Realizing Article 31 through General Comment No. 17:
Overcoming Challenges and the Quest for an Optimum Play Environment

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Global and Local Frames of Reference in Children's Play

Although we should recognize that play thrives in adulthood (Dobson & McKendrick, 2018) and there are moments and situations when children are deprived of play (Brown & Webb, 2005; Hughes, 2013), it is widely understood that children's lives are infused with play and that play is of central importance in our understanding of childhood (Lester & Russell, 2010). Such everyday understandings have been bolstered in recent years with the articulation of global statements on children's right to play, most notably in article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC; UNICEF, 1989), the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's General Comment No. 17 on article 31 of the UNCRC (2013), and the International Play Association's declarations on the child's right to play (1977) and the importance of play (2014). Global frames of reference for children's play are also evident through the work of organizations such as the International Play Association: Promoting the Child's Right to Play[1], Child in the City[2] and Right to Play International[3], and the impetus to global scholarship afforded by learned publications such as *Children, Youth and Environments*[4], the *International Journal of Play*[5] and the *International Journal of Play Therapy*[6].

Supporting this global endeavor are many organizations and institutions serving world regions (e.g., European Play Work Association[7]; Playright Children's Play Association, Hong Kong[8]), nations (e.g., American Journal of Play[9], Play Africa[10], Play Australia[11]) and localities (e.g., Beyond Association in Lebanon[12]; Play Highland[13] in Scotland). Through their work, they might be considered to be pursuing what Roland Robertson (1995) understood as *glocalization,* the fusion of universalizing and particularizing tendencies in the continual creation of new realities grounded in place. The local adaption of the global principles that have been developed to assert the child's right to play is explored in this collection of papers; specifically, in relation to overcoming challenges to attain what might be considered an optimum play environment.

General Comment No. 17
The play sector welcomed the UNCRC and article 31 has been widely cited and used to promote play in children's lives (Davey & Lundy, 2010). However, fresh impetus to strengthen the play imperative in children's lives has since emerged with growing concerns that children's right to play is not being realized by government, there is a lack of access to safe and engaging play environments, and there are what might be understood as threats to the volume and nature of play (such as urbanization, commercialization of play provision, persistence of child labor, growth of crisis situations, and increasing pre-occupation with educational outcomes) (IPA, 2013).

In response, the Committee on the Rights of the Child produced *General Comment No. 17 (2013) on the Right of the Child to Rest, Leisure, Play, Recreational Activities, Cultural Life and the Arts (art. 31)* to (i) enhance understanding of the importance of article 31; (ii) promote respect for the rights articulated under article 31; and (iii) outline the obligations of agents (including governments) under the UNCRC.

General Comment No. 17 comprises six substantive sections (following an Introduction and specification of Objectives and preceding comment on Dissemination), which include: articulating the significance of article 31 in children's lives, outlining the legal basis of article 31, situating article 31 in the broader context of the UNCRC, identifying groups requiring particular attention, and outlining State parties' obligations. Our collection of papers for *Children, Youth and Environments* is primarily concerned with section six of General Comment No. 17, i.e., creating the context for the realization of article 31, which in turn addresses the factors for an optimum environment and challenges to be addressed in the realization of article 31.

It is recognized that children will seek play whether the environment is favorable or not. However, the Committee on the Rights of the Child also considers that their right to play will not be realized to the optimum extent until certain conditions are met. Thirteen such conditions are identified in General Comment No. 17[14], covering social context (e.g., freedom from social exclusion), environmental conditions, time and space to access play, opportunities to partake of specified play experiences (e.g., play in natural environments), and wider societal recognition of the value of play. Many of these conditions are premised on an understanding that, while

supported by adults, children should be afforded opportunities for play which is initiated, controlled and structured by children themselves.

The Committee also identifies 11 challenges that must be overcome if the optimum play environment is to be attained[15]. Although the threats posed may not be universal—for example, concerns over the marketing and commercialization of play are more pressing in advanced economies—collectively, these challenges constitute the main global threats to play.

