

## **Realizing and Imagining Schools as Sites of Community Care: Lessons from Children Playing During a Pandemic**

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### **Abstract**

This paper is the result of an action research project that aimed to understand how to support family play experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through grounded theory interviews and analysis, underpinned by an ethics of care, schools were revealed as important providers of community care for children through their offerings as spaces where children create friendships, move, learn, engage in the arts, feel a sense of belonging, contribute, and play. This paper takes a strength-based approach to learn from children and families playing during the pandemic to explore the many ways schools provide care to children. It also offers imaginings of schools in partnership in care-offering alongside community-based organizations.

*Keywords:* COVID-19, play, community care, aesthetics of play, schools, children and public space



## Realizing and Imagining Schools as Sites of Community Care: Lessons from Children Playing During a Pandemic

In the summer of 2020, I undertook an action research project that explored how the COVID-19 pandemic affected play and how community organizations and professionals working with and for children might support play for families at home. At the time, I was a graduate student working from home as a primary school teacher and community-based organization executive director while parenting two young children (ages 1 and 3) who were home from childcare. My position and relationships in the university, public school system, and early childhood community led the executive director of another organization to approach me to undertake this project.

In this paper, I specifically outline the implications of findings and action components of this research for schools. Since before the COVID-19 pandemic, scholars have been exploring what is often considered a decline of play (e.g. Brown, 2014; Karsten, 2005; Lewis, 2017; Valentine & McKendrick, 1997). The study being reported on was conducted with the following questions in mind:

- How do families perceive that the COVID-19 pandemic has shaped play?
- How can community-based organizations, including schools, support play at home during a pandemic and otherwise?

In an effort to move past identifying barriers and towards identifying and implementing actionable items that restore and protect play's presence in the lives of Canadian children (Oberle et al., 2021), the focus of this paper is on what families playing during the pandemic can teach schools about their role in community care. Ethics of care, as described by Noddings (1986), has been utilized as a conceptual framework for understanding how to care for the welfare of families and children living during a pandemic, and play is positioned as a component of community care.

Links have been made between play and care in academic literature. For example, Graber et al. (2020) write: "There is good reason to take changes to children's play seriously ... For children living within these severe safety restrictions [of the COVID-19 pandemic], play may be one of the most essential ways to attend to their health, development, and learning" (p. 144). Casey and McKendrick (2023) noticed that play, often framed as *in crisis*, was a *remedy to crisis* during the COVID-19 pandemic, offering means of comfort and compassion to many. Aitken (2019) and Kallio and Hakli (2015) explored how play and art opportunities can allow human beings to suspend painful realities of the world. This paper directly positions play as an often-undervalued form of care, demonstrated in part through children's motivation towards it (Yoon & Templeton, 2019); expressions that play makes them happy (Brockman et al., 2011); and its significance for human relations and experiences across the lifespan (Lewis, 2019).

The study occupies a delicate time: the early onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, when adapting and doing education differently agitated questions surrounding how education is done ordinarily. Bazzul (2023), for example, reimagines a quality and ethical education as one that confronts malfunctioning societies, life on a dying planet, and what it means to co-exist and find pleasure in ongoing crises. The study described in this paper was conducted with the understanding that quality and ethical schools, as central components of the care and education of children, are responsible for fostering and facilitating children's play as a critical act of social justice. The study's examination of play during the pandemic, including practical action components and applications, contributes to understandings of a school's role in community care for children.

## Literature Review

Defining play has consumed much of scholars' time and remains highly disputed (Lebed, 2019; Russell, 2016; Sutton-Smith, 2001). For the purposes of this paper, play is defined as a voluntary and intrinsically motivated action where the act of engaging in such activity presides over outcomes associated with it (Play Scotland, 2023). Although children's play has many reported developmental benefits and is a United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) declared children's right, in this paper, I advocate for play as a worthwhile activity in and of itself. Children repeatedly tell researchers that play makes them happy (Brockman et al., 2011), and the effects, content, meaning, significance, and emotions of play are far-reaching (Saltmarsh & Lee, 2021). It remains a fragile and important way that children process the world and their placement within it.

