatello reflected that in his school things were pretty good regarding treating people equally. While Donatello commonly referred to the positive in all situations while engaged in the research, his statement was intriguing as at other times it had been noted that there was a lack of quality social connection between himself and peers at his school. This begs the question whether there were systemic challenges in his school and/or limitations in peers’ interactions and understanding of differences, and whether Donatello had internalised discriminatory based practices as normative behaviour in his setting. The experiences across different schools and recommendations to support young people better were collectively explored. During the dialogue Ocean played with her two rocks that she had found on the river and had used to express her understanding of play in an object story activity previously. While asserting her concerns she continuously rolled the rocks back and forth between her two hands, keeping them in motion and at play. She transitioned back and forth between watching the rocks and looking up to see the reflections of her peers while engaged in the inclusion conversation. After dialoguing on inclusive education the Emerging Researchers shifted to discussing rocks, shells, and nature images. While the two conversations were not directly connected, the

interweaving of the non-verbal dialogue of play and social issue conversation seemed to facilitate the dialogue to start, transition, and deepen.

Further conversations around discrimination in formal education systems were explored during other play-based activities and between spaces during the research between Emerging Researchers as well as between the Emerging Researchers and adult researcher. For example, while on a nature walk along the river, Sydney expressed her negative experience with the formal education system and having felt stupid (as highlighted in Chapter 5 on play-based research relationships). The natural dialogue that emerged did so in part due to the playful silent process of walking along the rock bed of the river. Dialogue may be assumed to verbal, yet the silences that occur in play can allow for rich dialogue between bodies and peoples to emerge in verbal and non-verbal forms. Sydney's expression of contentment through a silent walk at first and then through dialogue was apparent as she spoke of the contrast between the formal education system and her engagement in experiential play-based learning approaches. While this chapter focuses on the role of play in conversations between young people, it is important to note that it also aided in intergenerational dialogue between the Emerging Researchers and the adult researcher and programme coordinators present at different points in time. My conversation, as an adult researcher, with Sydney as we walked emerged after we had been at play together in the day and while we were at a form of play in our walk. Additionally, it encouraged dialogue on how play-based research can and should be introduced with other young people. The act of play-based movement and dialogue further supported opening up social issues conversations, allowing them to emerge throughout the research journey itself.

Education was thus recognised as an important social dialogue for the Emerging Researchers that was frequently introduced to discuss inclusion, respectful education, and fair treatment for teachers and students. Through play, the Emerging Researchers critically reflected on and shared perspectives with one another.

6.1.2 Gender and LGBTQI+ Rights

Discussions on gender and sexual orientation rights were prevalent throughout the research with particular emphasis on LGBTQI+ and women's rights. The discussions of the Emerging Researchers explored social (in)justice in their own lives and that of other young people, as well as action they or those around them had taken. The Emerging Researchers sought to respect one another's reflections on their lived experience, as exemplified when D stated that 'cis people never truly understand' after sharing about discrimination he had faced when transitioning, and Sydney quickly reinforced his proclamation through stating that 'you can only understand when you experience something' (Field Notes). Although Sydney identified as cis gender herself, thus suggesting she could not truly understand D's experience, she regularly sought to be a support to her peer. As such, understanding of one's positionality with a desire to listen and learn coalesced in the collective space.

The relationships built through play, as explored in Chapter 5, nurtured space for sharing uncertainties around understandings of social issues and everyday experiences that may not always be shared due to their sensitive nature and potential to be considered disrespectful. For example, Kodak shared that his grandfather expressed profanity through using offensive terminology about homosexual males 'saying the "F" word while watching a show' when 'two of his friends who were over who were gay and transgender' (Field Notes). He voiced extreme embarrassment, and what appeared to be shame, as well as a desire to entice the group to talk about the experience and his grandfather's statement. Sharing of this story could have led to uncomfortable silence, disjointed relationships, and/or conflict between the Emerging Researchers. However, due to the relationships already formed through play, the story, albeit with initial tense silence, resulted in conversations about discrimination, what effective responses could be, intergenerational dialogue, and young people's relationship with and education of older adults. The Emerging Researchers discussed how to begin conversations with older adult members of society that would support

them to learn about gender and sexual preference and to shift attitudes and behaviours that they perceived as negative. In most of their experience, older members of their community had less engagement in discussions on gender identity and were more discriminatory to non-heteronormative and binary identities. Additionally, they discussed the balance of respecting elders and standing up for rights of those discriminated against. While no solutions or answers arose, the dialogue space encouraged further exploration regarding conversations within and across society on issues of social (in)justice and rights in their communities.

Societal gender norms were also deconstructed in play-based programmes that the Emerging Researchers had been a part of. For example, the research partner hosted mixed gender programmes yet had one weekend a year where youth were divided into male and female groups, and where these activities were gendered construing a male weekend as outdoor adventure training and a female weekend as a meditation. This binary construction of groups discriminated against young people identifying as non-binary or in the process of transitioning where they faced difficulties in feeling unsure where to 'fit'. D 'advocat[ed] mixed gender [groups] and recognition of diverse gender identities [while transitioning himself]' and was instrumental in the organisation's decision to modify the gendered weekends the following year (Field Notes) from male and female specific to welcoming all genders to both activity weekends. The Emerging Researchers engaged in conversation around gendered social constructs in spaces they played in as well as the impact of the change for the programme weekends on their own engagement. For example, Cedar shared how although she identified as female she partook in the adventure weekend that had previously been 'male' only, and Tesla questioned why one could not do both. While Sydney stated that sometimes it's 'fun to have a little like ladies' weekend' she felt it was more inclusive and 'really cool' for people to have choice. As such, the conversation fostered space for exploring how play and outdoor activities can be more socially just and inclusive while at the same time the data suggests the play-based space of the researchers enabled the dialogue to occur.

While Sydney's comment on supporting inclusivity was welcomed, her statement about a 'little ladies weekend' alludes to both a value for and devaluing of activities that are often considered 'women' activities. Through 'little ladies weekend[s]' and gender diverse spaces of play and in-between spaces of play, the data suggests that Sydney engaged with a particular form of female gendered childhood while at the same time experimenting with ways to be otherwise (McDonnell, 2019). The dialogue encouraged the Emerging Researchers to reflect on how all genders could be respected and were able to voice their opinions on what this could mean for the partner organisation's programmes going forward.

This subsection introduced the role of play in dialogue around gender and LGBTQI+ rights as well as conversations about these rights during everyday play experiences. While further exploration is needed around social constructions of identity, gender, and the role of play in these spaces, it was evident that the experience of play acted as lubricant for perspectives and reflections of the Emerging Researchers to be spoken about and for peers to engage in dialogue on issues pertinent to them and people in their spheres of influence experiencing discrimination and forms of oppression.

6.1.3 Political Dialogue and Engagement

As the Emerging Researchers began to get to know one another through acts of collective play, their comfort and confidence to speak about critical social issues that were important to them appeared to increase and occur more frequently. During the research training expedition, significant conversations arose on politics, values, and discrimination with particular leaning towards leftist politics. While sitting around the fire and playing young person driven campfire games, a few Emerging Researchers raised the challenge of being unable to vote as young people under eighteen years of age and highlighted that adults with less knowledge on the different political platforms have the power to vote however they choose to. During this conversation I mentioned that in Scotland sixteen year olds could vote, in which the group voiced appreciation for this idea and questioned why it did

not exist in the Canadian context. Political dialogue also fostered value based conversations around respect for different political perspectives. For example, a values based conversation arose around left leaning visions of politics in relation to the United States President Donald Trump. While Ocean suggested 'that you can still be friends with people who have different political views and respect their opinions', D agreed in principle, yet not when the political views suggest 'hate for people like himself' in referring to transgender and gay people. On reflection, Ocean agreed feeling that from 'that view they would hate [her] too as an indigenous body and a woman' (Field Notes). This conversation opened space for the Emerging Researchers to reflect on their own values in relation to their lived experiences and experiences of persons discriminated against and oppressed in society due to gender, sexual orientation, culture, ageism, and other intersecting layers of discrimination. The impact of the use of the word 'hate' played an important role for the young people's reflections on values and the direction of the conversation and the perspectives of the Emerging Researchers. This was evident through the transition in Ocean's positioning after the use of the word hate and other Emerging Researchers nods of agreement. The play space encouraged space for dialogue to expand on challenging topics through both verbal and non-verbal forms of engagement.

The dialogue allowed the young people to share their concerns with one another freely on critical social issues important in their own lives. In addition to Canadian and American national politics, everyday politics about local communities were discussed. This included varying topics of social spaces, such as, co-op housing to support communities, and community spaces in which the Emerging Researchers operate, in their everyday lives. Elwood and Mitchell (2012) suggest that young people's dialogue of the everyday can constitute an important space for their own politics as well as their formation as political actors themselves.

Everyday politics were expressed through environmental climate activism conversations that arose throughout the research. As the majority of

Emerging Researchers had a strong relationship with nature, due to their experience in outdoor programmes and their relationship with the place of the island where they lived, the interconnection between nature play and climate activism was evident and highlighted by the Emerging Researchers themselves. For example, after engaging in play-based outdoor programming and an environmental course that the partner had linked him with, Cameron began an undergraduate degree in environmental education and became more passionate about the preserving the climate. Similarly, Tesla hoped to start an apprenticeship after high school to focus on green energy in car mechanics. Scholarship on outdoor play pursuits, such as the ones the Emerging Researchers were familiar with, highlight how they can instil and express care for natural environments (Collins, 2020). With regard to specific dialogue on climate action, one evening during a play-based 'hanging out' moment in a preparing to lead session, Cedar spoke of the importance of climate strikes and how she had been involved in getting students in her school to participate. She emphasised how important nature and the land was, based on her personal experiences playing in nature and exploring healing medicines of plants. As an indigenous young person, she highlighted appreciation for Greta Thunberg, a global youth climate activist, yet a concern that strong indigenous young people who have been advocating for decades were less recognised in the global conversation. Donatello also expressed how he was trying to create awareness in his school through partaking in peaceful climate strikes and trying to encourage others to engage. Hadfield-Hill and Christensen (2019) highlight the role of between spaces and 'liminal' spaces to enact children's political potential in their everyday spaces. My data suggests that the play-based research spaces allow between space dialogue to emerge on social issues that are important in young people's lives.

Through the collective play space, the young people had the opportunity to share ideas on what worked well and on the different initiatives they were engaging in order to then integrate them into their school and community actions. This conversation arose as we were in the process of a reflective

time-limited discussion on planning for next steps in leading research; I took space to pause for the unintended conversation to emerge and flow without blocking it for time purposes or for my own research agenda. While critical conversations can (and do) emerge in other child and youth work spaces, the role of young people as play-based Emerging Researchers provides a different approach and a unique lens for Emerging Researchers to more actively engage in both structured play with critically reflective dialogue and for a between space of play to be valued in order to foster dialogues on social issues in their lives.

This subsection introduced social issues pertinent to the Emerging Researchers that were explored on the margins of and during play-based research activities and playful encounters. A few of these dialogic spaces explored and shared action, such as the climate activism conversations and reflections on non-gendered youth spaces, while others were openings for dialogue without a targeted outcome that foster critical reflexivity and space for further germination of ideas. While some of these conversations could arguably act as a ripple effect for action going forward, it is important to respect the value of critical reflective space for shared dialogue and reflection on social issues without always seeking for immediate action or solutions. As such, the data suggests that play provides great value for conversation to germinate and critical reflections to be explored respectfully in trusting environments for young people on social issues.

6.2 Mental Health

In addition to social (in)justice issues that were explored through play in dialogue, strengths and challenges in mental health were discussed, experienced, and reflected upon in relationship to play throughout the research. While mental health is also a social issue, the prevalence and depth of data on mental health that arose from the research warranted a separate section. The everydayness of mental health which can be hidden in public domains was examined through shared and independent embodied verbal and non-verbal experiences and dialogues. In particular, anxiety,

depression, and alcoholism were experienced and expressed in dialogue through play. Dialogue can take many forms and thus the embodied expression of mental health challenges and how the embodied dialogue interacted in relationship across peers was important to recognise in the data. In this section I also reflect on the implications of sanism within many of the settings in which the young people reside which ‘refers to the inequality, prejudice, and discrimination faced by people who are constructed as “crazy” within dominant culture’ (Diamond, 2013, p. 77). As such, a space for dialogue on mental health is a means to trouble and problematise sanism, allowing conversations which explore positive ways to respond that do not contribute to suffering (Poole & Grant, 2018).

Through relationships developed at play, the majority of the Emerging Researchers shared previous and current mental health challenges they have faced and currently face in their lives. For example, after a day of paddle boarding and learning play-based research activities, Kodak spoke of his social anxiety as a younger child. He expressed how he ‘used to curl up in a ball under rocks to hide as [his] anxiety was so high’ at elementary school recess breaks (Field Notes). The foetal position when ‘curl[ed] up in a ball’ and the rocks acted as a space of protection during the scheduled ‘play’ time of recess. While the dialogue and interactions between the other children in his school during recess were spaces of interactive play, Kodak’s comment suggests that the prescribed play space of recess was a challenge for him where he engaged in dialogue with himself to stay safe under the large rocks. As mentioned in Chapter 5, at another point Kodak highlighted how he had found his own sources of solitary play as a child, such as finding pieces of wood that had bug patterns in them. Dialogue has been explored in relation to humans, both verbally and embodied, yet dialogue between young people and their natural world can also be furthered through acts of play, such as Kodak’s observation and engagement with intricate bug patterns and his desire to replicate the bugs process through doing some of his own carvings in wood. Kodak expressed how after being involved in outdoor nature play programmes facilitated by the research programme partner and

building relationships with nature he became more confident in engaging with peers. This was exemplified by his frequent dialogue and joking manner during the research process. His peers' responses to his sharing of childhood play anxiety were supportive and, in concert, they shared some of their previous experiences of anxiety and depression at younger years (and ongoing) as well. Kodak's openness about his experiences supported greater open dialogue on mental health throughout the research journey.

