Play and childhoods: how are the relationships between researching play and children changing?

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Introduction

Play does not happen in a sealed vacuum, and it is practised in myriad ways across time and cultures. One way of thinking about research in the field is how shifts in culture, politics, policy and environment change how children play and how adults relate to child play. Innovations in play research have been versatile and responsive to the emergent contexts of play: from enquiry that explores the impact of gender or poverty on play to research that is constructed appropriately to conduct sensitive enquiry into play therapy. This chapter explores and problematises interdisciplinary connections between play, the new sociology of childhood and children's rights. It examines how this relationship creates questions and new opportunities concerning how children and adults engage in research together. Three examples from contemporary projects illustrate how recent developments are resulting in important changes and innovation in how research, children and play relate to each other. The first concerns a 'Day in the Life' methodology (Gillen at al., 2007; Gillen & Cameron, 2010), the second 'Child Conferencing' (Huser, 2015) and the third a children as researchers approach (Jones et al. 2018).

Research, play, the new sociology of childhood and child rights

Recent literature on research involving children has included the evaluation of a particular 'phase' of theory and related research, often described as being informed by the 'new

sociology of childhood' and by children's rights (Larkins et al., 2015). As Murray notes, children's participation in 'research in matters affecting them has become increasingly articulated. This development aligns closely with Articles 12 and 13 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989)' (Murray, 2011, 92). These articles concern state parties assuring children the 'right to express' their views 'freely in all matters affecting' them and the 'the right …to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds' (UNCRC 1989). Kellett summarises this phase as a 'paradigm shift', where children began to be seen as 'participants' with rights rather than 'objects', and that this is manifested in changed research practices, such as children having places on research steering groups or children being researchers themselves (Kellett, 2010). Kellett describes key aspects of this change:

> 'part of our responsibility in researching with and for children and young people entails developing their capacity for judgment, for communicating their views and agency for action. Good practice aspires to a partnership in which adults, children and young people generate a body of child research knowledge. Here, research with, for and by children and young people are complementarities that inform and interact with each other' (2010, 4).

This approach is often framed in the literature by terms such as power, collaboration and control. For example, Fargas-Malet et al. note that the 'new approach has meant a methodological shift' which has engaged children as collaborating with adult researchers within the 'various stages of the research process, such as formulating the research questions, planning the methodology, collecting and/or analysing data, drafting recommendations and disseminating findings' (2010, 175). They position this as mediated power and control: 'differing levels of control-sharing and of participation in the research process' between children and adults (2010, 175). Recent play-related research has begun to reflect this shift in

attention and approach, for example, by exploring what children themselves think about play. In Barnett's (2013) US study, children aged 8-11, identified as Caucasian, African American, Asian American, and Hispanic, were invited to define what play meant to them. The research reveals that the children emphasised play as being fun and active, the importance of being able to play in the way they wanted to, alone or with others, and of being and having time away from things they were obliged to do (such as school). Other studies have responded to the views of children concerning their play spaces, for example (Burke, 2005), or considered play based interview methods in work with young children (Koller & San Juan, 2015).

Researchers have begun to problematise the nature of child involvement in research and the ways in which adults and children participate and collaborate in research. Invitations to re-evaluate participation have highlighted particular issues connected to children, adults and research (Flewitt and Ang, 2020; Larkins et al., 2015; McCarry, 2012; Powell et al., 2016). These concern a need to be especially aware of the relationships between the context and any act of participation in research in order to engage reflectively, rather than to essentialise the process. Larkins at al. (2016), for example, argue that there is a 'lack of critique' in much extant literature on participatory 'rights based' research. Authors such as Buhler-Niederberger, have warned against the danger of 'children's actorship being essentialised rather than analysed and therefore affecting the quality as well as the credibility of research' (2010, 160). Einsdottir notes the particular 'complexity' and diversity of power issues within a research context with children, as 'unequal power can exist in terms of age, status, competence and experience' (2007, 204). Issues concerning gaps in the literature addressing the need to review and evaluate the process and outcomes of participation and collaboration have been identified from both adult and child perspectives. Powell at al. (2016, 197) call for 'a deeper engagement' with the ways in which children are constructed in and

through research, with greater reflexivity and professional dialogue creating ‘improved practice’ through ‘critical engagement’.

Three examples from research

This background illustrates how the interaction between play, rights and the new sociology of childhood offers new perspectives to approach the research process in relation to children’s play. These include how children are seen as participants rather than subjects, how the agendas for research emanate from children’s perspectives, and how the data and findings can be interpreted or responded to by children.