For decades, scholars have been warning that children's play opportunities are shrinking (Aitken, 1994; Brown, 2014; Karsten, 2005; Lewis, 2017). Community accountability for neighbourhood children appears to be declining (Karsten, 2005); play is moving from outdoors to indoors (Valentine & McKendrick, 1997); and adult supervision and control of play is increasing (Barron, 2014; Furedi, 2006; Lewis, 2017; Stephenson, 2003). In addition, a push-down of academic learning on increasingly younger children, regularly referred to as *schoolification*, is considered a pronounced threat to play opportunities (Nicolopoulou, 2010). Graber et al. (2020) notice that significant gaps remain in understanding the effects that restrictive circumstances to play, including lockdown conditions, may have on children's health and education. Understanding the history of play as a means of healing and joy during adversity (Bambrick et al., 2018; Boucher et al., 2014; Casey & McKendrick, 2023), coupled with the currently precarious state of play, necessitates attempts at understanding what one may learn about community care for play from its occurrences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite many play-advocates' work and community interventions made in an attempt to support children's active play, Canadian national survey results demonstrate that as a consequence of the immediate effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, children were overall playing less outside than they did before the outbreak of the pandemic (Moore et al., 2020), which could potentially have both short- and long-term effects on children and their well being (Lannoy et al., 2020; Puccinelli et al., 2021; Tremblay et al., 2015). Furthermore, while documenting community efforts to support play during times of crisis and its benefits to children during the pandemic, Casey and McKendrick (2023) uncover that play continues to lack adequate public and community support.

Locating play as a critical component of being well, understanding, processing, and emoting during a crisis, action research with community-based organizations to support play during and post-pandemic is a principal part of the action study this paper reports on. I shared the findings widely within the community-based sector, made easier by my position within it, and many organizations have altered their offerings, whether temporarily or permanently, around the study's results. This paper discusses how adults' attention to children during the COVID-19 pandemic opens possibilities for how school administrators, educators, and community organizations might involve play in caring for children.

## Method & Study Design

The study reported on in this article was an action research project (Stringer & Aragón, 2021) conducted using constructivist grounded theory as described by Charmaz (2014). After receiving a notification about a research funding opportunity from the host university's Community

Engagement and Research Centre, the executive director of a community-based organization approached me to see if I might undertake a study. The organization leader was interested in being responsive to changing community needs during the pandemic, in particular around play. In the resulting qualitative study, I conducted interviews via Zoom and telephone, online surveys, and social media to collect data. Findings were constructed through participants' experiences and expressions, and shared with community-based organizations. I attended to the non-profit organization community desires of the project through conversations with non-profit organization leaders and staff. The action components of this study are inspired by Noddings' (1986) *ethics of care*, which fuses morality axiology, ethics, and care together with an assertion that action components which are caring in manner become an ethical responsibility. Similarly, Held's (2006) work on ethics of care helps reject action components that might hold a singular and objective moral stance on what a better human or society might consist of. Therefore, the action components of this study focused on caring relations rather than the virtues of individuals or societies. The action components are also seen as imperfect and incomplete; thus, the paper explores further, speculative imaginings of additional offerings of care, motivated by the work of Puig de la Bellacasa (2017). Such a framework centres the study on care, seeking evidence (or lack thereof) of care, and perceiving action research itself as a means of offering care.

### **Recruitment and Participants**

After receiving institutional ethics approval, I recruited interested adult parents as participants using purposeful sampling (Bungay et al., 2016). All the parents had children up to six years of age. An important note, therefore, is that this study worked alongside caregivers of children but not children themselves, which is a limitation. As will be explored in the discussion section of this paper, this limitation also provided a rich method for examining how adults, myself included, witnessed, relayed, and experienced children's expressions of how they felt about play, schools, learning, and relationships during the pandemic, and what might be learned from such witnessing.

Upon completion of an initial online survey, which asked questions about changes people might be experiencing around play and how they might want community organizations to respond, participants were asked if they were interested in participating in a virtual interview for 45-90 minutes via telephone or Zoom. The first ten respondents who indicated they had at least one child below six years of age were selected. In addition, there were approximately 200 unique survey respondents to online surveys via Instagram for this study. Non-profit organization staff who wanted to receive emerging data and attend conversations and webinars were recruited via email through a network of local organizations serving families and young children.