In addition to open conversations emerging after a day at play, planned play-based experiences followed by discussion also contributed to dialogue on play and mental health and societal implications. For example, during a reflective debrief after a hike using dice with images on them, Ocean shared an image of a shadow with a monster that was likened to her feelings of 'slipping into [her] own head' and the desire 'to stop putting [herself] in [her] own way' in order to experience the enjoyment of play experiences. The notion of slipping into one's own head and being stuck was shared across Emerging Researchers, as will be further explored below. Ocean's openness in the conversation circle space appeared to foster comfort for her peers to share their experiences using the play-based die as a tool of expression and conversation. Ocean's recognition of the importance of play in her own mental health encouraged her to continue to engage in the hike that took place. While an element of one's personal role is important for mental health, Ocean's concern over 'putting herself in her own way' suggests self-blame and internalisation of sanist narratives and social norms of performativity within society. As such, while play was recognised by both Kodak and Ocean, as well as other researchers, as a critical factor in positive mental health, additional factors in a social ecological framework, such as the Emerging Researchers' peers, family, community, government, and society need to be considered as well. The data shows play's valuable contribution alongside the complexity and systematic challenges that exist in young people's social ecological experiences.

Figure 6.3 *A die depicted as a 'monster' in a debrief activity to reflect on a hike experience*



Several of the Emerging Researchers also shared their emotions and mental health experiences prior to and during engaging in the play-based research training process. For example, while engaging in a play-based river journey activity that explored how young people were feeling prior to arrival, during the research training expedition, and what they were anticipating for the future, mental health was expressed in non-verbal and verbal dialogue through artistic expression of drawings, words on the page, and conversation. D expressed that he had been looking forward to the trip yet had also been concerned about his mental health and depression:

I've definitely really struggled with depression in the past, and I've kind of like recovered from it, but at this point I'm like, is it getting worse again. Cause I think it is getting worse again, just fuck man it's just like not good. Going on this trip has made me realise because I was thinking like maybe I should change my medication, there's got to be like you know. Maybe I should consider doing counselling again, I just need some sort of change right, and then going on this trip has made me realise that like it's not like my meds or anything like that it's just the way I live my life basically. (D)

The excerpt illustrates D's ongoing experience of mental health challenges and his fears of 'getting worse again'. This statement had similarity to several other Emerging Researchers' mental health concerns. While fearful of

depressive symptoms re-emerging, D also expressed that being on the research trip encouraged him to reflect on his everyday life at home and his personal perspective on how his daily practices were impacting his mental wellbeing. The data suggests that stepping out of his everyday space and being immersed in play allowed him to reflect on his mental health. This aligns with Woodyer's (2012) assertion that play can provide an opportunity to reflect critically on everyday experiences by providing young people with moments to rupture and transform the normative ways of being and doing. D's reflection on changing his medication and counselling, while both can be beneficial for one's health, points to normative sanist narratives on depression prevalent in the social spaces in which D operates. While D communicated his recognition that going on a hike 'wouldn't fix everything' he felt 'it would be better'. This statement suggests the importance of a social ecological and holistic understanding of mental health and wellbeing that respects the value of nature and play for mental health, not just Western medication and counselling, with recognition that one action cannot 'fix' or 'solve' one's mental health experiences. D's prior comments that all he has been doing is work and sleep, suggests that systemic challenges of work being prioritised over play and that economic drivers (as shared in Chapter 4) also impede D's opportunity to engage in play. While 'solutions' were not developed, the space of the play-based river journey contributed to D's own critical reflexivity of his mental health through the dialogue generated around this activity.

Furthermore, the dialogue that arose engaged D's peers to share their own experiences of concern prior to the trip in relation to their mental health. For example, Sydney affirmed D's feeling of his depression getting bad again through sharing how she had:

... been feeling the exact same way lately [and that] it was getting bad again. And that scares me when that happens cause I'm like oh, oh my god, we're going down that road again oh my god. (Sydney)

Sydney's sharing was expressed both in her verbal comment in this excerpt and through her visual imagery of drawing a 'stormy cloud it's raining' on the river journey flipchart papers prior to expressing her feelings verbally.

Through both the reflective space of drawing her emotions and the dialogue space that D opened up on mental health, Sydney articulated her feeling of being scared of going 'down that road again' towards a space she feared for her mental wellbeing. She further reflected how she was conflicted in recognising she would have a good time but also being afraid to transition to the new space of the research expedition when she was 'stuck in [her] own head'. Visual representation used in combination with methodologies that elicit conversation can support young people to effectively engage in dialogue around sensitive issues and convey components of their lives (Leitch, 2008). The data suggests that the majority of the Emerging Researchers felt 'stuck' in their everyday spaces and that the journey to a new play space to critically reflect on their everyday experiences allowed for deeper reflection on their own mental health and the structures around them that impeded this in their own lives. As such the training expedition component of the research acted as a new play space for the Emerging Researchers while also as a step outside their personal lives to be able to critically reflect on their own everyday spaces and mental health.

Figure 6.4 *River Journey activity: stormy cloud image*



In addition to exploring anxiety and mental health at an overarching level, specific issues linked to mental health, such as alcohol use, were also shared

during play-based activities. Alcohol use was explored in dialogue as both an agent of play as well as something that was a 'problem'. During a reflective discussion, after a visual explorer activity where Emerging Researchers discussed pictures selected that expressed what play meant to them, the young people explored in more depth what play looked like to them and how this might be different for other young people and adults in their school and work settings. D and Kodak proclaimed that drugs and alcohol may be considered play for people at their work in the restaurant hospitality industry. In their workspaces this was more prevalent and normalised whereas alternative acts of play, such as photography, hiking, and free running, that D and Kodak were also interested in were less frequently explored. They both felt this impacted their own relationship with alcohol as it was normalised and thus they used it more often in their own lives without necessarily reflecting on their use of it.

At a later point in time, D expressed his challenges with alcohol. As highlighted in Chapter 4, humour as a form of play was initially used to share personal experiences as a form of coping/sharing with less worry about consequence. As such, D began the conversation by making a joke about his liver in relation to his drinking. Once introduced through humour D further shared his recognition that 'addiction is definitely something that runs in [his] family' and that he wants to be careful about. D highlighted that the research trip had led him to 'reflect on that' and the potential to slow down his drinking patterns. Through being engaged in different play experiences that connected him with peers and nature, he reflected on how the act of staying up late after work until four in the morning drinking and then sleeping until just before his next work shift deterred him from being able to engage in things that he had enjoyed before. His own critical reflexivity and his peers listening and affirmations in the dialogue space resulted in D sharing his experience attending Alcohol Anonymous (AA) meetings and his intentions to go back to encourage himself to drink less through support of a community.

During this dialogue, peers were active in learning collectively, listening, and sharing their perspectives, such as Kodak recommending working more to drink less like he did and Donatello suggesting to drink water instead of alcohol. D responded with a joking critique of Kodak's idea being unhelpful for health in general (as the two often joked together about work) and in a smile (as did a few of the other Emerging Researchers) at the intended thought and simplicity of Donatello's suggestion with stating 'oh sweet innocent Donatello'. Donatello did not appear bothered by the response. While D's statement could have appeared condescending and potentially offensive, the relationship that had formed in the group and recognition of Donatello's way of being, suggested warmth and care. Intriguingly both the recommendations to 'fix' the 'problem' were shared by those who identified as males in the group while the females listened and asked further questions. Further probing and a greater gender analysis would be needed to assess adequately the gendered responses to sharing of problems. This piece of data, however, could reinforce a social narrative that socially constructed male roles can often focus on a desire to fix while females may be more apt to first listen. With regard to learning, one of the Emerging Researchers asked what 'AA' was and as a result D provided the whole group with information on Alcoholics Anonymous to learn more about different supports available in the neighbourhood for those with addiction. The data suggests that an open space for dialogue amid play-based reflection during the river journey and the humour of jokes, fostered deeper conversations on addiction and its impacts on mental health as well as a space to critically reflect on personal actions going forward.

Play was also reflected on as something that contributed to positive mental health and enabled conversations on previous and current mental health experiences. For example, Kodak expressed how without play in his own 'personal fashion [he] would definitely be quite depressed and get existential and [it] would not be good'. He further stated that without play he would not be 'good in any way' and if he 'hadn't been able to play in some degree' he 'would probably be in prison' due to prior issues of self-deprecation and

anger (Kodak). As shown earlier the data shows that play acted as a dialogue between human and non-human material and spaces. Kodak's quotes highlight the significance of young people being able to engage in dialogue with play itself in their own 'fashion' and form and its potential for mental health. Kodak's ability to reflect back on his experiences connected with his re-engagement in play during the expedition and the relationships he experienced through play with his peers. The depth of his sharing about depression and his own self-deprecation and anger was further supported by the relationship he had built with the other Emerging Researchers.

This subsection has explored the experiences, embodiment, and conceptualisation of mental health and social issues as dialogued by the Emerging Researchers during, after, and through play. It highlighted the role of play in fostering space for dialogue with human and non-human bodies for their mental health, as well as being a tool to contribute to mental health. While play was recognised by all of the Emerging Researchers as something pertinent to their own mental health, it was also recognised that multiple factors and systems that the young people operate in contribute to (or deter) their opportunities/abilities to play which links with play in the challenge (Chapter 4). Further, this section explored how acts of play, such as drawings and imaged dice sets, can create space for complex conversations to emerge and for young people to express themselves effectively on mental health social issues that are important in their own lives and those of people around them.

6.3 Conclusion

This chapter commenced with an introduction of play's role in fostering space for reflexive dialogue on social issues. It highlighted how play acted in the spaces of dialogue and was used/experienced by young people to explore experiences of discrimination and other social issues critical in their lives. In particular, Emerging Researchers spoke about education, LGBTQI+ and gender rights issues, politics, and climate activism. The conversations included discussions around intersectional (in)justice of people, with my own

recognition of the adultist oppression of young people that further exacerbate discrimination and injustices in the social issues explored in this chapter. The intention was to illustrate play's role in fostering space for social issues, and thus did not engage in the depth of complexity and analysis on specific social (in)justice issues. I chose to include this section to highlight how play catalyses discussions on these issues to shine light on the role of play in fostering dialogue on such pertinent areas. Further research should be done that uses play-based approaches to explore the social issues discussed in this section in more depth as well as focus on how play-based methods support the dialogue on social issues.

The final section explored play for collective dialogue and embodied dialogue in mental health. While mental health has woven across all three findings chapters to some extent, here it was more explicitly explored in relation to play and the dialogic space while recognising layers of discrimination and systematic challenges for mental health and young people. The chapter aims to contribute to research and discussion on play in creating powerful dialogue spaces to explore social (in)justice issues in young people's lives. Furthermore, it speaks to the importance of process and play in co-creative spaces in research with young people for unanticipated extraordinary everyday dialogues to emerge.

Chapter 7 Conclusion

This concluding chapter summarises and discusses the key findings as they relate to the overarching research questions, further develops the overall conceptual intersecting themes, and explores implications for academic literature and theory, practice, policy, and research. The aim of this dissertation was to explore the role of play-based research within the research process and its effect on young researchers' lives. Additionally, it examined how acting as play-based researchers affected Emerging Researchers' relationships and dialogue on social issues. Overall, the research explored Emerging Researchers' relationship with play-based research and the role leading play-based research had on their own lives and that of their community.

The research questions were:

1. How do young researchers experience, conceptualise, and embody play?
2. What are the individual and relational experiences of play-based research, for young researchers within the research process?
3. How does play-based research affect young researchers' exploration of social issues in their lives?

In many ways the findings are interconnected, highlighting the relationships and weaving between concepts and process of the Emerging Researchers' conceptualisations, experiences, and embodiment of play, play-based research, relationships, and social issues. Themes of play, embodiment, mental health, and relationships acted as golden threads through all three findings chapters and were important elements of the research methodology itself. The summary of findings is followed by methodological reflections and implications for academic literature and theory, practice, policy, and research. The chapter ends with recommendations for future research and critical reflexivity.

7.1 Summarising Findings and Answering the Research Questions

My research questions have guided the discussion and analysis throughout this dissertation and were explored across the three findings chapters. In describing and analysing the findings of this research, Chapter 4 has mainly addressed the first research question while also contributing to question 2. Chapter 5 has contributed to research question 2, while Chapter 6 has addressed research question 3.

My research was informed by the theoretical concepts of childhood studies, children's rights, and a social ecological framework. All three respect children as critical social actors in their own lives and society. Woven together they recognise the value of relationships and social interconnections in children and young people's lives, as well as the social and systemic barriers that impede children's rights. A critical exploration of childhood studies, children's rights, and a social ecological framework critiques the dominant and oppressive adultist social constructs that were found in the data with regard to the Emerging Researchers play experiences. It imagines other possibilities that centralise children and young people's conceptualisations, experiences, and embodied relations. I now turn to summarise the findings of this study by addressing all three research questions.