Introduction to This Collection: Four Themes and a Vision Statement
The 20th IPA Triennial World Conference held in Calgary (Canada) in 2017[16] was attended by more than 700 delegates representing close to 50 countries and more than 400 presentations were delivered across four days. Following the conference, it became apparent that there was a need to revisit the existing body of knowledge on play in the physical environment—across a wide range of geographic and socio-cultural contexts—to advance contemporary understanding of the key issues that were constraining children's opportunities to play. Drawing inspiration from section six of General Comment No. 17, this special issue of *Children, Youth and Environments* addresses four themes, two of which are core to General Comment No. 17 and two of which are interwoven through it. We selected the papers in this collection from presentations delivered by play researchers, advocates, designers, educators, and practitioners at the IPA World Conference.

Blueprints for Progress
There is a rich tradition of research and practice that seeks to specify the necessary conditions for play that are part of a child-friendly environment. This has led to the creation of plans of what constitutes a child-friendly neighborhood (Cunningham & Jones, 1994), taxonomies of the extent to which neighborhoods make a positive difference to children's lives (McKendrick, 2014), and international child-friendly places movements (Malone, 2006). Here, we consider four ways in which "optimum environments" can be created to support play for diverse child and youth populations.

Although the UNCRC (UNICEF, 1989) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD; 2006) provide the imperative for play (and inclusion in play is reinforced in the UNCRPD), policy can fulfill a key role in shaping how these aspirations are to be realized. Lynch, Moore and Prellwitz, in "From Policy to Play Provision: Universal Design and the Challenges of Inclusive Play" provide an overview of national play policies in Europe, finding more absence of policy than presence, despite widespread European ratification of the UNCRC (and its article 31 commitments). With a view to informing the development of inclusive play policies, these authors also demonstrate how each of the seven principles of universal design relate to play principles.

The challenge of providing more inclusive playgrounds is also considered in the field report authored by Yuen. In "Championing and Implementing the First Inclusive Play Space in Hong Kong," he describes how an initial concern for raising public awareness on inclusive play developed over four years and several stages to

culminate in a design guide, redevelopment of a public playground, and public acknowledgement that local playgrounds in Hong Kong fared less favorably than those in the wider region. These outcomes were achieved through the efforts of Playright[17], a non-profit organization that exists to promote children's right to play in Hong Kong, engaging a wide range of stakeholders and interest groups.

The driving force behind designing better play space is not always a professional interest group. In "The Community-Based Revitalization of the Ridgecrest Accessible Neighborhood Playground in Greater Sudbury, Canada," Yantzi, Landry-Altmann, and Camirand-Peterson describe the work of one neighborhood association to redevelop a community play space in support of inclusive play. As Yuen shows for Playright in Hong Kong, Ridgecrest's is a long-term commitment, in this instance spanning ten years and four phases. Blueprints do not always result from executing well-formed plans. Here, Yantzi and colleagues show how serendipity molded a desire to revitalize an impoverished neighborhood resource in a manner that was grounded in inclusive design; the availability of federal funds allowed these visions to be developed into realities.

Equally, blueprints for play are not only about creating designated *play* spaces; as Shimamura shows in "Street Play in the Revitalization of Low-Birthrate Communities: Playborhood Street Tokyo," progress can also involve changing spaces to facilitate play. Inspired by work in the U.S., they are supporting a range of local neighborhoods to provide time-limited opportunities to transform urban streets into play spaces. The ambitions of the Playborhood project extend beyond play. Play is used as a vehicle to promote intergenerational interaction, recovering the lost connections between generations through play.

The final paper in this theme is Almon and Keeler's field report on "The Rise of Adventure Play Provision in North America." Here, the recent growth of adventure play in Canada and the U.S. is charted. Acknowledging the inspiration from Europe and the support of the North American Adventure Play Association[18], the article shows how a wide range of grassroots developments are—in their different forms and different ways—promoting adventure play. The tenor is upbeat, sensing a shift toward more favorable attitudes toward play in general, and risky play in particular.