The 10 study participants included seven participants who self-nominated for the study via social media and three who were referred by one of the participating community-based organizations that work with families based on factors such as newcomer status, poverty, and special needs. All 10 participants indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic affected their family finances. Three of the participants received a Canada Economic Recovery Benefit (CERB), a monetary benefit of \$1000 CAD every two weeks for people financially impacted by the public response to the COVID-19 virus (Government of Canada, 2021). All participants discussed sensitive information involving their personal finances, mental health, and their children's special needs. Understanding that data would be shared with community-based organizations that many families were connected to, and anticipating future possible publications in journals, all participants chose pseudonyms to be identified by.

## Data Collection

Although the study was an action research project, I used grounded theory techniques for interviewing and for coding methods in the data. Action research and grounded theory have been used conjointly in previous studies, and thought to work well together (Wastell, 2001). In the case of this study, grounded theory offered rigour in systematically conducting interviews, transcribing them, and coding them, which assisted me in locating patterns and constructing categories of the data. This, in turn, helped me to create pathways for action.

I conducted the first interview about play during the COVID-19 pandemic according to an initial interview guide in which I asked questions about immediate changes and concerns around play, and how parents would like to see community-based organizations support play during the pandemic. When participants appeared to deviate from the guide, their path was followed rather than directed, as is recommended by Birks and Mills (2011) in order to take the “optimal route” (p. 75) in grounded theory data collection. Although interview guides with set questions were prepared, during the interviews I would invite participants to address matters they felt were important to explore regardless if it was on the interview guide or not. I would ask follow-up questions and invite participants to wander away from the pre-made set of questions when they felt it was necessary. I transcribed and open-coded (Charmaz, 2014) the first interview so that I could slightly alter the guide for the next interview. Each interview, transcribed and coded before the next, was further informed by community findings as I began to see patterns emerge. As patterns such as ‘public play invites playfulness’ became more apparent, I solicited online responses from the aforementioned social media account surrounding play in the local area. Sharing early findings with the community enabled me to check whether or not the findings were resonating with the larger community and allowed me to invite further insight into apparent patterns. The social media account also aided the action component of this research: as participants shared what appeared to increase access to play during the pandemic, I often shared their responses to the social media community. Doing so not only initiated a community discussion around fostering play during the COVID-19 pandemic that helped me refine findings, but it created an ongoing, open discourse about supporting play during that challenging time.

## Data Analysis

I analyzed the data using constructivist grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2014). When I transcribed the interviews, I assigned every line or every sentence in each transcript with an initial code that helped define each fragment of data. Slowly, I moved from initial coding to more focused coding as codes started making sense together and as some codes began to subsume others. Focused coding involved diving back into the data to revisit initial codes and fragments, to test how the focused codes aligned with initial data and coding. Finally, I moved into theoretical coding which involved playing with the focused codes and revisiting data to see how the codes might fit into one another and/or develop into a theory. The grounded theory data analysis and the action research methods intersected in several ways. Rather than analyzing data entirely on my own, I would often check-in with participants, the social media page, and the non-profit leaders involved in the project to share codes and phases of analysis. Considering the urgency with which the non-profit leaders wanted to adjust their findings, this approach helped inform their community offerings while inviting their own perspectives on the analysis and study’s trajectory.

## Findings

Although this study focused on how, in general, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted play in and around the home, this paper specifically underscores findings around community care offerings involving play. What follows is a presentation of what parental observations of children playing during the COVID-19 pandemic may teach about schools' role in supporting play, and how to position and care for children in public life. Findings, relative action components, and theoretical analysis emerged in the following two categories: *Children, Play, and School*, and *Children, Play, and Public Life*. I focus on these two categories in this paper to explore specific applications for schools. Each of these two categories of findings are further divided into sub-categories according to how codes appeared to theoretically interact.

### Children, Play, and School

The first category of findings involved children, play, and school. Schools emerged in the study as a multi-faceted factor to support play throughout the pandemic. Patterns emerging from the data swirled around schools being spaces where children can enjoy play and around the unstructured and often taken-for-granted aspects of schools being important to children. The unplanning of play that seemed to be happening at home during the pandemic opened a means of listening to and understanding children's expressions of how they found unplanned and informal ordinary moments at school, meaningful. Within this section, I present findings around unplanning play, discourses of learning loss, and taken-for-granted aspects of schools.