7.1.1 Research Question 1: How Do Young Researchers Experience, Conceptualise, and Embody Play?

The Emerging Researchers shared their experiences and conceptualisation of play through a variety of play-based approaches. The findings for this question were presented in Chapter 4 with some interconnected findings emerging across Chapters 5 and 6. While common forms of play in Western play literature were spoken of, such as, sports, games, and arts, reoccurring themes that emerged in the data showed modes of play that went contrary to popular conceptualisations of play as easy, childlike, and/or trivial. Play emerged as a challenge that required risk and effort. Humour also emerged as a form of play. Furthermore, the issue of time for and access to play for

older children and their personal role in making time and taking time alongside the systemic, institutional, and societal barriers that impeded play were exposed in the data of this research.

Defining play is critiqued for normative assumptions of universality and a fixation to define and classify play reducing it to a utilitarian focus (Lester, 2016). Adultist 'obsessions' with definitions and outcomes lose sight of the process and innate value of play for young people themselves (Lester, 2019) and colonise play perpetuating childhood oppression. As such, this question sought to address young researchers' experiences and conceptualisations of play and that of their peers and to respect their own conceptualisations and embodiment of play. Societal norms, identities, and diverse lived experiences of the Emerging Researchers had implications for how play was conceptualised, felt, and experienced.

7.1.1.1 Play as a Challenge

Play was conceptualised as a challenge by many of the Emerging Researchers. While play is often romanticised as positive (Fink, Saine, Saine, et al., 1968) there is a dearth of literature on play as a challenge outside the scope of adventure and wilderness programmes (Harper, 2017; Houge Mackenzie & Hodge, 2019). The data showed play as a challenge in relation to comfort and control, achievement, trust, life difficulties/struggles, and finding balance. The majority of Emerging Researchers expressed play as a challenge to go beyond their 'comfort zone'. While a challenge could be perceived as negative, the analysis found that several Emerging Researchers felt going beyond comfort was something positive with an opportunity to immerse themselves in a process and to try to achieve new things. The findings were also contrary to binary dichotomies of intrinsic and instrumental values of play, as the Emerging Researchers expressed both in the moment (intrinsic) and longer term challenge to conquer (instrumental). This dismissal of binary constructs of intrinsic and instrumental aligns with Collins and Wright's (2019) assertion that binaries must be abandoned to value and embrace the complexity of play itself. The experience of

challenging play was valued for its ability to support the Emerging Researchers to be *active* in the process and *present* in the activity without being concerned about external worries outside the space of play.

Additionally, play as a challenge to achieve emerged in the findings with several Emerging Researchers presenting a sense of pride in achieving a play challenge. This contradicts much literature that focuses on the romanticised notion of play as carefree and easy, outside adventure play literature.

Additionally, the data showed the importance of balance for the Emerging Researchers between the easy and the challenging in their play engagement. For example, one Emerging Researcher expressed play could be something ‘as simple as finger painting’ but then could also be ‘about experiencing those more challenging ones that result in a really cool outcome’ (Ocean). Intriguingly, the Emerging Researchers conceptualised play as ‘challenge’ for older children, such as themselves, whereas references to easier care-free play were equated with ‘childlike’ ideas of younger children. While challenge can arise in younger children’s play the reflection on play forms of the Emerging Researchers emphasized a distinction. As older children (also known as young people), the majority of Emerging Researchers expressed the need to be engaging in challenges, understanding risks and taking challenges, and not being paralysed by the risk or challenge. Challenge with some balance was central to older young people’s conceptualisations of play and their ways of engaging in it.

7.1.1.2 Play as Humour

The analysis of the data found that humour is closely related to play. Humour was expressed through different forms (e.g. laughter, jokes, and games) as: a playful activity between young people developing relationships (McGhee & Goldstein, 1983); intellectual play with ideas (McGhee, 1984); and exploring challenges through coping mechanisms, avoidance/transition spaces, and dialogue. In the research, humour acted to establish, strengthen, and subvert relationships as well as to cope, avoid, and transition between subjects. The

data on humour showed humour as a form of play that evoked positive elements of wellbeing and relationships that readers may typically equate with play, while also exposing darker sides of play both in fostering space for young people to engage with and express their difficult experiences and in its ability to silence and leave out others. For example, humour allowed for complex conversations on transgender experiences and perceptions. It was also used (both intentionally and unintentionally) to silence difficult conversations, such as a conversation on lack of opportunity to express oneself as a child. As such, humour as a form of play has the potential to take on and be used in multiple forms to contribute to and inhibit meaningful participation, elaborate and express feelings, and deepen or disrupt relationships among young people.

7.1.1.3 Making Time and Taking Time

Access to and opportunity for making time and taking time in play were discussed as a challenge in relation to Emerging Researchers' experiences and perceptions of personal, societal, systemic, and institutional barriers. Making time and taking time were expressed both as an individualised ability to take action in their own life and as part of a greater social ecological framework that contributed to (e.g. nature-based programmes) or inhibited (e.g. work, poverty, resources) the opportunities to engage in play. The Emerging Researchers expressed desire and guilt both for, and for not, taking and making time to play, linking this with work and life responsibilities and the social norms of prioritising economic outcomes over social relations.

The 'making time' and 'taking time' section also highlighted how young people's liminal positioning between the social constructed ideals of childhood and adulthood, limits their access to play fully, and presented difficulties in terms of play experience and engagement. The findings exposed particular perceptions, experiences of, and embodiments of play that shed light on strengths and challenges of play itself and in the access to play for young people. Young people are required to regularly 'negotiate' between their more expansive, playful subjectivities and the denial or

repression' of these (Ferguson, 2017, p.130). The data suggested that play had less value for older children if it was not linked to a form of achievement (e.g. conquering a challenge) that aligned with calls for productivity. This focus on productivity can encourage young people to repress a free play 'sensuous, imaginative' engagement with their worlds (Ferguson, 2017, p.120), as was observed in several of the Emerging Researchers. The limitation of their play aligns with research that asserts the right to play is regarded 'as a luxury in comparison to other rights who violations bear visible, and spectacular consequences' (David, 2006, p. 17). As evidenced by the Emerging Researchers, I argue that this challenge is particularly heightened for older children where play is less respected, researched, and supported.

7.1.2 Research Question 2: What Are the Individual and Relational Experiences of Play-based Research, for Young Researchers Within the Research Process?

Play was explored through Emerging Researchers' conceptualisation, experience of, and embodiment of play, as summarised above as well as its role as an approach and in the research process, and as a method in itself. Chapter 5 explores research question 2 through its focus on play-based approaches and relationships with peers, adults, community, research methodology, nature, and reflexivity.

7.1.2.1 Relationships

The findings demonstrated relationships the Emerging Researchers experienced throughout the research through play-based research. Relationships with play-based methodologies and materials were an important embodied finding. The Emerging Researchers' relationships during and fostered through play-based approaches focused on relationships with their peer researchers, adult researchers and programme partners, and their families, peers, and colleagues in their communities. Play-based research played a unique role in relationships in the research allowing for relationships with people, places, and things to deepen and be experienced in different forms. The data suggests that the relationships between Emerging

Researchers and their peers, adult researchers, and community members were enriched and developed throughout the play-based research process. While arts-based research with young people (e.g. Green & Denov, 2019) highlights the powerful role of arts-based research medium in relationship building and cohesion, less is documented on the role of play-based research. As such, the exploration of play, both formally constructed in research activities and play in the between unplanned spaces, poses new insights into participatory research with young people who are researchers. The data showed how the complex dynamic of peer-to-peer and intergenerational partnerships can be fostered and further developed through play encounters.

The literature is replete on power dynamics and relationships between young people and adults. Literature is continuously exploring the hierarchies that exist and the intention to reduce hierarchies, yet it does not always include the nuances and complexity of intergenerational relationships. There is significantly less focus on relationships between young researchers themselves and the methodologies in their relationships. Play-based research approaches in the form of explicit tools (e.g. River Journey, Objects stories, Wellbeing Jenga) and play in the between spaces (e.g. while sitting around a campfire, singing in the van, walking along the river) played a critical role in the formation of relationships between Emerging Researchers. As relationships formed the Emerging Researchers sought out ways to work together during activities. For example, when drawing a River Journey exploring significant changes over the research training, the Emerging Researchers chose to do one collective image instead of working independently. In addition to specific activities, the play-based process of 'hanging out' was evident as a contributor to relationships throughout the research. While hanging out was not orchestrated by the adult researcher or by the Emerging Researchers for research purposes, they were key moments that took place within and outside of the research time that further deepened peer-to-peer engagement and relationships. Additional 'non' research activities, such as taking time to celebrate Emerging Researchers'

birthdays, strengthened relationships between Emerging Researchers, as well as with the adult researcher. The findings reinforce Liebenberg and colleagues' (2017) assertion that meaningful engagement in non-formal formats has the potential to produce better research, and to build relationships; it goes further to show that play-based approaches, particularly collaborative approaches but also self-reflective play, can play a critical role in strengthening relationships and research.

In addition to deepening relationships with methods and between the Emerging Researchers, play-based approaches had an impact on adult researcher and Emerging Researchers' relationships. The Emerging Researchers expressed respect for adults' information, ideas, and experiences. However, there was greater importance expressed for adults to not dictate young people's decisions and actions with their ideas and to instead step back to let young researchers engage in and facilitate play and research in their own way. Emerging Researchers' emphasis on not being made do to things is crucial for meaningful participation of young people in leading research processes. This perspective aligns with literature (e.g. Cuevas-Parra & Tisdall, 2019) that highlights adults' role to provide support and facilitation but *not* to control. This also supports a childhood studies and play-based approach that moves beyond adult centred requirements for young people's engagement, and that values play to unsettle constructs of control between adults and young people.

Recognition of children and young people as individual social actors is a central tenet of childhood studies (e.g. Christensen & Prout, 2002). While arguably this supports recognition of young people, the relational element of children's rights and childhood studies are critical. Although the findings highlight Emerging Researchers' relationships with their personal reflexivity and selves, they do so in recognising the relationality that exists between humans and non-humans in the Emerging Researchers' spheres of influence. This was evident in a research planning session where Cameron expanded the notion of a traditional social ecological model to be imaged as

a tree trunk, respecting the role of nature and materials in the relationships Emerging Researchers had in their lives. Hill (2012) questions whether a focus on the individual child overshadows ‘the web of relationships in which children are embedded’ (p.211). Hill’s (2012) questioning is significant for both children and adults in recognising the relationality of people’s lived experiences and their own self reflexivity and engagement with the world. This connects with literature on notions about emotions as a collective feeling (Cvetkovich, 2012) in the way they are expressed and experienced rather than private, individualised possessions (Wright et al, 2021). Emerging Researchers also expressed their growth/transition in relationships with their family members, colleagues, and peers after participating in the Emerging Researcher process. For example, two Emerging Researchers shared experiences of engaging their siblings more actively in play, while a few others spoke of engaging in play with their colleagues, and one applying the play-based research methods to their work as a camp counsellor. The findings on play-based approaches and relationships in this dissertation align with a move away from individualised identities to recognise the role of play in relationships between people and with research methods in young people’s lives.

7.1.3 Research Question 3: How Does Play-based Research Affect Young Researchers’ Exploration of Social Issues in Their Lives?

The data in this research showed that play, both as a play-based research tool and that arose in the between spaces, fostered space for reflective dialogue on important social issues. In the dialogue space, play supported negotiating the tensions that different perspectives on social issues created whether within the Emerging Researcher group itself, or with their families, friends, and peer colleagues. While several topics were discussed by and with the Emerging Researchers, the data was most prevalent on social issues of education, LGBTQI+ and gender rights, political perspectives, and climate activism, issues that arose both during and after spaces of play. These social issue focus areas were used to illustrate the role of play in

dialogue. The role of play in mental health, through a critical and mad studies lens, was also explored. A few of the dialogic spaces explored collective action in which the Emerging Researchers had been engaged, such as climate activism conversations where young people had been engaged in peaceful protests and reflections on pushing for non-gendered youth spaces and programmes. Other social issues conversations were openings for dialogue without a targeted outcome that fostered critical reflexivity and space for further germination of ideas. While some of these conversations could and may arguably act as a ripple effect for action going forward, there was an important need for critical reflective spaces for shared dialogue and reflection on social issues for young people separate from immediate action and outcomes. Often participatory research that is child and young person led/co-led is focused on action (e.g. Participatory *Action* Research).

However, a greater respect and space for critically reflective *dialogue* is vital to allow for ideas to germinate, young people (and adults) to reflect on complexity of issues, and greater engagement on situations without jumping towards immediate action. As such, the data suggests that play provides great value for dialogue to germinate and reflections to be explored respectfully in trusting environments for young people on social issues.

The data aligned with Woodyer's (2012) assertion that play can provide an opportunity to reflect critically on experiences by providing young people with moments to rupture and transform the normative ways of being and doing. My research findings showed that play can create space to transcend boundaries and engage in non-linear formats allowing new ideas and conversation to emerge. The analysis identified that an open space for dialogue amid play-based reflection during the river journey and the humour of jokes, fostered deeper conversations on addiction and its impacts on mental health as well as a space to critically reflect on personal actions going forward. Additionally, the research showed how acts of play and artefacts of play, such as drawings, imaged dice, and giant Jenga can provide an outlet to focus on, that creates space for complex conversations to emerge and for young people to express themselves effectively in both verbal and non-verbal

dialogue on social issues that are important in their own lives and those of people around them. Finally, the findings highlighted the importance of process and play in co-creative spaces in research with young people for unanticipated extraordinary dialogues to emerge.