The section concludes with a review of Arup's *Cities Alive: Designing for Urban Childhoods.* Adrian Voce, director of Playful Planet and president of the European Network for Child Friendly Cities, welcomes what he describes as a short guide for supporting children's play in urban settings and notes its success as measured in terms of free downloads. On the other hand, he is concerned that there is a suggestion that improved well-being and safeguarding of rights can simply be attained through good urban design. He stresses that the role of central government should not be ignored.

Blending Nature in the Everyday
Lack of access to nature is one of the challenges specified in General Comment No. 17, with an increasingly urbanized and privatized world identified as restricting children's access to natural areas and the wide-ranging benefits these afford (also

see Louv, 2008). Access to nature is also specified as one of the necessary conditions to attain an "optimum environment for play."

Profice and Tiriba introduce the reader to the ways in which play in nature is an integral part of everyday schooling and everyday life for some indigenous children in northeast Brazil in "Living and Playing in Nature: Daily Experiences of Tupinambá Children." Drawing on multi-method research with 91 children across 10 indigenous schools, they explore the ways in which biophilia, attachment to place, and affordances are evident in local children's everyday engagement with nature and play. As part of an education in which outdoor play is integrated into the school day, the report shows how children have a strong attachment to their natural environment and routinely incorporate nature in their outdoor play.

Schlembach, Kochanowski, Brown and Carr explore how outdoor play is incorporated in early educators' daily routines on a natural playscape in the setting of a North American university campus in "Early Educators' Perceptions of Play and Inquiry on a Nature Playscape." Although the end result is equivalent to that outlined by Profice and Tiriba, Schlembach et al.'s study is on a bespoke environment that was created to facilitate play with nature, and their focus is on the perspectives of early educators working with pre-school children. Based on a cross-seasonal study and drawing largely on their work with 13 early educators, they report highly positive perceptions and recollections of the impact on children of regularly accessing this natural play space in terms of skill development and behavior.

How to Grow a Playspace: Development and Design by Masiulanis and Cummins, reviewed by Helen Woolley (University of Sheffield), asks what makes a great play space and explores the many dimensions of designing them. Woolley points out that the publication also provides challenges to the concept of what a play space is and whether they are needed at all in some contexts—issues pertinent to the discussions in this collection.

The toolkit produced by the International Play Association, *Under the Same Sky: Children's Rights and the Environment,* provides some practical guidance and project examples in which children have been supported to articulate their views and concerns about their local environment. Michelle Templeton (Centre for Children's Rights, Queens University, Belfast) welcomes the resource and opines that it has considerable potential to be applied globally in a wide range of contexts. If fault with this resource is to be found, it perhaps rests beyond the publication; she poses the question of whether children's concerns will in fact be acted upon by adults and key decision-makers in their community.

Extending the Reach of Play
By implication, creating the conditions necessary for an "optimum environment for play" and addressing the challenges that restrict children's play would result in more expansive opportunities for play. Extending the reach of play is explored through four very different case studies, highlighting that the conditions that need

to be addressed, and the populations who might benefit, vary markedly across place.

Teenagers are a group that is often understood to be disinterested in play or is discouraged from playful behaviors in preference for education and more "purposeful" leisure. However, as Owens demonstrates in "'We just want to play': Adolescents Speak about Their Access to Public Parks," teenagers in a case study neighborhood in West Sacramento, California lament the lack of opportunities and the disabling environment that curtails their play in public space. Owens describes a participatory action research project that afforded these young people the opportunity to share their aspirations for play with others in their community.

Terada, Ermilova, and Kinoshita share the experiences of developing opportunities for adventurous play in "Why Do We Need Adventure Playgrounds in Rural Areas? The Revitalization Project of Ishikawa, Fukushima, Japan." In the context of rural depopulation in Japan, they explain how opportunities for play have diminished for children. The nature and scale of changes in rural children's play is evidenced through a three-generational survey. They then developed an action research project, supported by regeneration funds, bringing together adults and children to better understand the needs for adventurous play and to design a play environment adjacent to a school, which meets their needs.