A cornerstone for research in this field is how adults and children construct their research relationships with each other. The following research examples illustrate three different ways of working with relationships between researcher and children that are informed by such changed agendas. Rather than essentialising the participation of children in research as a given ‘good’, our presentation of data and analysis responds to the concerns of Buhler-Niederberger (2010) and McCarry (2012) by examining the nature of research conducted in specific contexts, and the benefit to participating children. Our approach to each example responds to calls in the literature to address gaps in our understanding of children’s participation by offering insights into the details of the relationships between research, children and play.

Each example illuminates different facets of how researchers develop relationships with children and play:

- In the first example, the researcher creates a relationship with children who are in the complex situation of being 'temporarily displaced' (Government of Lebanon and United Nations 2019, 4) in Lebanon as a result of armed conflict in their birth countries. In this study, a 'day in the life' approach is used to generate and share data with children, with a view to empower them to share and reflect on their play.
- The second example involves a researcher working alongside two young children, developing relationships over time to enable each child to work as a co-researcher of their experiences and perceptions of play. The child-researcher interactions explore the development of a 'child conferencing' approach to meaning-making.
- The third example involves adult researchers training and mentoring young children as researchers. This extract illustrates children drawing on play as a data collection method in their research design. It shows the ways in which play can be an empowering method, how adult researchers draw on its potentials in their training of young researchers, and how the young researchers reflect on its qualities in their enquiry.

All research was undertaken in concordance with BERA's *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* (2018) and was approved by University College London Institute of Education's Ethics Committee. All children and parents or guardians gave consent to take part and for material to be published in anonymised form, using pseudonyms.

Research Example 1 'Day in the life', play and children's perspectives

This research investigated the impact of armed conflict and displacement on the play and childhoods of young Iraqi and Syrian children who were living as 'temporarily displaced' persons in Lebanon. The study, funded by the Froebel Trust, explored how armed conflict

and displacement shaped the childhoods, play opportunities, and constructions of play of young Iraq and Syrian child refugees in Lebanon, and how their opportunities for play could be improved.

The research involved conducting case studies with two Iraqi and two Syrian young refugee children (4-8 years old) and their families in their homes in Greater Beirut/ Mount Lebanon. As a way of gaining children's own perspectives on their childhood experiences and on their play, the researcher adopted a *day in the life* approach (Gillen & Cameron, 2010), to fit the study aims. This involved visiting each family on four occasions, helping to establish a trusting and comfortable relationship with both adults and children. During the visits, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with parents and semi-structured interviews using participatory methods with young children, observed children's play for a whole day (around 6 hours) using a video camera, and watched and discussed with the children and their families a 30-minute compilation video of footage taken during the day of filming. Additionally, interviews were conducted with professionals working with child refugees in Lebanon, an observation of four hours (the length of the school day) was made in a local school for refugee children, and the researcher kept a research diary throughout the period of data generation. This chapter focuses on one component of this work. The next section explores an integral part of the 'day in the life' methodology which includes sharing a selection of video clips (approximately 30 minutes in length) with participants to gain their perspectives on the recorded data. However, child participants are not always involved in this phase of participant consultation. In this study, the researcher involved parents and children in consultation as a way of broadening and deepening children's opportunities to work with the researcher to convey their meanings and perceptions.

Looking to gain the case study children's perspectives as experts in their own lives, the researcher also engaged with the participating children in a playful manner throughout the

study and devised diverse approaches to prompting their self-expression. Drawing on Pyle and Danniels' (2016) picture book idea, the researcher created information sheets for the children in the form of colouring books, substituting photographs with cartoon image outlines, explaining the study to the children in a way that interested them and was accessible to them (See El Gemayel, 2019, for more on colouring book information sheets). Following parental consent, children's consent was gained by asking them, as depicted in the colouring books, to make a 'Thumbs Up' sign if they wanted to take part in the study and a 'Thumbs Down' sign if they did not. This method of consent was well received by the children who at times played with the process, by, for example, alternating very quickly between the thumbs up and down signs to toy with the researcher.

This approach helped build a playful bond and a degree of trust between researcher and child participants. Children in turn gave the researcher access to their play worlds as depicted in the following extract from a *day in the life* of Kefa, a five years and seven months year old Iraqi boy. In August 2014, Kefa and his family were forced to flee their home in Northern Iraq's Nineveh Plains when ISIS was on the verge of invading their village. After three months of internal displacement, Kefa and his family moved to Lebanon with the intention of being resettled to a third country via the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). At the time of the study, Kefa had been in Lebanon for two and a half years, living in poverty with his family of mother, father and younger brother, in a one-bedroom apartment, while they all anxiously awaited resettlement overseas to Australia.