7.2 Methodological Reflections

A play-based research approach acted to demystify 'research' which had been considered intimidating by many of the Emerging Researchers. Several of the Emerging Researchers faced challenges with formal education and thus perceived research negatively as internet searches and writing papers (as per high school assignments). The play-based research approach, alternatively, connected with non-formal experiential play-based learning that the Emerging Researchers had experienced in their previous wilderness programme and provided comfort to engage in an embodied relation of play. It brought together their relationships with play, and play that was used and that occurred in the research process, resulting in a more positive association with research itself as they engaged in and led play-based research. The emotional relationship with their previous play experience helped to facilitate a relationship with the play-based research methodology itself. A play-based research approach could thus also be valuable for other young people and adults who either have negative previous ideas of research and/or who are just learning about research and exploring how it relates to their lives. Further exploration of play-based research methods with young people who have diverse experiences of play and who may have less experience with play-based experiential approaches in learning and programmes would be valuable in order to learn to what extent the embodied relationships with play-based research approaches applies to young people in other contexts. For young people who are less familiar with play-based approaches, would their relationships with the methods take longer to form in research and/or be expressed differently?

My intentions at the start of the project sought to actively engage Emerging Researchers in all stages of the play-based research journey. While the

Emerging Researchers were keen to engage, there are multiple competing factors that impacted their ability to be active in all stages of the research, such as work schedules, personal and family life circumstances, school, and interests/desires. Like Davidson (2017) and Bettencourt (2018) I learned that it is not necessary for all young people to engage at the same level at the same time. The play-based research methods and approach used were able to provide Emerging Researchers with opportunities to engage in different processes that aligned with their interests, experiences, and lived realities. For example, one young man had a passion for photography and expressed interest to document through images, whereas the majority of Emerging Researchers were more keen to facilitate play-based research activities and engage directly with participants. I had planned for the Emerging Researchers to have the opportunity to co-lead on participatory data analysis, as children and young people are often left out of the data analysis component of research. However, the Emerging Researchers had less interest in reconvening after the research for this part, and thus their role was more limited (e.g. preliminary thematising during the play-based visual explorer and other activities themselves, and providing feedback on themes I had categorised). While I have had great success in play-based data analysis with young people since the PhD research on other projects, it is pertinent to respect different contexts, interests, and lived realities. This PhD research challenged my assumption that research is more participatory when young researchers are active in all stages of the research journey. If societal, economic, academic, or other barriers impeded engagement than adult researchers should strive to address these barriers to engagement with children. However, if children and young people are genuinely *not* interested (and this is not masked by barriers in their lived experiences) in a particular aspect of research then it may be *more* participatory to *hear* them and respond to their decisions to not engage in certain elements.

Play-based research approaches enabled verbal and non-verbal embodied forms of reflection and expression to emerge in participatory research. The data showed that play used as a tool (e.g. a play-based research activity)

and play that emerges in the between spaces during a research process complement one another to foster important data that was documented, analysed, and shared, and dialogue for young people researchers. This research highlighted the value of play and the role of play-based research approaches for young people and opens up the potential to explore further the role of play-based research in other contexts with children, young people, and adults.

7.3 Implications for Theoretical and Academic Literature

This dissertation has significant implications for play theory with regard to conceptualisations and embodiment of play by children and young people. It highlights the importance of engaging in partnership with children and young people to explore their experiences of play and how these shape and are shaped by their conceptualisations. Children and young people's ideas and innovations can support academics to deconstruct and strengthen theory through critically exploring normative assumptions of play. Because the literature on play has largely focused on young children, those engaging in this area of literature can learn from this research with older children. In particular, this research brings in less-recognised aspects of play: specifically play as a challenge and as humour. While play as a challenge is noted in wilderness adventure literature (e.g. Harper, 2017; Houge Mackenzie & Hodge, 2019), this dissertation explores the dimensions of challenge and its role across play for young people. The role of play *in* the challenge and as a challenge in relationship with mental health warrants further research and problematisation of carefree notions of play to explore the complexity of play, challenge, and mental health together. Additionally, through exploring humour as play, our understanding of what constitutes play can be expanded. Furthermore, darker areas of use of humour in play can also contribute to questioning of play as inherently positive. These two areas warrant further theoretical exploration in academic literature. Play theory is predominately situated in early childhood literature and development psychology, and has not 'readily crossed or transcended disciplinary

boundaries' into childhood studies and young people led research methodologies (Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles & Rousell, 2020, p. 206). As such, greater literature on play across disciplines, such as this dissertation using a childhood studies, child rights-based and social ecological approach, can expand the literature on play theory. Further exploration of play theory in participatory research methods and childhood studies across disciplines (e.g. sociology, geography, education) could open new spaces for theory and research.

By evidencing the role of play-based research in relationships with people, particularly peer-to-peer, and relationships with the material world this dissertation supports a growing call for relational approaches to children's participation in research (Hatton, 2014; Mannion, 2007) recognising children and young people as part of a network of relationships, and not autonomous detached agents as can be perceived in individualised notions of participation. This aligns with literature that moves beyond Western autonomous definitions of child participation, and recognises relational and social ecological understandings of participation which can further contribute to our understanding of and approach to participation in research processes. The dissertation has scope to extend the literature on children and young researchers' sense and experience of relationships with one another and with the non-material world, recognising embodied relationships with play-based materials and methods as a critical factor in the research experience. These relational approaches have implications for expanding literature on the embodied understanding and nuances of participatory research methods creating potential for strengthening and/or transforming research processes as well as play-based practice for children, young people, and adults.

The dissertation contributes to further theoretical exploration on methodological approaches to, and reasons for, research with and/or led by children and young people, expanding areas beyond specific cognitive, social, and emotional competencies 'acquired' or tangible actions enacted by young people to relationships and the value of dialogue without concerted

action. The role of play-based research in fostering dialogue has useful theoretical implications for researchers. This can be beneficial for those using approaches like PAR and CAR to integrate play-based methods to support generation of dialogue, and focus greater emphasis on cycles of reflection. It can encourage researchers to re-examine understandings of 'action' in research led by and/or with children and young people. Additionally, it can support researchers and practitioners to move away from an overemphasis on 'actions' with 'outputs' and tangible neo-liberal impacts, to question prioritisation of action, and to critically reflect on why the space of dialogue does not receive greater attention and focus. The findings in this dissertation highlight that play-based research supports engagement in dialogue that can be equally or more important than concentrated action, at times. This will be further explored in the implications for professional practice section and research section in this conclusion chapter.

7.4 Implications for Professional Practice

The findings highlight how play-based methodologies are valuable for older children and young people (aged 15 to 20 years) and not just early childhood which is more prevalent in play research and programming. Greater respect is needed for play for older children as well as opportunities to focus time on, and access to, play. The Emerging Researchers expressed that more play programmes for older children are desperately needed. While this is important, the Emerging Researchers' guilt around taking time to play suggests that greater attention is needed to shifting societal norms and perceptions around who 'should' play and what type of value it brings. As shown in the research, play can happen in the between spaces and emerge during and outside programmes. However, if young people themselves internalise adultist discredit of play for older children and adults that is perpetuated in their social spaces, then their decisions or abilities to engage in it will continue to be impacted. While play does not always need to be a structured programme, the lack of societal respect for play (included in internalised oppression of young people themselves) raises concern for young people's ability to take time or make time for diverse modes of play.

Education and awareness for children and adults on play is critical, as well as promoting play for adults, to help de-stigmatise play as a child-only experience.

Similar to social perceptions of play, the data shows that allowing or creating space for humour to emerge should not be considered trivial or a distraction from the focus of practical activities. The between space of humour through jokes, games, laughter, and other forms in this research were important for relationship building, coping, and transitions. Humour allowed for playful and deep dialogues on social issues to emerge and for young people to co-create and develop new ideas as well as to transition, cope, and engage in powerful dialogues. While child and young people programmes are often constrained by their funding bodies to have specific outcomes and activities to report on, it is important that the value of the less tangible is not lost. I recommend that child and young people programmes, research, and funders critically reflect on programme structures and ways that the non tangible can still be valued, promoted, and effectively taken time for. This may include re-imagining what 'activities' look like, valuing process, and exploring more creative models of evaluation and theories. Furthermore, the inclusion of the less tangible play can also pose benefits for the adults interacting with children and young people, fostering stronger intergenerational partnerships and contributing to children and adults' lives.

Furthermore, it is evident that diverse perspectives on conceptualisations, experiences, and values of play exist across young people. Adults can critically reflect on their own subject positionality and lived experiences, and how this affects their conceptualisation of play when engaging with children and young people. Openness to respecting the diverse conceptualisations, experiences, and understanding of play for young people could provide new opportunities for play across generations. Children and young people must be invited to be a part of the design and co-creation of programmes and policies both directly on play and/or where play can be built so that they align with their conceptualisations of, and visions for, play in their lives.

7.5 Implications for Policy

There is a dearth of policy explicitly on play in Canada, where this research took place. A national outdoor play strategy (Lawson Foundation, 2015) exists; however, this is not at a government level and/or implemented across the provinces of the country. A few cities have developed play charters (e.g. City of Calgary, 2017) with limited focus on older children and young people. Policy primarily focuses on early years, leaving out older children and the importance of play in their lives.

The International Play Association of Canada and the Canadian Coalition for Children's Rights (CCRC) argue that the nation needs to 'embed play in public policy at all levels of government, such as public health, education, and urban planning' so that this fundamentally important aspect of children and young people's lives is not lost (IPA & CCRC, 2019). This PhD research found a strong relationship between mental health and play, both as a contributor to, and something that is contingent on, young people's ability to play. Play, in particular humour, was also used as a tool for young people to cope/avoid/transition. In a recent national survey (2020) almost one in four children reported low life satisfaction, with Canada having the third highest suicide rate of adolescents (aged 15 to 19) among 38 wealthy nations (UNICEF Canada, 2020). Opportunities to play for older children are typically centred around sports, with less recognition of the between spaces of 'hanging out'. More attention is needed on the relationship between play and mental health and how it is included in policy prevention and responses for mental health at the provincial and national level.

Globally, the UNCRC General Comment 17 on Article 31 calls for greater cross departmental collaboration at national, regional, and municipal government levels across health, education, social services, child protection, culture, recreation and sports as well as areas that are less frequently considered with regard to play (e.g. transport, environment and city planning). Policies need to allow children time that is 'not determined or controlled by adults' and time to do 'nothing if they so desire' (Committee on

the Rights of the Child, 2013). In alignment with the Committee, I argue for greater recognition of forms and locations of play preferred by older children. Taking time to ask young people and to co-design policy, practice, and research with them for play is essential for quality experiences that meet their needs, rights, and interests.

7.6 Implications for Research

The role of play for peer-to-peer child and young researchers is evident across the child and young person led/co-led research sector yet there is a dearth of literature that explicitly focuses on these relationships between young researchers themselves. The findings in this research showed that play-based research's role in peer-to-peer relationships was central for development, disruption, and deepening of relationships between Emerging Researchers. Planned play-based research activities and icebreakers functioned well in tandem with the between spaces of play that arise. When play is included in research it can allow for new possibilities in research design, data generation, analysis, process, outcomes, and/or dissemination. Connecting with and integrating children and young people's own conceptualisations of play, such as play as a challenge and play as humour, into the research methodology can strengthen the research process and support greater ownership of and relationship with play-based research for young researchers. Time for hanging out and getting to know one another must be valued and supported for a quality research process for young people's experiences and for the research itself. In the current pandemic world, further reflection and research on how to foster hanging out time online that is not contrived or feels like structured unstructured time (e.g. zoom coffee chats) should be explored. Examining approaches that allow for the between play space golden moments to flourish and for young people to feel comfortable joking and engaging in unconventional forms online can contribute to the potential for play-based research to continue to support the between spaces of research in new forms.

Researchers can continue to critically reflect on play-based approaches for child and young people-led or intergenerational co-produced research and its role in process and dialogue. Other participatory methodologies, such as PAR, particularly child and youth-led forms, often focus on taking a particular overt action (e.g. leading a peaceful protest, launching a youth driven activity, activism on behalf of social causes, etc.). I argue that an overemphasis on action (albeit useful) can minimise the value of space for critical reflexivity and dialogue on social issues. Critical pedagogy fosters space for dialogue and reflexivity yet much literature is still tied to dialogue intended to lead to action for social justice. Can we look more at participatory reflective research or participatory dialogue research that is emergent in play-based research that recognises different forms of action as engagement and dialogue process? Can conceptualisations of action be reimagined to include more time for cycles of reflection that are embedded in PAR and CAR methodology to foster greater space for dialogue and formation of relationships? The findings in play-based research expose the importance of time for these dialogue spaces and play's role to foster them.