In "Children's Coping, Adaptation and Resilience through Play in Situations of Crisis," Chatterjee explains how the International Play Association's *Access to Play in Situations of Crisis* project sought to increase knowledge and understanding of children's play needs and how practical applications can realize the right to play. Chatterjee presents findings in a paper that draws from the experience of over 500 children in 13 unique sites, with examples discussed from Japan and Nepal (post-earthquake) and India and Thailand (everyday hazards). Observations, interviews and other child-friendly participative methods are used to uncover the adaptive capacity of children to eke out play amidst crisis conditions and to explore the value of such play as a coping mechanism and as a means to build resilience.

Our final examples of extending the reach of play are also drawn from the International Play Association's *Access to Play in Crisis* project, i.e. Wirunrapan, Boranmool, Chaiarkhom and Kathawong's field report on "The Right to Play of Children Living in Migrant Workers' Communities in Thailand" and Mary Ann Rintoul's review of the toolkit associated with the project. The root of the vulnerabilities experienced by these migrant worker families rests with their precarious political and economic status. Noting that play is not among the priorities of their parents or employers, Wirunrapan and colleagues explore play among 97 children from three very different migrant communities in Thailand, focusing on the coping mechanisms the children deploy to access play. Although the children are adept at accessing play despite unfavorable conditions, it is concluded that there is a need for adults to support children's everyday play. Reviewing *Play: Rights and Practice. A Tool Kit for Staff, Managers and Policy Makers,* Rintoul (University of Alberta) notes playwork's valuable role in interventions for children

experiencing the effects of crisis and the powerful healing factor gained by children through playing together.

Technology Is (Not) the Enemy
General Comment No. 17 not only acknowledges the various ways that electronic media presents in children's lives but describes these media as a central dimension. Although recognizing the "huge educational, social and cultural benefits" that accrue, concern is also expressed over the imbalance of time spent engaging electronic media (as opposed to outdoor play, for example) and the particular risks and harms that these present. Many contributors to this collection also premise their work on the need to check the drift toward excess use of electronic media. On the other hand, the collection inadvertently identifies some positive benefits of technology for children's play.

Technology is to the fore in "State of Play: Methodologies for Investigating Children's Outdoor Play and Independent Mobility" by Han, Mâsse, Wilson, Janssen, Schuurman, and Brussoni. Grounded in ecological systems theory and a construction of gender framework, the authors task themselves with defining the playability of three neighborhood outdoor environments in the Vancouver region, and exploring the determinants of outdoor play and independent mobility for 105 children in middle childhood. The deploy a multi-method design of interlinked activities, at the heart of which are technology-based data collection tools, such as GPS loggers and accelerometers.

Cox, Loebach and Little in "Understanding the Nature Play Milieu: Using Behavior Mapping to Investigate Children's Activities in Outdoor Play Spaces" present an introduction to the potential and use of behavior mapping to understand the environmental influences on children's outdoor play behavior and to explore the reciprocity between the environment and behavior. Having introduced the tenets of behavior mapping—including the role of GIS—they go on to describe a case study application in an outdoor natural play area adjacent to a museum in Santa Barbara, California, based on observations of children and observations of adults over a one-week period.

In conclusion, we return to General Comment No. 17 to consider the significance of what we have learned about meeting the challenges that have been identified in order to achieve optimum play environments.

Endnotes
1. Visit: http://ipaworld.org/
2. Visit: https://www.childinthecity.org/
3. Visit: http://www.righttoplay.com/
4. Visit: http://cyenetwork.org/journal/
5. Visit: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rijp20
6. Visit: http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/pla/
7. Visit: http://www.go-epa.org/en/node/30
8. Visit: http://www.playright.org.hk/
9. Visit: http://www.journalofplay.org/