First Extract Kefa's Play

The parents and children agreed that the researcher could set up a camera, mounted on a tripod, in the main living area in order to film a day in Kefa's life, and the researcher encouraged Kefa and the family to go about their daily life as usual. However, rather than

being observed, Kefa preferred to stand behind the camera beside the researcher and take on the role of commentator, giving the researcher insight into aspects of his play, as illustrated in the following account which was compiled from the researcher's diary and video recordings:

> The researcher follows Kefa as he leads her upstairs to his cousins' apartment, who live on the second floor in the same building. Kefa, his 3-year-old brother, and 4- and 5-year-old cousins immediately run out onto the balcony where they start to play. Kefa joins the other children for a short while but then retakes his position behind the camera. As they both stand watching the other children play, the researcher asks:
>
> Researcher: '*What do you play here?*'
>
> Kefa: '*At night we, we come up here and play […] We bring these (blankets) and cover this (a pram lying on the balcony floor) and sleep in it'*.
>
> Kefa suddenly runs over to his cousins exclaiming: *'come on let's bring those!'* He hurries into the bedroom, and carries cushions and blankets onto the balcony for his cousins to play with. After a quick conversation with his cousins, he returns to his position behind the camera and explains to the researcher *'He is going to play sick person […] Now he is going to sleep here like he is sick'.*

Kefa's interest in manipulating and standing behind the camera decreased as the day wore on, particularly when his seven, five and four year old cousins visited him later on. Kefa brought out play blocks and started building a road with his brother and cousins, instructing them how to build the road, controlling what blocks they could use and voicing his frustration when they went against his wishes. While they played, the children mainly spoke in Chaldean, their mother tongue. Knowing that the researcher did not speak Chaldean, Kefa regularly looked up at her as she sat in the corner taking notes, voluntarily translating what they were saying into Arabic and explaining '*now we are building a very big road! […] This is for the cars to drive on […] this is my car […] now we are driving the cars'*.

Second Extract Kefa's reflections on play

On the researcher's final visit with Kefa, after re-watching the 'building of the road' play episode on video, Kefa explained that he loved cars and that his father was going to buy him a car when they moved to Australia. The following conversation ensued:

Kefa: *We left Iraq so we could come to Lebanon and then go to Australia.*

Researcher: *Why did you leave? What happened?*

Kefa: *ISIS came.*

Researcher: *Do you know who ISIS are?*

Kefa: *Do you mean what do they do?*

Researcher: *Yes, what do they do?*

Kefa: *They explode the ... they explode and kill the people.*

While adopting a day in the life approach provided the researcher with a structured process to investigate the home lives of young refugee children in Lebanon, flexibility on behalf of the researcher was pivotal when conducting this study with Kefa. The relationship between Kefa and the researcher evolved throughout the study as power relations played out between them. When filming began, Kefa felt empowered to challenge the researcher's structured approach and he sought to gain control by varying his position from the 'observed' to the 'observer'. Recognizing Kefa as an expert in his own life, the researcher strived to gain his perspectives and knowledge by facilitating his understanding of, and participation, in the study. Therefore, the researcher, who initially intended to film Kefa as he played, instead followed his lead and listened to him as he provided her with his insider knowledge and unique perspectives about

his play, his traumatic experiences of ISIS, and his concerns over challenges that hindered him from attaining his future aspirations.

Kefa balanced out power relations and exerted his agency by standing behind the camera beside the researcher, positioning himself as a co-researcher. Instead of only being filmed, Kefa chose to give the researcher insight into his own play by commenting on and directing his cousins' play of 'sick person', for example, providing them with the necessary play props, and explaining to the researcher that he usually played this game with them. Later on in the day while he built a road with his cousins, Kefa thoughtfully translated their play, yet in so doing he exercised power in choosing what information to divulge about the children's play, giving her his own perspective on what was unfolding and in so doing, exercised control in how the play was represented.. Re-watching and discussing the compilation video gave Kefa further opportunities to elaborate on certain points and turn the researcher's focus to aspects of his play that he deemed important.

Kefa had been, and continued to be, exposed to life-changing events that were beyond his control. He was forced to flee his home, was separated from his extended family, and was anxiously awaiting his resettlement to Australia. Through observations and conversations, the researcher found that although Kefa had very limited access to play resources (space for play, and toys and people to play with), play provided Kefa with an arena where he could be in control. By imagining play scenarios, transforming objects to meet his play needs when he had limited access to toys, and directing his cousins' play. Kefa had the opportunity to transport himself out of his liminal state, which was riddled with fear and insecurity, into a world where he could exercise his agency, express his perceptions and fulfil his desires through play.

Research Example 2 **Child conferencing and play**

This research examined the relationship over time between 3-5 year old children's free play cultures and practices at home and in the nursery. The study addressed the following research questions: 'What are the relationships between children's free play cultures and practices at home and in the nursery?'; 'How are these relationships perceived and responded to from multiple child and adult (parents, practitioners and researcher) perspectives?' and 'How do these relationships, perceptions and responses develop over time and impact children's free play experiences in the nursery?'