While I advocated a move away from instrumentalised utilitarian 'use' of play in research and practice, the very act of exploring the role of play in research has the possibility to instrumentalise the way it gets used. The extraction of play-based approaches data through transcripts and audio recordings, as is done in this research, can take away from the embodied experience of play, reducing it to neoliberal forms of social justice research focused on data as its outcome. For this dissertation I began with an aim and overarching research questions, with an intention to collect data in partnership with young people, yet did not have a hypothesis or intended answers or outcomes. Although the act of research itself could be critiqued for using play for a particular means, the space for emergence and value of process to create new ways of understanding and engaging through play can support a process-focused form of research and play that respects the intrinsic value and space for the unexpected to emerge. As such, play-based research, while it could be used as a form of extraction, has incredible potential for a

space of emergence and for new forms of participatory research that is engaging and respectful in partnerships with young people.

Play does not have a set definition, as it is associated with diverse conceptualisations, understanding, and experiences across disciplines and sectors. Research too can be contested, but it is often associated with the generation systematically of knowledge. Thus bringing play and research together creates dissonances as well as advantages. If play can be ephemeral and spontaneous, then how can it be systematic and robust within social science research? Will the 'rigour' required for research methods extinguish or limit the potential of play? Alternatively, can the traditional notions of rigour be re-examined to forge new forms of research and new relationships? This study has sought to explore the bringing together of the two, in considering both the inclusion and the occurrences of play. While not without its tensions, play-based research has been research in its attention to data generation, documentation, and systematic analysis, as well as maintaining a process for the unpredictability and emotionality of play.

7.7 Future Research

While writing up this dissertation the world was experiencing a global health pandemic (COVID-19) that required government mandated quarantines, lockdowns, physical distancing, and isolation of citizens. Although the majority of the data collection took place prior to the pandemic when social interactions in person were still permitted, the importance of play's role in relationships has grown substantially in understanding connections in person and online, and also in understanding and further exploring relationships people can have with other people, play, methods, and nature in their lives. Thus, the relationship with play-based research methods themselves pose a unique possibility for how research, whether in person or online, could foster and support relationships for young people. How can play-based methods be transferred to an online space? What tools and approaches work better than others? Do we need to reconfigure our ways of engaging with play instead of seeking to contextualise similar tools and approaches in an online platform?

What does power look like across screens between young people and with adult researchers?

The Emerging Researchers' embodied experience of play and their relationships formed in their small cohort through play was critical for their experience. As such, what could embodiment and relational formation look like in other settings? Furthermore, young people's engagement in social issue dialogue and large-scale social justice has grown and there are greater implications for the role of play in acting as a space for dialogue on social issues. While the current opportunity for these to be in person has reduced for research, there is significant potential to explore the role of play in online and in person physically distanced spaces at present, with other forms of in person opportunities in the future.

As discussed, a key aspect of this dissertation has been to capture a diversity of young researchers' conceptualisations, experiences, and embodiment of play and play-based research approaches. Over the duration of my research a variety of micro-issues were identified but not deeply explored in this dissertation. I will endeavour to explore these issues and the role of play-based methods in exploring critical social issues, such as mental health in young people's lives, in future research.

One of the key areas that was not fully explored was the role of nature. While the context of nature was introduced, further exploration of nature in play-based research and its particular role with research with children and young people is needed. Nature is often romanticised with regard to children's wellbeing or as a wild space for adventure and challenge. However, further research could explore the interconnections of research training, play, and nature spaces. Additionally, social issues were introduced through play as dialogue. Environmental justice was briefly explored. Further research could critically explore the relationship between nature play and children and young people's engagement in, and commitment to, environmental and equity social justice. This would be particularly valuable given the current social justice environmental activism led by young people globally and recognition in

international spaces (such as the UN Human Rights Council adopting a resolution to protect the rights of children to a healthy environment) (Human Rights Council, 2020) on children's environmental rights. Additionally, the interplay between play and nature and the embodied experience could be further explored in connection with young researchers leading play and nature-based research processes.

While I opine for greater exploration of embodiment in research, I recognise embodied research can be difficult to effectively capture in traditional academic writing. Doctoral researchers are often required to 'reduce ... stories to words on paper' or as aspects of narratives which diminishes the essence of movement and embodiment central to play (Lissahunter & Emerald, 2016, p.29). Voice is often prioritised and translated into a textual interpretation. When text is the primary focus, other elements such as tone, innovation, use of body, and the relationship between speakers are not fully explored and understood. While art-based modalities have been used to explore embodied experiences, there are still limitations on how to creatively capture embodiment in play without then translating it to words on paper or being reduced to extraction of their play-based form. Further research innovations could explore embodiment beyond text-based reports, dissertations, and academic publications to include non-traditional academic forms (e.g. video, music, play-based expression) in academic, public, and policy spaces.

Most significantly, this research shines light on new ways of facilitating participatory research that delves into play as a research methodology varying from targeted play-based activities to exploring play in the between spaces and at the margins during aspects of or the whole research process. Play-based research approaches are not merely about using play-based research tools but go beyond to look at how tools and ways of engaging enable pockets of play, and to reflect on play that emerges during the research process in the data generation, documentation, analysis, and dissemination of the research. The dissertation provides an introduction into

the huge potential that play-based research approaches do, and can, have in carrying out research with young people, with the possibility for going further to research with adults as well. While focused on older children, as asserted throughout this dissertation, the data highlights that it is vital to respect and recognise the value of play for all ages and move beyond an early childhood focus within theory, research, policy, and practice.

7.8 Concluding Reflections

Over the last few decades, a growing body of academics and practitioners have sought to explore participatory research methodologies and young peoples' roles as researchers, as well as the role of play in practice for children's wellbeing and health. This doctoral study has built on the foundation of participatory research while going beyond to explore play as an approach to and method of research led by young researchers. In doing so its key contribution has been to introduce the role of play as an approach for research and its impact for young peoples' relationships and engagement with social issues.

By practising reflexivity throughout the research process, I sought to explore not only the Emerging Researchers' conceptualisations, experiences, and embodiment of play, but also my own relationship with the play-based research methodologies and the effect of my subject positionality on the research itself. To support integrity of play, I have made sure to engage in pockets of play throughout the dissertation, such as trail running, painting, hiking, and between spaces with family and friends. I have paused to engage reflectively on the role taking time and making time to play has on my own wellbeing, creativity, and engagement in social issues, as well as my internalised guilt at 'playing' when there is work to be completed. My reflexive approach alongside the Emerging Researchers' reflexivity has sought to support transparency regarding my own role in the research methodology, data, identifying themes with Emerging Researchers, and framing my interpretations and analysis. In doing so this dissertation has prioritised Emerging Researchers while incorporating multiple perspectives of the child

participants, local partners, and myself, as researchers and participants, and allows its readers to engage in their own process of meaning making.

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Appendix A: Overview of Research Activities

A description follows of the research tools that Emerging Researchers were trained in and then adapted and modified to lead their own research. The below tools were compiled into a *Wilderness Emerging Researchers' Play Nature Kit*. Additionally, tools were added to the kit after the training based on recommendations from the Emerging Researchers.

A.1 Opening and Closing Circles, and Reflective Circle.

Unity circles (IICRD, 2012) and Circle processes (Pranis, Stuart and Wedge, 2003) were used throughout the research journey to build trust, establish unity, and build equal respect for one another in the space. Circles were used to create space for all participants to share their perspectives, emotions, and ideas. 'Talking circles are based on the ideal of participants' respect for each other and are an example of a focus group method derived from postcolonial indigenous worldview's that can be used to support more equal contribution across participants (Chilisa, 2012, p. 213). In this research process, the circle was used to welcome researchers upon inception of the training, to close processes, and was later used by the Emerging Researchers themselves in every session to lead activities when conducting research. A unity circle rope (a piece of climbing rope tied together in a large circle) was used where participants were invited to hold on, close their eyes, lean back and lean forward, and then try again with sitting down. A reflective discussion then takes place to cultivate dialogue on trust, equality, and relations in the research journey. The questions are adapted with each group to meet the purpose of the circle and based on the dynamics and reflections of those present.

A.2 Psychosocial Wellbeing Giant Jenga

Psychosocial Wellbeing Giant Jenga involves handing out five bricks of a Giant Jenga game to each young person and asking each young person to write people/places/things that support them to feel socially, emotionally, physically, mentally, and spiritually well on an index card then stuck to one side of Jenga piece. Once all are complete, the young people are invited to

place their wellness blocks in the five spheres of wellbeing (recognizing their may be overlap) and then work together to build a Jenga tower. After the tower is developed, young people begin to play Jenga, reading each of the bricks that they pull out before they place it on top of the tower. The game continues until the Jenga tower collapses. After it collapses, the researcher facilitates a discussion to support children to reflect on what makes them feel well, what aspects are play-focused, and what happens when you start to lose your foundations of wellbeing. The facilitator then supports them to reflect on and identify actions to rebuild their foundations for psychosocial wellbeing in their communities and the social ecological factors required, as well as where play and nature fit in.

A.3 Play Object Stories

Stories can be shared through many diverse forms. They can act as the ‘heart of transformative change’ (Ledwith, 2017, p. 49) and can be a valuable process to explore young people’s experiences and psychosocial wellbeing. Object stories, used in this research, fostered space for sharing on play and wellbeing. Young researchers were invited to find an object in nature and/or that they had in their backpacks while camping that depicted their understanding and experience of play in relation to their wellbeing. The activity was introduced on the first evening of the 5-day training expedition providing an evening and day to reflect. On the third morning I invited the Emerging Researchers to bring their objects on our day out where we would then share back in the afternoon after our morning paddle boarding on the river during our reflective research portion of the day. Each participant brought a unique object. A couple had forgotten and thus creatively found a new item prior to the circle, while one spoke of the objects that she could not find in the morning but that she had earlier during the week. Participants shared their objects through storytelling in pairs introducing what play and nature means to them, and the role of the object in their own psychosocial wellbeing, and then in collective circle. I invited the Emerging Researchers to sit together in circle on the grass bank beside the river and take turns sharing their objects. The playful objects ranged from hair elastics depicting play as

'letting your hair down' to backpacks symbolising camping and engaging with the outdoors, to different shaped and colours rocks highlighting the yin and yang of play processes, to a flower showing the relationship with nature. A collective conversation then ensued around play and its meaning in their lives. The conversation allowed for further exploration of storytelling in research and transitioned us into qualitative semi-structured interview conversations for our next activity.

A.4 Peer-to-Peer Qualitative Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they provided the opportunity for participants to discuss, expand on, and reflect upon their lived experiences. Additionally, they can create space for greater personal reflection and engagement for young people. Qualitative interviews were introduced to the Emerging Researchers' both during the one-day training on site and the five-day training while camping. Each group learned about and experienced the concept of interviews and the structure in different forms leading to different reflections on the value and experience of interviews. In the first group (the one-day training), the Emerging Researchers participated in informal walking interviews. During this time, the whole group went for a collective nature walk. The researchers posed two questions about play and wellbeing during the walks for participants to discuss in pairs and then continue on to other dialogue. The informal nature of the questions supported further discussion and was interspersed with tangents, jokes, silences, and multiple other dialogues. Engaging in conversation while moving allowed for a sense of 'equals' in conversation and an informal less structured process. During the planning to lead research session a couple months after the training day, the young people who had participated highlighted their appreciation for the walking interviews and the format of them. The second group who participated in the five-day Emerging Researcher expedition had greater time to get into further depth on research activities. This cohort thus was engaged in a deeper learning process on what qualitative research interviews are, how to ask questions, how to actively listen, and had the space to practice semi-structured interviews while recording with a peer. The

training included an introduction to research as storytelling, what makes good interview questions and how do we actively listen, an actively listening peer-to-peer game, observation of a scenario on 'good' and 'bad' interviewing skills, and an opportunity to review the questions and modify them. To introduce story dialogue we began with two readings from *Embers One Ojibway's Mediations* (Wagamese, 2016). I invited two of the Emerging Researchers to randomly flip open a page and share with the rest of the group to ground us for the session. I personally had been doing this myself each morning for over a year during the time of the research. The stories both grounded us and transitioned the group into a discussion on the role of storytelling and how research is storytelling as well as improving our relationships with ideas. Next, the Emerging Researchers worked in pairs to lead peer-to-peer interviews with one another while recording. Capacity and comfortability to lead interviews varied across individuals and groups, with some keen to facilitate the process and others finding less value in it. While participating Sydney spoke about feeling 'awkward answering so many questions without a mutual conversation' and Ocean highlighted feeling appreciation for the 'opportunity to speak and share' when asked open ended questions. The leading process resonated differently across the Emerging Researchers, with some enjoying this element more and others feeling awkward. One participant highlighted that she felt awkward at the start and then chose to 'fake it till you make it' and started to enjoy it more as she visualised herself as a researcher (Sydney) did. Another pair felt uncomfortable with the process and in their audio recording spoke about not enjoying the process yet still had valuable conversations that took place. Skills at interviewing varied across participants, with some probing deeper and asking questions that built from their participants answers whereas others rigidly stuck to the interview questions.

The use of two different approaches in the Emerging Researchers' training resulted in diverse perspectives and interests in using interviews. During our preparing to lead session with the young researchers that brought together the first and second group, we explored what types of activities would be best

suited for them to lead with younger cohorts. Those who had engaged in the more formal process did not choose interviews with some crossing the idea off during dotmocracy (voting with sticky dots). Whereas researchers that had done the walking interviews seemed more positive about using this form. Those in the walking space felt they could readily build it into a nature walk with children, whereas those in the qualitative peer-to-peer interviews felt it would not work in the space and would be uncomfortable. While a couple mentioned that the qualitative interviews were interesting and useful for their own skills they did not feel they were practical to use with children in the group. As such, the Emerging Researchers chose to build in informal walking interviews on their third leading research session.