#### *Unplanning Play*

Many caregivers who completed the initial survey inquired about play ideas for use at home with children. All 10 research participants indicated a desire to support children's play, often relaying that the more children played at home, the more they could focus on work or enjoy quiet time. Parents also often expressed feeling good about their children playing, with play appearing to help children to be calm and happy. Caregivers described how the play children were most frequently engaging in at home during the pandemic was unplanned, and interview discussions illuminated planned, prescribed activities and crafts as barriers more than catalysts for play. One participant, Lola, shared frustration that her children were reluctant to join her for structured crafts and activities, but then she noticed:

you know what they had been doing when I interrupted them? They were playing. I was interrupting their nice play with my own ideas of play. So now I just completely let them be unless they're bored asking me for something to do. Which is honestly so rare.

To support an apparent desire for children to spend more time in such unplanned and unstructured play processes, one community-based organization received a grant to purchase play baskets to give to self-nominating families who expressed that purchasing children's play items was financially challenging. Families indicated the ages and interests of the children, and each received a custom basket. The organization also invited families with the financial means to purchase play baskets in any amount, with the option to donate money towards the purchase of baskets for self-nominating families. The organization staff leveraged wholesale purchasing and free books afforded to the organization to offer children and families a diversity of items for different types of play. They donated labour to purchase, assemble, and deliver baskets of play items specifically for families, which were filled with open-play items with no prescribed methods for play, including loose parts, blocks, open-ended puzzles, books, a ball, and high-grade art

materials. Another organization with many staff members and strong financial resources used findings to distribute baskets of simple household items, children's books, art supplies, and infographics about play, for free, to more than 700 families in the city. The play baskets were enthusiastically received and increased unplanned, unstructured play at home, as indicated by surveys sent to recipients and unsolicited written responses of appreciation.

### *Discourses of Learning Loss*

One parent, Jessica, described a discrepancy between two of her children's school workloads while learning from home. She worried that one of her children's teachers was not sending home an appropriate amount of schoolwork and that, as a result, this child might "fall behind other children in his grade." Two other participants shared similar thoughts and experiences, and clarified that it was not a lack of learning that was causing stress, but rather, the thought of their falling behind their peers. Participants Michele, Jennifer, and Haven shared the sentiment that they wished schools would entirely standardize their teaching during the pandemic, with Haven suggesting that schools broadcast each grade on a different free, publicly accessible website or channel that children could watch throughout the day so that each child would receive the same education.

In the data, participants described difficulties getting children to complete schoolwork at home. There was a pattern that many children were agreeable to completing art-related homework, especially visual art and physical education activities if assigned, but were more resistant to other school tasks. One participant stated that when her school-aged child's teacher became aware that children in her class were struggling to complete all homework and prioritizing what they often referred to as the 'fun stuff', she suggested that parents instruct children to complete literacy and math homework and disregard the rest. For a time, only math and literacy content were posted to their online classroom.

The findings around pressures that parents felt to keep up with academic standards, and schools indicating a preference for math and literacy subjects, created, at times, a false binary between what was considered more *important* or *serious* learning over less important and less serious learning and activities. Many educators, myself included, care a great deal about children's literacy and numeracy abilities and can understand the prioritizing of such subjects. During a pandemic, however, throughout the loss of people, places, things, and ways of life, such priorities became more nuanced. The action research study's conceptual framework involving ethics of care disturbed some of the ordinary and accepted ways of doing education, and called for possibilities of doing things otherwise. This was a point in the study where adults relayed that teacher and adult desires conflicted with those of children. Uneven power dynamics between children and adults meant that adult desires often prevailed over those of children. This was demonstrated by the teacher who, upon hearing that children were prioritizing 'fun' homework, only posted work in two subject areas. Such a scenario emaciated children's education to involve maintaining opportunities to complete constrained work, while depriving opportunities for play, building relationships, and engaging in an abundance of learning opportunities, all of which schools typically provide children. Thinking with care and asking questions about whose desires should count, led to thinking with abundance. Math, literacy, *and* play and the arts, all became caring and important and necessary; it was difficult to consider any subjects at the expense of others or to categorize them differently as being universally serious or fun. Math, literacy, and the arts are all, at different times, easy, playful, serious, and challenging. An ethics of care, where one is meant to acknowledge the desires of the cared-for (Noddings, 1986), in this case children and families, provided ample room for playful learning, the arts, and movement in formal learning offerings.