Eighteen children from two state-maintained nurseries in London were invited to take part in this qualitative research to share aspects of their free play at home and in the nursery. The researcher was introduced to the children by the lead-practitioner as a learner who attended a school for grown-ups, and who was interested in how children play at home and in the nursery. The researcher introduced the children to the study using a combination of talk and activities, where the children could try out showing and sharing their play with the researcher, before deciding to take part. The children's consent was understood as provisional, and each child was invited to take part at the beginning of each observation (Flewitt, 2005). The children were informed that they could take part in, or withdraw, from the study and ask questions, at any time. They indicated consent and dissent on paper through mark making of their choice such as drawing 'smileys' in columns labelled 'yes' and 'no'. During the research the researcher made it clear that at any time children could say that they did not want to research on a particular day, and at times children chose not to.

Six, hour-long observations of children's free play were made during playtime in the nursery, over six months, in addition to photography and child-conferences (Huser, 2015) as participatory tools that best suited the individual children's skills and preferences.

Photography, for example, meant that children could take photographs of areas they enjoyed playing in as part of their work with the researcher. Child-conferences included children's answers to a short interview consisting of structured and age-appropriate questioning at the beginning, middle and final stages of research. These questions pertained to aspects of their free play experiences at home and in the Nursery, such as their likes and dislikes concerning play resources and spaces. All child participants were asked the same questions in the same order and could respond with talk or showing. The aim was to capture consistencies and developments in answers over the six months and to gain insight into their perceptions of their experiences through a comparatively structured medium of communication. Each interview ended with an open-ended question that provided an opportunity to add any additional information. Engagement in the child-conferences was optional and children were encouraged to choose if and how they wanted to respond to the questions.

The researcher refrained from replicating patterns of adult behaviour that were typical of the nursery cultures and practices in order to communicate to the children that her role as a researcher was different from the role of other adults in the setting. The researcher responded sensitively to each child's unique engagement with the research process. This led to the development of diverse researcher-child relationships as both children and researcher practised co-reflexivity by examining each other's, as well as their own responses in an ongoing manner. As the children engaged in play during the study, they communicated as co-researchers by sharing aspects of their free play at home and in the nursery as the extracts below will reveal.

Data generated by the children were supplemented by in-depth semi-structured interviews with their parents and practitioners, which provided insight into multiple adult and child perspectives from which the temporal, contextual and relational dimensions of each child's free play journey was perceived and responded to. The following three extracts are selections

from this data and focus on the child-researcher/ researcher dynamic. They illustrate how two child participants, Clare (aged three years and five moths) and Irene (aged three years and seven months) made meaning of the researcher-child relationship, their own role in the study over time, and how their understandings shaped how they shared particular aspects of their play during the research process. Three excerpts are presented in succession, and then discussed.

First Extract 'What do you like about…?'

The researcher asked Clare the following questions about her play at home and in the nursery during their first child-conference:

Researcher: *What do like about playtime in the nursery?*

Clare: (Clare's eyes widened as she exclaimed): *Everything! All the toys. Doll's house, water station, paint, doll's house!*

Researcher: *What do you not like about playtime in the nursery?*

Clare looked around the room before answering and exclaimed when she saw the book corner.

Clare: *Reading!*

She walked up to the bookshelf.

Clare: *let's go to the book corner*. *I don't like Friday* (children read for half an hour with their parents every Friday morning in this nursery and were instructed by practitioners at playtime to select a book of their choice to take home to read over the weekend). *Because some of these books are…*(she pulled out a book called 'Kipper and the egg' from the shelf, flipped

through the pages) *this book is rubbish* (she wrinkled her nose and turned one corner of her mouth up).

Researcher: *What do you like about playtime at home?*

Clare: *Doll's house!* (Clare grinned and her eyes widened again)

Researcher: *What do you not like about playtime at home?*

Clare: *Nothing.* She shook her head and shrugged her shoulders.

Second extract ***'Do you want me to do that again? Slowly? So you can write?'***

This also occurs at the time of the first child-conference. The researcher reminded Irene about what the research was looking at, and asked Irene what she wanted to share about her play at home and in the nursery. Irene led the researcher into the nursery play kitchen.

Irene placed one Teletubby on her lap and another on the researcher.

Irene*: These are babies. Let's hold them on our laps. This one is Shayla. Your one is Cici.*

Irene speaks to Shayla.

Irene*: You're too heavy to sit on my lap. I'll take you to baby school where you'll have friends, ok?*

Irene picked up the phone.

Irene*: Calling policeman. She's been punching people. Not eating properly. Baby is being naughty. Calling Mum. Mummy, I don't think my hairband is right for school. You have to come pick it up. Ok bye alligator. See ya later alligator.*

Irene hung up the phone and turned to the researcher.