Visual Explorer.

Visual Explorer, developed by the Centre for Creative Leadership, is a set of over 200 cards that are photographs and imagery designed to generate reflective conversations (Fletcher et al., 2016). The cards can be used in multiple diverse forms of facilitation, research, counselling, and other dialogue spaces. In the Emerging Researchers process the cards were used multiple times. The cards were introduced to explore play and wellbeing as two separate cards and then integrated together for the conversation. During the one-day training the cards were used as a reflective tool after completion of a one-hour canoe ride on the lake. The question posed focused on their experience canoeing through the image of the card. While at expedition the cards were used to identify what does play mean to you and what does wellbeing mean to you. The Emerging Researchers then chose to use them when leading their own research with the younger cohorts as well to reflect on their experiences leading research. They were used in opening circle to explore what does play mean for children with two different groups of young people and were also used as a transition closing activity in the car ride back from camping with young people to share on their personal reflections of the trip. The cards are flexible in scope and provided for diverse creative opportunities to reflect on experiences through visual forms.

A.5 Story Cubes

Story cubes are a set of dice that have different images on each side of the die. The images are diverse and include images such as, theatre masks, magnifying glasses, pyramids, lightbulbs, and other images that can depict stories and/or reflections. During the research the story cubes were used as a reflective debrief tool post a nature-based morning hike up the Stawamus Chief. The hike itself is a 3 to 4-hour journey round trip 702 metres up and 5km round trip. Upon completion the group sat in a circle on a grassy patch near the parking lot to stress and go through a reflective circle. Once in the circle I placed a set of story cubes in the centre of the green space. Each participant (inclusive of facilitators) was invited to take a cube to express how they were feeling at the end of the hike. Participants went round the circle and shared their reflections on the experience of the hike and what that meant for their wellbeing.

A.6 Reflective Journaling

In both research trainings, the Emerging Researchers were provided research journals at the start of their training. They were invited to write their notes and reflections on the research experience in this space and where they felt comfortable to take pictures of and share their writings with the PhD researcher. In both groups we included a five-minute journal activity. Participants were invited to free write their feelings about what they had learned that day and what they were thinking forward to. All were invited to write without taking their pen off the page for five minutes. The idea is to not overthink and formulate but to write with feeling and expression at that point in time. After five minutes, participants were then invited to read their journal entry to themselves and circle key words that stuck out to them. After circling key words, they were invited to re-read their work and to underline words that resonated with them once more. Upon completion, I invited participants to share any reflections from their journals they would like to with the group. I spoke of the value of taking time to journal as researchers and critically

reflect on their experiences and their own role in this research process. Three participants allowed me to take pictures of their journals that could be used as part of the research data itself.

A.7 River Journey: Most Significant Change

The Most Significant Change technique originated in 1995 monitor and evaluate a participatory rural development programme located in Bangladesh (Willettts & Crawford, 2007). The tool originates from international development participatory methodology and was intended for use in strengthening participant engagement in evaluating programmes. The technique has been built into a variety of evaluation tools and has further been modified for participatory research processes. The process is subjective as well as systematic, in that all participants are invited to use the same tool to reflect on their process (Parks, Gray-Felder, Hunt, & Byrne, 2005). This project used a modified version of MSC entitled River Journey. The tool builds from multiple organizations and researchers' participatory methodologies, inclusive of the IICRD where I also work. River Journey invited the Emerging Researchers to reflect on their research training expedition (at the end of the week), as well as to reflect on their process of preparing to lead and leading research. The process included collaboratively building a giant river through arts based medium of flipchart, markers, playdough, and other colouring tools. The Emerging Researchers were invited to work independently or collectively to reflect on their experiences. The young people chose to build a shared river, reflecting on the Past (how they were feeling prior to the research expedition), journeyed to the middle (how they feel at present), and into the future (of what they are looking forward to/thinking about going forward). The Emerging Researchers were invited to use drawings, words, or other forms to express experiences that took place and feelings at the different stages of the process. The discussion that took place during and after was audio recorded to capture process and reflections of the journey. While images are used, it is pertinent that the stories behind the images are shared by the young people and not interpreted through an adult lens. The first time the activity was used the

Emerging Researchers delved deeply into their reflective process and spend an hour and a half in dialogue and reflection. Whereas the second time, the activity was conducted was after an afternoon of leading research where the young people had been together for a shorter duration in less of an intensive journey and the river process was completed much quicker. The depth of reflection and reflective space was different in energy at each time.

A.8 Debrief Strengths, Challenges, Growth (Rose, bud, thorn; Sun, storm, rainbow; Head, Heart, Hand, Feet)

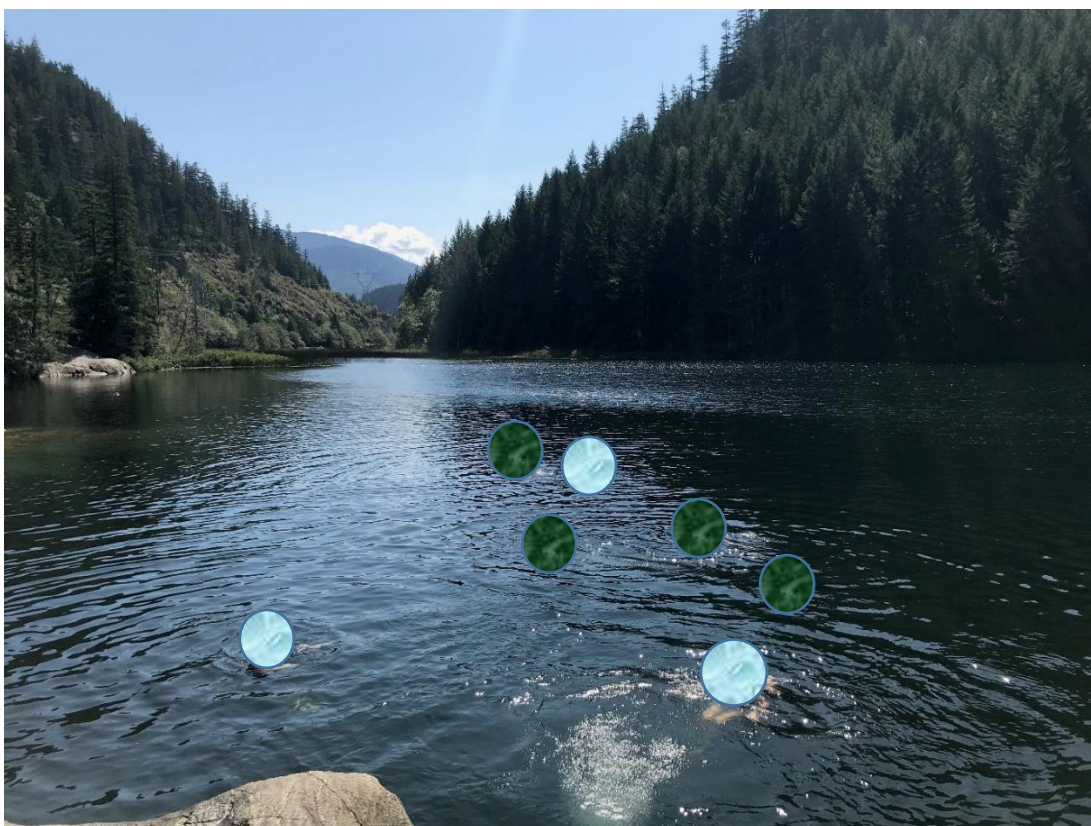
A vast array of participatory debrief and assessment activities exist to support people to reflect on strengths, challenges, and areas for growth in workshop spaces and life experiences. In order to reflect on the experience of the research training, preparing to lead, and leading research we used a variety of reflective tools. In particular, the young people had the opportunity to engage in ‘Rose, bud, thorn’, ‘sun, storm, rainbow’, and ‘head, heart, hand, feet’. The activities hold similarities in looking at strengths (rose, sun), challenges (thorn, storm, feet), and areas for growth – either potential learnings (rainbow), opportunities for the future (bud), or actions to take forward (hand). Additionally, in head, heart, hand, feet, the activity allowed for the researchers to reflect on what they learned (head) and how they felt (heart). The intention for the activities was to support the Emerging Researchers to continuously reflect and engage in reflexive practice as Emerging Researchers. Additionally, the Emerging Researchers ended up using these activities in modified formats during their own leadership. For example, when leading with the community school group the researchers ended the day in a closing circle where each participant answered questions around rose, bud, thorn to close.

A.9 Web of Strengths

Web of strengths is a participatory activity that invites participants to stand in a circle and toss a ball of string around the circle (with participants holding on to an end prior to tossing), to build a web of the whole groups strengths. The activity is used to explore individual and collective strengths and highlighted the relationships of the team. This activity was introduced by Cedar, one of

the Emerging Researchers who was keen to lead it and add it to our collection.

Appendix B: Wilderness Emerging Researchers' Play Guide



WILDERNESS EMERGING RESEARCHERS

Play Guide
*Everyone Belongs in **Play and Nature***
PILOT Version 2019

Partner Logo



THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH

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(the “Publishers”)

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Research Play Activities

Activity 1: Unity Circle

Activity 2: Values Charter

Activity 3: Needs and Offers

Activity 4: Visual Explorer

Activity 5: Wellbeing Trail Walk

Activity 6: Exploring our wellbeing: Giant Jenga

Activity 7: Nature Place Stories

Activity 8: Play Object Stories

Activity 9: Reflexive Journals

Activity 10: River Journey

Activity 11: Rose, Bud, Thorn and Closing Circle

Welcome to the Wilderness Emerging Researchers Play Guide!

We are excited you have joined the ***Wilderness Emerging Researchers*** and are learning about and leading research activities to explore the role of play in children and young people's wellbeing in your communities, and in your own life. To support you, we have designed a play guide with activities that you can use and modify to lead your research.

The Play Guide has eleven activities that include purpose, time, resources, data collection tips, and step by step instructions. You can adapt the activities and questions to include your creative ideas and meet the needs of the young people you are researching with. Make sure to take plenty of time to prepare your materials and how you will facilitate before leading. If it is your first time, we recommend leading in pairs. Always have at least one audio recorder to record your session, keep anything developed (e.g. flipcharts, pictures of visual explorer cards used), and take reflective notes after you are done.

You are a Wilderness Emerging Researcher LEADER for this exciting program. If you need any back up support you can ask your peers, your Adult Researcher (Laura Wright), or a [community partner] staff member.

We hope that you will learn a lot and have plenty of FUN as you lead sessions to learn about play and nature in wellbeing for children and youth in your community.

All our Best,

Laura Wright and The Wilderness Emerging Researcher Alumni Support Team

Activity 1: Welcome and Unity Circle

➡ **Purpose:** To welcome participants and introduce the goal of the workshop; To get to know the other participants and the facilitator(s)⁵

✍️ **Materials:** Unity Circle Rope

🕒 **Time:** 25 minutes

Data Collection Tips: Audio Record Conversation; Take Field Notes End of Day

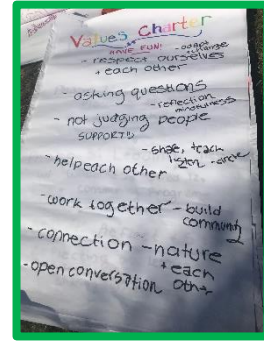
Process

1. Place a rope on the ground in a circle prior to the start.
2. Ensure the rope is large and strong enough for all participants to stand around it. Tie the two ends of the rope together in a tight knot. Ensure that it is secure and will not come undone.
3. Place talking pieces in the centre of the circle (e.g. special stones, objects of meaning for location (sweet grass), ball)
4. Invite all participants to come together in a circle at arm's length apart.
5. Pick up a talking piece to pass around. Invite all participants to go around in circle and state their name, pronouns, and one thing about play and nature that inspires them.
6. Next, invite participants to pick up the rope and hold on tight with two hands. The rope should be tight also.
7. Invite all participants to close their eyes and lean backwards.
8. After 15 seconds, invite participants to open their eyes.

⁵ Inspired by Right To Play and International Institute for Child Rights and Development Unity Circle activities

A Play-based Research Approach

- Ask participants: How did it feel to close your eyes and lean back? Why did you feel this way?
- Invite participants to close their eyes and lean back a second time. After 30 seconds, invite them to open their eyes.
- Lead a discussion using the questions below as a guide.



How did you feel the second time? What was different? The same?

Explain that:

- *This circle represents equality and continuity because everyone is on the same level. In our circle all of our views are respected and listened to, and everyone has different strengths to contribute.*

Sample questions:

- In your life what are ways that you have worked together in community to support your peers?
- How can we trust one another and support one another to build a positive environment to ensure everyone has an equal opportunity and feels safe to share their ideas?
- **Please Note:** *It is important to using probing techniques based on what the young people share in the circle.*

Activity 2: Values Charter

➡ **Purpose:** To establish values (similar to ground rules) important to the group.

✍️ **Materials:** Flipchart, Markers

🕒 **Time:** 15 minutes

Data Collection Tips: Take a Picture of the Values Charter; Audio Record;

Process:

1. It is important for us to explore our shared values and commitments to make this workshop safe and fun for all.
2. Invite participants to share ideas popcorn style on values that are important for them for the week/day/weekend.
3. If participants are having difficulty thinking of ideas, provide an example:
E.g. active listening, respect self, respect one another, time management.
4. After participants have run out of ideas ask participants if they all agree to the values listed.
5. If all participants agree, invite all members to come up and sign their name to the Values Charter.
6. Remind participants that we will refer back to the Values Charter throughout the research training.