10. Visit: https://playafrica.org.za/
11. Visit: https://www.playaustralia.org.au/
12. Visit: https://www.facebook.com/beyondassociation/
13. Visit: https://playhighland.co.uk/
14. According to paragraph 32 of UN General Comment No. 17, the conditions necessary for an optimum environment for children's play are: (i) Freedom from stress; (ii) Freedom from social exclusion, prejudice or discrimination; (iii) An environment secure from social harm or violence; (iv) An environment sufficiently free from waste, pollution, traffic and other physical hazards to allow them to circulate freely and safely within their local neighborhood; (v) Availability of rest appropriate to their age and development; (vi) Availability of leisure time, free from other demands; (vii) Accessible space and time for play, free from adult control and management; (viii) Space and opportunities to play outdoors unaccompanied in a diverse and challenging physical environment, with easy access to supportive adults, when necessary; (ix) Opportunities to experience, interact with and play in natural environments and the animal world; (x) Opportunities to invest in their own space and time so as to create and transform their world, using their imagination and languages; (xi) Opportunities to explore and understand the cultural and artistic heritage of their community, participate in, create and shape it; (xii) Opportunities to participate with other children in games, sports and other recreational activities, supported, where necessary, by trained facilitators or coaches; and (xiii) Recognition by parents, teachers and society as a whole of the value and legitimacy of the rights provided for in article 31.
15. As articulated in paragraphs 33 through 47 of UN General Comment No. 17, 11 challenges are summarized, i.e. (i) Lack of recognition of the importance of play and recreation; (ii) Unsafe and hazardous environments; (iii) Resistance to children's use of public spaces; (iv) Balancing risk and safety; (v) Lack of access to nature; (vi) Pressure for educational achievement; (vii) Overly structured and programmed schedules; (viii) Neglect of article 31 in development programs; (ix) Lack of investment in cultural and artistic opportunities for children; (x) Growing role of electronic media; and (xi) Marketing and commercialization of play.
16. Visit: http://canada2017.ipaworld.org/
17. Visit: http://www.playright.org.hk/en/
18. Visit: https://www.facebook.com/groups/americanadventureplaygrounds/about/

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the Entrepreneurial City" for the Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation. *He has edited two collections of papers examining the impact of Austerity on playwork (*Journal of Playwork Practice*, 2014) and playspace provision (*International Journal of Play*, 2015) and an earlier collection of papers on "Children's Playgrounds in the Built Environment," a 1999 special edition of Built Environment. More importantly, he is dad to Lauren (29), Corrie (24) and Morven (9) and granddad to Finn (2).*

Dr. Janet Loebach*, Ph.D., P.Eng, is an environmental design researcher and consultant based in Ontario, Canada, and the Principal Consultant for Thrive Design Consulting. She is also a Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Center for Addiction and Mental Health Institute for Mental Health Policy research. Her research and practice focus on children's perception and use of their everyday environments, including home, school and neighborhood, and the socio-environmental factors that influence children's behavior and well-being. Her areas of expertise include assessment and design of natural and built play and learning environments for children, as well as residential, healthcare and care facilities. She also has extensive experience with participatory, child-led and community-based planning processes. Dr. Loebach currently serves as Vice President of the Board of Directors of the International Play Association (Canada) and as co-chair of the Children & Youth Environments Network of the Environmental Design Research Association (EDRA).*

Theresa Casey *served as President of the International Play Association: Promoting the Child's Right to Play (IPA) from 2008-2017. With the IPA Board and Council, she coordinated the initiatives leading to the publication of General Comment No. 17 on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts (article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child). In her final term as president (2014-17), Theresa led IPA's thematic work on Access to Play in Crisis, and Children's Rights and the Environment linking to the UNCRC Day of Discussion 2016. In 2013, she drafted the Scottish Government's* Play Strategy Action Plan *and took up the role of vice-chair of the implementation group. She has an honors degree in painting and a post-graduate certificate in playwork. Her playwork practice began in an adventure playground in Scotland and led to play development in Thailand where she worked for three years. Theresa is a freelance consultant and writer on play, inclusion and children's rights and frequent presenter at conferences in Scotland and internationally. Her recent publications include* Free to Play: a guide to creating accessible and inclusive public play spaces *(Inspiring Scotland, 2018);* Play Types: bringing more play into the school day *(Play Scotland, 2017),* Inclusive Play Space Guide: championing better and more inclusive play spaces in Hong Kong *(PlayRight Child's Play Association & UNICEF, 2016);* Loose Parts Play *(2016, Inspiring Scotland).*

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