Irene*: How was that? Was that alright?*

Researcher*: Yes. That was lovely. Thank you.*

Irene looked into the researcher's notebook where observation of her play was documented.

Irene*: Do you want me to do that again? Slowly? So you can write?*

Third Extract ***Redacted***

Four months into the study, the following interaction took place while the researcher observed Irene play under the shed in the Reception playground, as it was raining.

Irene*: Let's go out shopping?*

Researcher: *I have to stay in because I can't get my notebook wet in the rain.*

Irene*: Why??*

Researcher: *Because I need to show this to my teacher.*

Irene*: Oh yeah what's his name again?*

Researcher*: Phil.*

Irene instructed the researcher not to report on the next section.

Irene*:* [redacted] What Irene said next is redacted, as per her instructions.

In the first extract, among various resources within the nursery play provision that Clare preferred, her repetition of the doll's house while discussing playtime in the nursery and playtime at home revealed her fondness for it. It also showed parallels in her play experiences between home and nursery. The recurrence of doll's house in later child-conferences (not included in this chapter) showed its consistent presence in Clare's play journey over time. In addition to her overt verbal expression, Clare's dislike for activities related to reading at playtime was also visible in her facial expressions as she flipped through the book. Clare's act of looking around the room and stopping to mention reading as she saw the book corner shows the impact of context on her engagement in the research process. Clare showed agency, for example, in the way she used space within the researcher-child relationship, as she led the researcher to the book corner and spatially relocated the research activity.

In the second extract, Irene showed agency in relationship to space and resources as she led the researcher into the play kitchen. Using open-ended resources within the nursery provision, Irene developed a selected demonstration that included themes of mum, babies, hairband, policeman, being reprimanded for bad behaviour, taking care of babies. These all related to her play experiences at home and in the nursery in response to the child-conference questions. These themes recurred in Irene's talk and play, and were mentioned by practitioners and her mother over time. In extract two Irene picked up and hung up the phone to move in and out of the pretend situation and reality, as she overtly attempted to co-reflect with the researcher on how they conducted the research; and ensured that the play that she displayed matched the research agenda and was documented. This showed her awareness of sharing her experiences of play with the researcher. In extract three, as Irene discussed the

researcher's teacher, she showed awareness of what happened to the observation notes documented on her play. As she instructed the researcher to omit parts of their interactions from the notes, Irene exercised agency in the researcher-child relationship by determining who was able to access information relating to her play.

In extract one, by following Clare's suggestion to relocate the child-conference to the book corner, the researcher communicated to Clare her intention to share control over the research process. In extract two, the researcher's agenda to learn about Irene's free play at home and in the nursery served as a focus for the child-conference. However, the researcher deliberately did not give explicit instructions to Irene on how to interact with the provision in the nursery: the aim was to share control over the research agenda with Irene by enabling her to decide what aspects of her play she chose to share and how she wished to communicate them. The events that unfolded were a consequence of child-conference interactions that took place moments earlier when Irene was asked questions relating to her play at home and in the nursery. The researcher intended Irene's choices and actions to be rooted in her interpretation of the purpose of the research; and Irene's resultant intentions for it. This process of interpretation involved co-reflexivity between Irene and the researcher, as the researcher carefully considered how she embodied and communicated her intended researcher role; and Irene responded through reflexivity by thinking about the implications of her choices. Based on these interpretations, Irene communicated aspects of her play repertoires at home and in the nursery that she considered to be of value for the research. Similarly in extract three, by answering Irene's questions and following her instructions to omit part of their interaction from her observation notes, the researcher shared control over the research agenda with Irene.

Research Example 3 Training Children as Researchers and Play

This final research example illustrates the potentials for play as a research language, in a study where an adult research team trained primary age children to design and conduct small-scale research. The examples illustrate how the researchers developed a relationship of trainers and mentors to the child researchers and how play language and process was key to this.

This project, funded by the LankellyChase Foundation, aimed to develop ways of working that maximised the potential of participatory research to enable children and young people experiencing severe and multiple disadvantage to represent their experiences and views. *UCL Institute of Education (UCL IOE)* and the *Digital Arts Research in Education Collaborative* (*DARE*) which is part of the *UCL Knowledge Lab* joined together with voluntary sector local organisations to develop the project. The research was conducted in four sites in different parts of England, and included children aged 7 to 18 years (Flewitt et al., 2018; Jones et al. 2018). Each site offered the opportunity for children to become involved as researchers and offered sample workshops and information sessions, with age-appropriate information sheets and consent forms to enable children to make an informed decision about taking part. The research questions included 'What are effective ways to *develop and sustain relationships* with young, hard to reach individuals, and establish effective ways to initiate and sustain participatory research for them to document and report on their own lives?' and 'How can participants be involved as active and empowered agents in every stage of the process?' The project involved training the children in research techniques, and supporting them to develop questions they wanted to explore with their peers and then mentoring them in designing, recruiting, conducting, analysing and presenting the results of their enquiry. The project was supported by a reference group of children who advised on the project's design and development (Jones et al., 2018). One of the areas of