Activity 3: Needs and Offers

➡ **Purpose:** To create space for participants to share their needs and offers for the week

✍️ **Materials:** Flipchart, Sticky notes (2 colours), pens

🕒 **Time:** 15 minutes

Data Collection Tips: Take a picture of the sticky notes; Audio Record

Process:

1. Pass around 2 different coloured sticky notes to all participants in the circle.
2. Begin the activity by introducing the idea of needs and offers. Tell participants that we are all unique and have different needs to support our wellness and learning for the day.
3. Ask participants: What is an example of a need someone may have? Listen for: breaks for snacks, support from their peers, etc.
4. Ask participants: what is an example of an offer you may have to contribute? Listen for: energizers to support the group, photography skills to help take images, etc.
5. After participants understand the idea of needs and offers invite participants to record their needs on one colour sticky note and their offers (strengths they want to contribute) on another
6. Invite participants to sign their name beside ones that they want the facilitators or their peers to follow up with them on (e.g. You have great energizers and we can call on you in the week for support).
7. Tell participants, if you don't want to record your name for all to see you can also follow up with one of the facilitators privately.

8. Once finished writing, invite participants to post their notes on a Flipchart with two columns (Needs, Offers) at the front of the room.
9. End the activity once all participants have posted their needs and offers on the flipchart at the front of the room.
10. As a facilitator, during the break, take time to read needs and offers and reflect back on them to the group by the end of the day.

Activity 4: Visual Explorer

➡ **Purpose:** To reflect on an experience/concept in the research workshop/that participants are exploring.

✍️ **Materials:** Flipchart paper; Markers, tape, Center for Creative Leadership Visual Explorer™ cards or another diverse assortment of photographs (create your own from a royalty-free image bank such as this one: [pexels.com](https://www.pexels.com)*)

🕒 **Time:** 45 minutes

Data Collection Tips: Audio Recorder; Field Notes afterwards, take photo of pictures that the participants selected; take photo of the themes

Process:

1. Welcome the group into the space.
2. Lay visual explorer cards in a circle in a circle or pathway that allows participants to walk around and look at all the images.
3. Ask a reflective question or prompt about the topic. E.g. What does play mean to you? What did you do this summer that supported your wellbeing?
4. In response to the question, invite participants to walk around and look at the photos (in silence) and select one or more photos that best represent their response to, or thoughts around, the prompt.

Tip: Prompts can be provided regarding the selection of photos to ensure participants understand that there are different ways of selecting photos. They can select an image because it directly represents their answer, they can select a photo because it metaphorically represents their answer, or they can select the photo intuitively, that is, the

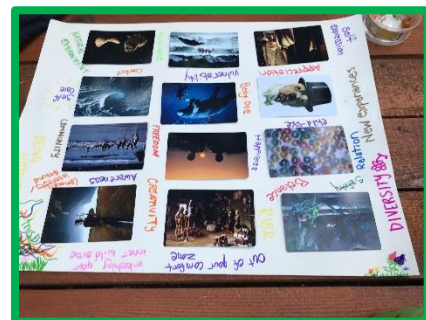


image speaks to them in some way they don't necessarily understand but that feels right).

1. Invite participant to describe the photo (what is actually in the image) and then describe how this photo represents/evokes their response to the prompt or question. Each participant takes a turn.
2. Afterwards, facilitate a discussion to identify and discuss common themes that emerge from the descriptions they have provided (E.g. Team work, connection, belonging, joy), and using flip chart paper, tape, markers, build a poster that reflects these themes.

Activity 5: Wellbeing Trail Walk

🎯 **Purpose:** To informally explore the role of play and nature in our wellbeing through a trail walk.

🔧 **Materials:** Audio Recorders, Healthy snacks

🕒 **Time:** 1 hour

Data Collection Tips: Audio Recorder; Field Notes afterwards

Process:

1. Invite participants to go on a trail walk together.
2. Take time to get snacks, water, sunscreen, bug spray, hats, etc.
3. Invite participants to find a buddy to walk next to.
4. Ask them to reflect on one or two questions: *E.g. What did you learn in year one? Tell me more about.*
5. Walk collectively through the nature trails.
6. Create space for informal conversations and use open ended questions to support the dialogue.
7. Half way through the walk, consider transitioning to a second question.
E.g. What are you excited for in year 2? Why?
8. End the walk once everyone has had a chance to share, explore, and recharge in nature.

Note to Researchers: *You could also use the nature walk space to start nature object story telling (For example, invite them to find an object during the walk), nature spots (For example, invite them to choose a place that calls to them and bring their peers there), walking peer to peer interviews (For example, provide them with sample interview questions they can ask one another during the walk), or reflective journals (For example, bring your journals during the walk).*

Activity 6: Exploring Our Wellbeing: Giant Jenga⁶

➡ **Purpose:** Part 1: To explore our wellbeing and what makes us feel well in relation to play and nature. Part 2: To explore any barriers to our wellbeing, and ways to prevent and respond to barriers we face.

✍️ **Materials:** Giant Jenga, Flipcharts, Markers, Index Cards cut to size of jenga pieces, Tape, Image of Wellbeing Wheel, Image of social ecological model

🕒 **Time:** 45 min

Data Collection Tips: Take pictures of Giant Jenga; Type up all wellbeing index cards; Audio record conversation

Process:

Part 1

1. Invite participants to sit together in a circle.
2. Ask participants to turn to a partner and share one thing that makes them feel well
3. Ask participants to turn back to the group
4. Hand out 5 to 10 half-size index cards to each participant
5. Show participants a poster with five quadrants of wellbeing (social, emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual)
6. Invite participants to reflect on what people/places/things in relation to play and nature activities support their wellbeing
7. Invite participants to write one per index card. If participants would like examples provide examples for the different quadrants (e.g. trail running

⁶ Adapted from *Right To Play Youth Leadership Symposium for Resilience* by Design Lab, Royal Roads University RYSE youth research Wright, L. (2017) *Wellbeing Jenga*. Further adapted for this resource.

physical, laughing with friends social, yoga spiritual). Explain that, you may have something that makes you feel well that crosses several quadrants. (E.g. a nature hike may be physical, it may also reduce anxiety/boost mood, it may also be a meditative space, or a social space with friends).

8. Once complete, invite participants to stick their index cards onto the side of the Jenga pieces you have placed in front of them.
9. Next, invite participants to place their Jenga pieces in the giant quadrant (which you have placed on the grass/floor)
10. Share with participants that they may have some that overlap several spots and/or some they feel do not sit in any quadrant. They are welcome to place them in multiple sections and/or place outside of the categories too.



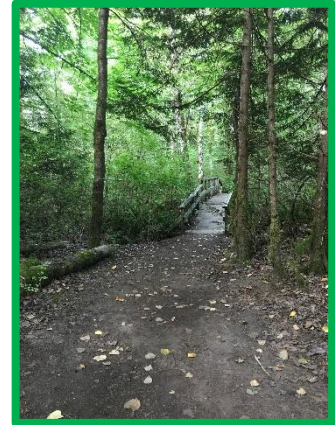
11. Lead a Discussion using the following questions as a guide:

- How did it feel to reflect on what supports your wellbeing?
- What were some of the ideas shared on the Jenga pieces? (Go through the different quadrants)?
- Do some ideas fit into multiple spaces? If so, which ones?
- What ones are related to play and nature? Are there other play and nature experiences that support your wellbeing?

Process:

Part 2:

1. Introduce the activity by explaining that: So far we have been exploring our wellbeing. We are going to reflect more on what this looks like at different times in our lives.
2. Invite participants to reflect on the social ecological model, what are the things that support their health and wellness.
3. Next, collect all the blocks back and invite participants to aid you in building the Jenga tower of wellness.
4. After the tower is built, invite participants to take turns pulling pieces out and placing them on top (reading the statement on the card each time)
5. The Jenga tower will grow and grow until it crashes.
6. Once the Jenga tower crashes lead a discussion using the following questions as a guide:
 - What are some of the areas of wellbeing that were written on the blocks?
 - Why did the tower crash? Why does sometimes our own wellbeing crash in our lives?
 - In our own lives, sometimes things get overwhelming or very busy and we forget to or don't know how to access the things that make us feel healthy and well. What are some of the challenges that we see in our communities for wellbeing?
 - What are some of the barriers at the personal, peer, family, community, and government level? (*Show social ecological model and explore; Note create space to explore how play and nature can be brought into this model too*).



- What can we do to rebuild and support a strong foundation so that we have our health and wellness strategies in both the good and difficult times in our lives?
- How can we explore this with the children we will be leading research with in the fall?

Activity 7: Nature Place Stories

➡ **Purpose:** To explore spaces we connect with in nature

🔪 **Materials:** forested area, audio recorder, camera

🕒 **Time:** 40 minutes

Data Collection Tips: Audio Recorder; Field Notes afterwards, Photos of nature spaces

Process

1. Invite participants to form a circle in a nature based setting
2. Invite participants to close their eyes and engage in breathing in and out for ten breaths.
3. Invite participants to open their eyes and ask them to find a spot in the nature in the surrounding area (Note to facilitator: choose a parameter of about 30 feet/in eye distance around where you are all standing) they feel called to.
4. Invite them to take their journals and pen with them and draw or write what they notice (e.g. smell, feel, see) (up to ten things). As them to stay in the land for 5 to 7 minutes.
 1. After 7 minutes, invite participants to come back to the central space.
5. Invite participants to take turns guiding the rest of the group to their space (if they would like to). Invite each participant to share 2 to 3 elements of what drew them to the space.
6. Continue this process until all participants who want to share have shared.
7. After all, have shared, invite participants back into circle and ask them to re-reflect on their notes. Invite them to shift three of their notes from “I notice” to “I am”. For example, “I notice the light that shine through the branches” to “I am the light that shine through the branches.” *Note to researcher: Lead this so it focuses on strengths. If a participant has been*

*speaking of darkness or negative elements,
do not ask them to switch to “I am”.*

8. Lead a discussion using the following questions as a guide.



- How did it feel finding a space? What drew you to your space?
- What were some of the similarities across spaces? What were some of the differences?
- What about that space supports/does not support your own wellbeing?
- What is nature's role in your own wellbeing? What do you think its role is for other children in your community?

Activity 8: Play Object Stories⁷

🎯 **Purpose:** To explore our wellness through play and nature objects

🔪 **Materials:** play and nature objects, audio recorder, camera

🕒 **Time:** 30 minutes

Data Recording Tips: audio record, photos of play objects, field notes

Process:

1. Invite participants to go on a walk and find an object related to play/nature that supports their wellbeing.
2. Invite participants to find a partner that they feel comfortable sharing their story with.
3. Ask each person to share their story in three minutes without the other partner interruption or asking questions.
4. After 3 minutes, create space for the partner to ask questions.
5. After the partners have discussed, invite the second partner to share their story in 3 minutes.
6. After both partners have completed the activity invite all participants to come back together in circle.
7. Invite each participant to briefly share their object story with the whole group.
8. After participants have shared lead a talking circle (using one object as the talking piece) using the following questions as a guide:
 - How did it feel to find a play/nature object that connected with your wellbeing? Was it easy? Difficult? Why?
 - What were some of the themes that came out from our individual and collective stories?

⁷ Adapted from ResiliencebyDesign RRU and multiple qualitative research activities.

- What are some ways we can support more opportunities for our wellbeing in the future?

Activity 9: Reflexive Journals

➡ **Purpose:** To reflect on our experiences in the day⁸

✍️ **Materials:** Research Journals, Pens, pencil crayons

🕒 **Time:** 20 minutes

Data Collection Tips: Audio Recorder; Photos of journals (where invited)

Process:

1. Invite the participants to sit in a circle and to take their personal journals (which you will have given them at the start of the day) and a pen
2. Invite them to take 5 minutes to free write. Ask them to reflect on how they feel about today and what they are taking forward.
3. Invite them to write without taking their pen off the page, and free flow their thoughts. *Note: if you have participants who do not want to write, encourage them to draw/doodle their feelings.*
4. Tell participants that they can sit where they feel most comfortable (E.g. chair, floor, grass)
5. After five minutes, ask participants to finish their last sentence.
6. Invite participants to read through what they have written and underline words that pop out to them.
7. Next, invite them to re-read through and circle words that hold greatest significance.
8. Once complete, invite participants to share anything they would like to share back.
9. If participants would like to read a part of their journal or share key words, invite them



⁸ Adapted from Heykoop (2016) *Global Leadership Royal Roads Reflective Journal Activity*

to do so. However, remind participants that this is their personal journal where they can choose to share or not share.

10. Invite participants to take pictures of any parts of their journal writing (today or in the future) to share with you as part of the research. Remind participants that it will all be anonymous and that their name will not be connected to the content they share.
11. Invite participants to take their journals home and continue writing research reflections throughout the research process.