Throughout the study and development of action components, an urgency grew around endorsing play amidst the uncontrollable lack of access to education-as-it-was being frequently framed as *learning loss*, coupled with parents experiencing pressure to ensure children's upkeep with sometimes narrowed curricular content despite grief over losing play opportunities with friends. Thus, one action component included several organizations collaborating to offer a multi-professional-endorsed statement to the community that play is an important and worthwhile pastime for children, especially amidst the pandemic. Organization members and I launched a *Summer of Play* campaign that included a letter, an advertising campaign, and the creation and dissemination of a website and resources. Fifty-seven local academics, early childhood professionals, teachers, school administrators and directors, politicians, and organization leaders working in education or in another form of service to children, signed the letter. The advertising campaign included professionally-designed billboards and large bus signs announcing a *Summer of Play* with a web address to access the letter and resources. The website and resources shared the importance of play and offered ideas to spark play (Project Play YQR, n.d.). Aside from being broadly advertised, the campaign and associated resources were widely shared amongst organizations and the families they work alongside.

### ***Taken-for-Granted Aspects of Schools***

This final subcategory within the category *Children, Play, and School*, explores what appear to be taken-for-granted aspects of schools. Two community-based organizations with whom I was sharing emergent findings with throughout the study, moved their community programs online amidst the physical closures of their sites. Participants expressed that when they asked children what programs they preferred, children rarely mentioned the content of such programming. Instead, they mentioned enjoying hearing facilitators and educators say their names aloud and being offered unstructured time to interact with other children. As organizations continued to adapt their programming, they retained personal aspects and unstructured time for children to play and converse, even if such time felt awkward for facilitators in an online setting. Parents of school-aged children also indicated that their children's primary motivation for attending virtual classes and class meetings was to see and interact with their teachers and peers; children yearned for the unplanned, informal, relational bits of school.

It was found in the study that children's expressions of their preferences and motivations towards school are paralleled in the data in their expressions of preferences and motivations towards community activities. Participant interviews, surveys, and social media data all indicated that school-aged children were lonesome for their friends, educators, and the relationships that schools fostered. Four parent participants expressed how their children missed eating at school with their friends, and one parent, Lola, explained that her children receive two snacks, plus lunch at school. One child, who attended a teacher parade hosted by her elementary school, watched from her front yard as her teachers drove by in personal vehicles they had decorated, honking and waving. While her mother described her as delighted while watching the parade, she reportedly then spent the rest of the afternoon crying for her teachers and school staff that she missed. Such stories highlight the taken-for-granted aspects of what schools provide: nourishment, joy, play, belonging, and relationships.

Findings from the study indicate that participants hold desires for an education system that do not fit neatly together. Some parents expressed the desire for a standardized education system delivered via television, while others expressed being moved by children's expressions of desires to hear their names spoken aloud, to have unstructured time to visit their friends and share their



thoughts, to move, to play, to create art, and to spend time with their teachers, who they care for and feel cared by. Adult desires shifted and changed throughout the study, pointing to how much there is still to learn about care and desire within education, and how much adults can learn through listening to children. Questions which arose include: What does it mean to care for children during a pandemic? What does it mean to offer education during a pandemic? What is the purpose of education? What is care? What do children desire? Whose desires count? Whose notions of care count? These are all questions that parents, the community-based organization staff, and myself, as a parent, teacher, and researcher, asked ourselves consistently throughout the study.

Though there may be no singular perfect answer to such questions, it remains important that such questions are continually asked, and that they are asked with and alongside children. Educators, school administrators, parents, and the general public would be wise to take note of and appreciate what children have voiced through this study as being essential aspects of schools: spaces to develop friendships, to play, to enjoy the arts, to satisfy and kindle curiosity, to move, to create and express, to hear their names spoken out loud, to feel a sense of belonging, and to see and be seen by people they care about.

### **Children, Play, and Public Life**

While the study examined parent experiences with play at home, children's homework, and how children talked about and missed school in its absence, it also examined how the novelty of the pandemic conditions allowed children and families to experience their communities differently. Participants relayed how as children were more visible and present in their local neighbourhoods, such neighbourhoods seemed to offer them a sense of belonging. Aesthetics of play, or evidence of play and playfulness, seemed to grow and strengthen in response to children; in turn, children's presence seemed to grow and strengthen in response to aesthetics of play. This section reports on findings around the means by which schools and community organizations asserted children's play opportunities in public life as community care. Analysis of the data yielded two key findings relating to this category: increasing belonging in communities and aesthetics of play.