advice from the group concerned the activities and methods used within the project. The advice of the reference group was to ‘make the process enjoyable’ and ‘fun’, to use ‘play’, to create ‘characters to make confidentiality easier’ and to use ‘age appropriate languages’. In designing the workshops to train the young researchers, the team created a variety of research activities that were playful or based in play processes. These included games, imaginative play and creating stories and characters.

Workshops with the child researchers then supported them in their choices in designing research for them to conduct with their peers. The adult researchers worked with the young researchers to create a mind map of options of areas to focus on as a subject for their research and then, similarly, offered a menu of diverse conventional (such as questionnaires) and participatory data collection methods (such as creating images or using role play) the child researchers might consider, with space for adopting the menu or developing their own ideas about new research methods. The following data is from one of the four sites, where we trained child researchers aged 7-11 years in collaboration with *MD Productions*, a voluntary sector organisation that works with the arts in disadvantaged inner city areas. The young researchers decided as the focus to explore participants’ experiences of the streets they live in. The young researchers then developed a research project, researching with a peer group of eight children of the same age who were already involved in MD Productions arts workshops in the same city. The adults facilitated design workshops to support the children in planning their research with their peers and mentored them as they implemented their project. During these workshops, the young researchers developed data collection methods, building on those explored during the training phase of the work.

One activity they designed and used involved participants splitting into subgroups, with each group drawing round one of their peers on a large piece of paper in order to create the shape of a generalised character of a child living in their part of the city. The child participants within the project created one male (named 'Wilfie' by the group) and one female (named 'Majesty' by the group). Participants then added words or images to their character's outline, depicting some of the issues they thought the imaginary child might face. They then were invited by the young researchers to act out how the character might be interviewed about their life and experiences in an imaginary TV show, with a child participant playing the role of a TV interviewer and other child participants taking it in turns to play the role of the character that had been created. The following is a sample of the data generated when child participants used the method.