Activity 10: River Journey Mural

➡ **Purpose:** To explore the most significant changes that have taken place over the journey of the research process.⁹

🖌️ **Materials:** Flip chart paper (4-5 pasted together), paints/crayons/other colours,

🕒 **Time:** 1 hour

Data Recording Tips: Audio Recorder, Photograph of river journey mural, typed up notes, Field Notes



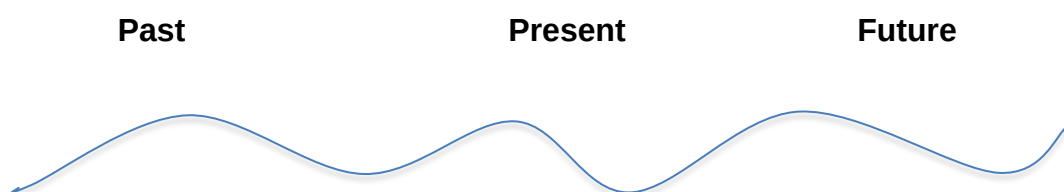
Process:

1. Place a long piece of paper on the floor or wall, and write past, present, and future in intervals across the top.
2. Ask participants to close their eyes and envision a beautiful river, flowing from their past (before this Wilderness School trip) to the present (recently completed trip) and into their future (What do they hope will happen next?).
3. Ask participants what their lives were like in the past, before they started this program. What it is like now that they have finished? And what they hope they might do in the future?
4. Ask participants what some of the most important changes have been between each of these phases (past, present, future)? These changes can be personal, in the family or in the community.

⁹ Adapted from Currie, V., Lee, L., & Wright, L. (2019). *YouCreate Participatory Action Research Toolkit*. IICRD and Terre des Hommes (originally adapted from Heykoop and Currie IICRD River Journey and Most Significant Change Research Tool).

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5. Ask participants to draw a river on the page (2 lines) and together add to the river with their stories and ideas (in writing and/or drawing). They may also include significant activities /events that led to the changes. Invite them to reflect on what the process of play-based methods and nature meant for them in these spaces.
6. Once complete, ask participants to draw or write any 'stories' that reflect the changes that they experienced.
7. What activities and events were significant to you / led to these changes? Please draw or write these.
8. Lead a discussion using the following questions as a guide. Record a summary of the group's answers.
 - What were the most significant changes that were revealed in your River Journey? What was the role of play or nature? Why are these significant?
 - Were the changes experienced by all participants? Please explain.
 - What have you learned that you will take forward into a) future activities you plan, and b) into your lives?



Activity 11: End of Day Assessment and Closing Circle

➡ **Purpose:** To reflect on strengths, challenges, and areas for growth. To close in community and explore our way forward.

✍️ **Materials:** Flipchart, Markers, Sticky Notes

🕒 **Time:** 30 minutes

Data Collection Tips: Audio Recorder; Type up sticky notes, photo of rose, bud, thorn, field notes afterwards

Process:

Part 1: Rose, Bud, Thorn

1. Post a picture of a rose, bud, and thorn on a flipchart page at the front of the room/outdoor space
2. Hand out sticky notes and ask participants to write a strength by the rose, a challenge by the thorn, and a new budding idea by the bud. Remind participants of the value of being specific in their feedback.

Note: If participants are not keen to write you can transition this activity into the closing circle conversation.

Part 2: Closing Circle

1. Place a rope on the ground in a circle prior to the start.
2. Ensure the rope is large and strong enough for all participants to stand around it. Tie the two ends of the rope together in a tight knot. Ensure that it is secure and will not come undone.
3. Place talking pieces in the centre of the circle (e.g. special stones, objects of meaning for location (sweet grass), ball)
4. Invite all participants to come together in a circle at arm's length apart.
5. Pick up a talking piece to pass around. Invite all participants to go and say one thing they are leaving here today with (*or rose, bud, thorn pending prior activity*).

6. Next, invite participants to pick up the rope and hold on tight with two hands.
7. Ask participants to sit down together.
8. Invite participants to stand back up together.
9. Invite a participant to lead the activity again.
10. Lead the activity one more time.
11. Close the circle in community exploring steps for the future.

Appendix C: Ethics FAQ Welcome Letter

PLAY-BASED RESEARCH PROJECT

Welcome to the Wilderness Emerging Researchers Team!

INTRODUCTION

We would like to invite you to join the Wilderness Emerging Researchers Team. The project involves young people like you who are involved in programs with play (this could be art, music, theatre, games, sports, free play, playing out outside, or other types you like) and nature. We want to learn how these experiences affect children and young people's wellbeing and how you are a part of decision making and action about things that are important to you in your life. You will support a younger cohort to reflect on how play affects their wellbeing.

WHO AM I?

My name is Laura Wright and I am a PhD Researcher (a graduate student) at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. I have been involved in a lot of different work on children's rights, play, and children's participation in decision-making. I grew up on a small island near Vancouver called Bowen Island. Running in trails, swimming in the ocean, hiking, learning, and spending time with my family and friends make me feel well.

WHAT DOES BEING IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT INVOLVE?

Acting as a member of our research project team and leading your own research with other children in your community. This will include joining in play-based research training where you will learn things like how play objects stories, Jenga and taking photos can be research tools, and how to conduct interviews. You will then act as researchers to lead fun research and activities with children in your community and be a part of meetings where we will chat about our research, and share activities and meals together.

HOW MUCH TIME WILL THIS TAKE?

Our fun research training and designing the research process will take about 15 hours and will happen over the expedition and a planning day. Leading research with children and youth will take about two to three days. We will make sure preparation is split up and takes place on the weekend and in summer hours to not disrupt your studies, your work, and/or family and personal commitments.

WHY WOULD YOU WANT TO JOIN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?

What we find in this study will be used to support future programs and research for children and youth. We will make recommendations with you (based on your ideas) to researchers and people who design programs and do trainings for adults working with children and youth on health and wellbeing. You will have a chance to build research skills, get a university certificate for your free research course, spend time with new friends, have snacks and meals during workshops and meetings, lead your own projects, and more! We hope that you will enjoy being a part of the research team!

DO I HAVE TO PARTICIPATE IN EVERYTHING?

If I ask you questions or to be part of activities that you do not like you do not have to join. You can say no and choose to not participate at any time.

WHO WILL KNOW I AM IN THE RESEARCH PROJECT?

The things you say and any information we write about you will not have your name with it, so no one will know they are your answers or the things that you did. The researchers plan to not let anyone other than themselves see your answers or other information about you. I will use password protected folders so that your information is private. If you would like to tell other people about the study that is okay. It is your choice. It is important to not share things about your research peers though that they do not want shared.

The information you share will be private unless you share something though that is about serious harm to you or someone else and then I will tell someone who can support to keep you or them safe.

DO I HAVE TO SAY YES?

NO! You do not have to be in project. We hope you will have fun and enjoy being a part of the project. If you change your mind and do not want to be in the research project, then you can tell me you do not want to be in it anymore. You can still be a part of other activities that happen outside of this research project. If you decide you do not want the information you shared already be a part of the study you can let me know. Please let me know as soon as you can as If it is already published in a report or an article I will not be able to take it out.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN WITH THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY?

The results of this study may be summarised in published articles, reports, and presentations, and to support future programs. You can be involved in sharing the results too! Quotes or key findings will not include your name on them. Information may also be kept for future research after this study.

If you have questions you can send me an email at

l.h.v.wright@sms.ed.ac.uk. If you want to speak to someone else at the university who is responsible for safety in research you can contact what is called the University of Edinburgh Research Ethics point person by email at ethics-socialpolicy@ed.ac.uk. If you want to chat with your [COMMUNITY PARTNER] Facilitators you can also email XXXXXX

Look forward to learning from you and doing research together!

Cheers,

Laura Wright

PhD Researcher, University of Edinburgh

Appendix D: Consent Forms for Emerging Researchers

PLAY, PSYCHOSOCIAL WELLBEING, AND CHILD PARTICIPATION

EMERGING RESEARCHER CONSENT FORM

- ☐ I understand what the research study is about.
- ☐ I know what my part will be in the study and I know how long it will take.
- ☐ I have had the chance to ask questions about the study and have my questions answered.
- ☐ I know that the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Edinburgh has seen and approved this study.
- ☐ I know that I can say I do not want to participate at any time and stop taking part.
- ☐ I agree to having my voice recorded and pictures of my ideas and things I make being taken.
- ☐ I agree to having the ideas I shared (without my name) be a part of a research dissertation (a very long report), articles, reports, presentations, teaching material, etc.
- ☐ I agree for the information I share to be stored anonymously (without your name or personal information) for at least five years to be used in future approved writing or research.
- ☐ I agree to take part in this research project.

If you want to be a part of this research project, please print and sign your name. You can still be a part of this study if you do not want your photos of all of your ideas being taken. If you would like to agree with words on a recorder instead of by writing that is okay too. If you are under 16 years of age, I will also ask your parent/guardian for their consent.

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Your name, printed: _____

Date: _____

Your signature: _____

Your age: _____

Appendix E: Consent Forms for Parents or Guardians

PLAY AND NATURE PSYCHOSOCIAL WELLBEING RESEARCH PROJECT

PARENT OR GUARDIAN OPT IN CONSENT FORM

- ☐ I understand what the research study my child will be taking part in is about.
- ☐ I have had the chance to ask questions about the study and have had my questions answered to my satisfaction.
- ☐ I know that the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Edinburgh has seen and approved this study.
- ☐ I understand that my child's participation is voluntary and that they can ask to withdraw at any time without giving reason and without their access to programs being effected.
- ☐ I understand that my child has given permission for their voice to be recorded and pictures of my ideas and things I make being taken and I agree with their decision.
- ☐ I understand that my child has given permission to have their ideas included anonymously as part of a research dissertation (a very long report), articles, reports, presentations, teaching material, etc., and I agree with their decision.
- ☐ I agree with their information to be saved in password protected files and used in further pieces of writing for a minimum of five years.
- ☐ I agree for my child to be a part of this research project

If you agree with your child's decision to be a part of this research project, please print and sign your name. If you would like to agree with words on a recorder instead of by writing that is okay too.

Your name, printed: _____

Date: _____

Your signature: _____

Appendix F: Recruitment Poster

Join the Wilderness Emerging Researchers' Alumni Team!

Join an exciting opportunity where you will develop research skills and learn how to lead play and nature based research with Wilderness School cohorts. Research tool examples include community mapping, nature object storytelling, walking interviews, photo stories, giant jenga, and treat coding data.

You will reflect on the role of nature and play (e.g. hiking, canoeing, art, music, leisure with friends, etc) on your own wellbeing and get to explore this with younger Wilderness School participants through designing research and outdoor excursions.

WHEN? July to October

Intro to Play and Nature Research: July 21st

Planning your Expedition: August 6th & 8th (5pm to 8pm)

Wilderness School Alumni Trip: August 12th to 16th

Preparing to Lead Weekend: August 24th, 25th

Leading Nature Play Research: September 13th-15th (with Wilderness School Year 2s)

Leading Nature Play Research: October (Dates TBC)

Certificate Ceremony and Celebration: October (Dates TBC)

WHERE? [location]

WHY DO I WANT TO JOIN?

Spend MORE time with [partner organisation] and your friends in nature! Participate in FUN, engaging, nature based activities. Develop leadership and research skills for employment and academic aspirations. Receive a *Wilderness Emerging Researchers Skills Certificate* upon completion of research from the University of Edinburgh, United Kingdom (valued at \$1000). Receive a thank you outdoors gift card for your participation.

QUESTIONS?

If you have questions about the programme, contact [name] at [email address]. If you want to learn more about what the fun research will include and about ethics and consent in research contact Laura Wright, PhD Researcher and Play and Participation practitioner at l.h.v.wright@sms.ed.ac.uk

Appendix G: Peer-to-Peer Interview Questions

Play, Nature, and Wellbeing Peer to Peer Interview Questions

Interview Protocol:

What: This interview is part of a research project that is exploring the role of play in child researchers wellbeing and young researchers' meaningful engagement in their communities.

Why: My goal in speaking with you, is to better understand what the role of play in research in your wellbeing and that of your peer researchers from your perspective.

How: There are no right or wrong answers – I am interested in your expertise! Throughout this process, if you have any questions, or need to take a break at any point, please let me know.

Time: 20 to 30 minutes (practice interviews)

Age: Approx. 11 to 22

Things to Remember:

- Review ethics and informed consent
- Make sure recording device is working and turned on (after asking for consent) and have a backup recorder (e.g. one recorder and one iPhone recording)
- Welcome participant warmly into the space. Ensure the interview environment is comfortable for them
- With each question explore to get as much detail as possible, using prompts such as:
“Can you tell me more about that?”
“When you say ... XXXX, can you tell me a little bit more about what you mean?”
- And also try to get concrete examples: “Can you give me a specific example of that?”

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Getting to Know the Participant

Focus: getting to know a little bit about the individual (work, play, things that are important to them).

Possible prompts: *Please spell your name for me; perhaps you can tell me a little bit about yourself? How would you describe yourself? Where do you live?*

Interview Questions

1. What does play mean to you?
2. Thinking about wellbeing (social, emotional, physical, mental, spiritual) what does it mean to you? What are your priorities for wellbeing? What do you see for children and youth's priorities for wellbeing in Victoria?
3. What is the role of play in your wellbeing? Nature?
4. What resources (people, places, things) or policies currently support children and youth in the community to access play and nature? What gaps exist (if any)?
5. Do you feel there are diversity impacts that positively or negatively affect children and youth's play experiences? If so, can you explain more?
6. What recommendations do you have for strengthening children and youth's play and wellbeing in your community?
7. Do you have any questions for me?

Thank you so much for your time and support for the research