First Extract ***Interview with 'Wilfie'***

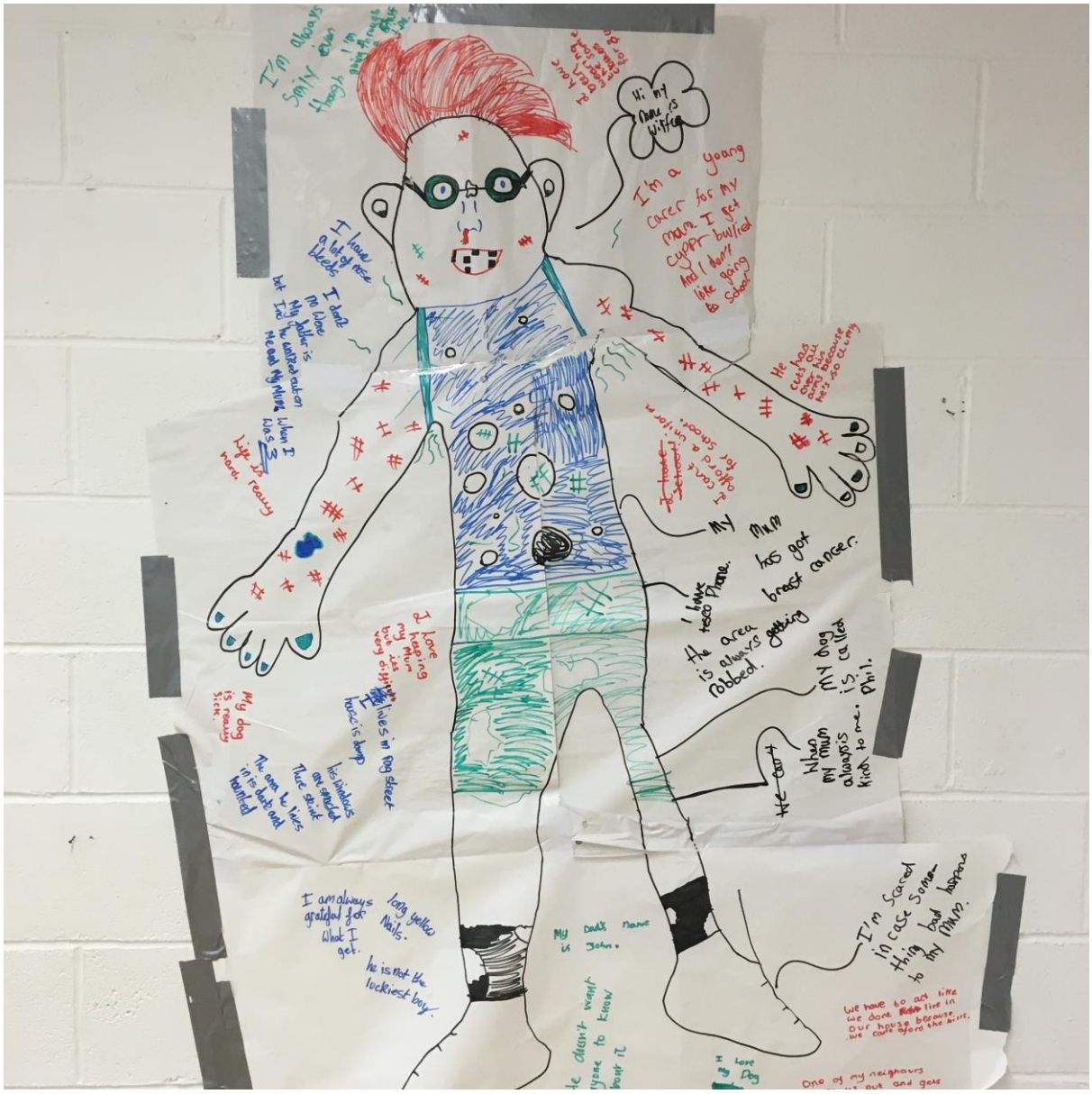

Figure 1 ‘Wilfie’ created by a group of five child participants

Child Interviewer: Hello, and welcome back to the Ellen show. I’m with a young boy called Wilfie.

Child in role as Wilfie: Hi!

Interviewer: So, Wilfie. What is it like where you live?

Wilfie: It’s very sad and, like, lonely. No one really plays out. And, like, you know, they all bully me cause, like, you know, how I look.

Interviewer: How do you feel about the area where you live?

Wilfie: I feel like that no one really cares about it and that no one really knows about the area so we can't get any help.

Interviewer: Is your area clean?

Wilfie: Kind of and kind of not. It's because, like, not that many people go in our street so there's not that much, like, litter on the floor. But there are bins everywhere what are like overflowing. We've got loads of bins there, but people just throw it on the floor and think, 'well, it's not my business'.

The young researchers collated their results and represented their findings to their peers and also to Liverpool counsellors making the case for further involvement of children's views on areas such as safety, the streets and play in their city.

Second Extract ***Feedback***

Feedback from child participants in the research was obtained by a short anonymised questionnaire, designed by the young researchers. This included questions such as 'What did you enjoy?' 'What did you not enjoy?' The participants said that there was nothing that they did not enjoy. The following is a sample of the data about enjoyment, which confirmed the accuracy of the reference group's perceptions and advice on the use of play based activities.

- We had fun activities
- We got to enjoy it whilst discussing serious things
- It wasn't completely serious but we had fun
- It wasn't completely serious and we all got to share our ideas

Figure 1: Feedback on the research workshops from child participants

This anonymised feedback from the participants (Figure 1) was shared with the young researchers and with the child reference group to enable them to be given evaluative information on what it was like for the children to participate in the activities they had facilitated or helped design.

The project included a review meeting involving the young researchers reflecting on their experiences of the research, part of the session involved a discussion of the data collection methods they had used. The following extract of child researcher reflections offers perceptions on the value of playful, participatory methods:

- The art and games and stuff they weren't boring
- It wasn't boring
- The activities kept people interested
- It's not just charts and words
- The games and drawings helped people do things that just talking wouldn't
- It kept them moving, it gave us things to make and start things off
- They said after how much it had been good, doing things like that
- They could talk about things but not saying it's me
- It was imagination, too, not just blah blah

Figure 2: Feedback from the young researchers on the methods they developed and used

These evaluative comments of the participant and of the child-researcher perceptions of the research and their responses to it (Figures 1 and 2) illustrate their perceptions of play-based participatory methods, such as children creating imaginary characters, stories and 'age appropriate' forms of expression to engage with complex themes, whilst experiencing enjoyment and having 'fun'. The adult researchers created a relationship with children where the research training and mentoring offered empowered the children to design and implement their own research, drawing on play languages and processes to enable their peers to express and communicate their experiences and views. The research did not approach participation and play as an essentialised good – but attempted to facilitate feedback by child participants and by the young researchers on their experiences of the participatory methods used.

CONCLUSIONS: Reflections on play, children and researchers

This chapter has illustrated new perspectives and opportunities for practice in approaching research in relation to children and play. The analysis addressed the tendency in research, identified in our review of literature, to position children's participation as a 'given good', rather than analysing the specific context and act of participation in research in order to engage reflectively, rather than to essentialise the process, The extracts and data illustrate the innovations created in each example, made possible by dialogue between the design and implementation of research with children and theories concerning power, collaboration and control, also identified in our review of literature. These include how play enables children and researchers to form relationships where children are valued as participants rather than subjects, how ways of working with research are created that foreground and empower children's perspectives and voice, and how the relationship between data can be interpreted or responded to by children, rather than by adult researchers alone. The following

summarises the nature of these innovative insights offered within the analysis of each extract from our research.

The first example illustrates how researchers and young children who have experienced armed conflict and forced displacement can work together to reveal children's invaluable insight into play and the unique knowledge and understanding of their own lives and childhood experiences. The research process and trusting child-researcher relationship offered Kefa age-appropriate methods to share his experiences, with the adult researcher adopting a flexible approach to data collection and actively listening to and following the child's lead. This example illustrates how, within the specific approach taken, Kefa was not the object of adult attention and interpretation: the analysis revealed how a child can work with the power relationships between participant and researcher differently. The combination of filming a *day in the life* of Kefa alongside the opportunity for Kefa to comment on the data, both during and after filming, enabled his voice to feature in shared meaning making and empowered him to work alongside the researcher to communicate and express his ideas (Kellett, 2010). We argue that this approach can empower children who have lost control over many aspects of their lives to regain some control and exercise their agency by choosing to bring to light aspects of their childhood and play that they consider important, but which would otherwise remain silent and invisible to the researcher.

The second example illustrates particular aspects of the relationships between play, research, power and control as children and the adult work together, with Claire and Irene choosing what to share with the researcher about their play experiences. This develops particular insights into how very young children can be facilitated though adaptation of child conferencing (Huser, 2015) to engage with Mallet et al.'s concept of 'differing levels of control-sharing and of participation in the research process' between children and adults

(2010, 175). For example, Irene shares the research process by working alongside the adult researcher, with both negotiating and sharing power and control over the research agenda. The extracts illustrate the complex role of the researcher - as an adult who differed from both practitioners and children in terms of power; and how her intentions to share control over the research agenda were communicated to Irene by practising co-reflexivity. Co-reflexivity between the researcher and the children involved the researcher carefully considering how she embodied and communicated her intended researcher role and how children responded reflexively by thinking about the implications of their choices. This extract also shows how children were involved in the decision-making process regarding particular aspects of their research engagements. In Irene's case, these included the selection of aspects of her play that she considered to be of importance to the research; and decisions regarding what aspects of her play were to be recorded as research data and made accessible to people beyond the nursery who were involved in the research. We argue that experiencing the process of collaborative enquiry and the development of the researcher-child relationship over time can enable young children such as Irene to engage as co-researchers of their experiences of play and to make decisions about what they value and want to share.

The third example portrays how play as a process enabled the young researchers to design and conduct their own research. The research illustrates how young researchers developed methods using play and were facilitated to reflect and give feedback on their perceptions of the ways of working they developed. The data also shows how the children were empowered by adults through training and mentoring, illuminating Kellett's concepts of changes in research where children develop 'their capacity for judgment, for communicating their views and agency for action' (2010, 4). The extract shows, for example, how the adult researchers adopted the role of research trainer and mentor to facilitate the children's choice of research topic, design, conduct and analysis of their own research. In this instance, play is integral to research as a

conduit for children to draw on in designing their enquiry. Play enables the adult researcher to show the child researchers methods they feel they can inhabit and value. The data extracts and discussion show how the children are aware of the potency of play as a method. The reflective feedback from the participants and young researchers on the research process are testimony to their perceptions of the potency of play as a method and respond to calls for the need to gain insight through specific reflection on the nature and benefit for the children and the research's specific context and use of play, rather than essentialising the participation of children in the research as a given 'good'. As the feedback extracts show (Figures 1 and 2), the children considered that play offers them particular values: to communicate their awareness of their own lives, to conduct research in innovative ways and to explore and communicate their experiences.

Our presentation of data and analysis has responded to the concerns of researchers such as Buhler-Niederberger (2010) and McCarry (2012) by addressing gaps in our understanding of children's participation in research by offering insights into the detail of our practices and the relationships between research, children and play. Each example has examined the nuanced ways relationships between play, adult researchers and children can be formed. The analysis has illustrated how the researchers and children in each context are exploring the 'paradigm shift' identified by Kellett (2010). The chapter has shown, for example, how the right for children to express their views becomes realised in different configurations of the researcher-child relationship; and how play can feature in such innovative explorations of the creation of 'partnerships' that facilitate children 'communicating their views' and developing their 'capacity for judgment' and 'agency' (Kellett, 2010, 4).

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