#### ***Increasing Belonging in Communities***

During the physical closures of schools, the participants who partook in interviews described going out for neighbourhood walks more frequently. One participant, Jessica, explained, "We never did this before. Never. And it's kind of nice? We've learned neighbours' names who we hadn't known before. We know who has pets. We know who is working from home. We go to the park by our house, and we just didn't really ever do that before." Later, she continued, "Each day is sort of different, even though it's the same. Like, 'oh look, someone drew a picture here with chalk!' 'Are these flowers new?' It's like a neighbourhood scavenger hunt every day." In fact, all interview participants described noticing new things in their neighbourhood.

According to the interview data, it appeared to make a difference to participants whether or not they found their neighbourhood aesthetically pleasing, and several interview participants directly stated that they found the aesthetic of their community attractive, providing motivation to get outside. Most interview participants mentioned noticing new things on their neighbourhood walks including flowers, nature, gardens, and interesting houses. If, however, participants found their neighbourhoods unattractive, it hindered their desire to get outside for walks and play. One participant, Amanda, described, "We do go for walks but... It's not nice. Where I live is not nice. It's a lot to get out already since it's an apartment and then it's just...dusty, and there's nowhere to go."

It appears that playful or play-related aesthetics encouraged children and families to get outdoors. On participant, Danielle, shared:

I live in [a] neighbourhood and there's this home that's all colourful and there's a tree with a little door on it and some fairies and it says 'shhhhh fairies are sleeping' or something on the tree and it's just so cute and thoughtful and cheers us all up so sometimes we just walk to go see that tree and go home. They sometimes write cute things on the sidewalk there, too, and it changes so we like to go and see what might be written.

Another participant, Lola, describes creating a pathway that she and her family would travel by foot based on the hearts in windows, especially noticing hearts in windows where there had previously been none. Participants seemed not only increasingly motivated to get outside if they perceived their neighbourhood to be aesthetically attractive, but also to direct and inform the location of their play depending on their neighbourhood's material aspects.

Aesthetics of one's neighbourhood emerged as a catalyst for outdoor play if children and families perceived the neighbourhood to be pleasing, but as a barrier to play if they did not. Neighbourhoods that appear welcoming, neat, and visually interesting not only motivated children and families to get outside but even to direct families where to go to play, consistent with a finding from Tappe et al. (2013) that neighbourhood aesthetics improve active outdoor activity for both adults and children.

What also seems apparent from the findings is that while neighbourhood aesthetics compelled children and families to direct their play and movement to specific spaces, those spaces tended to adapt to the increase of children in the community. The children enjoyed chalk messages, hearts popping up in windows, and fairy trees, which enchanted them and influenced their movement. On the other hand, the chalk messages, hearts popping up in windows, and fairy trees also increased as children spent more time outdoors in their neighbourhoods. This implies that children and the environment affect one another. Children's physical presence in public life changes public life. Thus, schools bringing children into civic life not only allows children to learn with the world in which they live, but contributes to how the world changes and adapts as humans and non-humans emerge in relation with children.

### ***Aesthetics of Play***

The study's findings indicate that the place of play affects one's experience of the world, similar to how Gadamer (1993) conceives of aesthetics in that novels, operas, poems, paintings, and songs can change how one thinks, acts, and behaves (Gadamer, 1993; Grondin, 1998). Aitken (2018) describes, from a geography perspective, how play "shows up as a radical flash of inspiration and creativity" (p. 14) and that,

the aesthetic created by ... play spaces and the practices passes through children and young people to suggest not only dislocation and surprise, but also a suspension of adult strictures and sensibilities ... there is a radical aesthetics in play that can change the world. (p. 14)

Play invites play. This research study demonstrated that the aesthetics of play has an affective and inviting component. Many online survey responses supported the pattern of seeing more of the same families around the neighbourhood and at community parks. In one online response, the respondent stated,

I have never seen this many kids outside in our neighbourhood! It's amazing. I would send my kids, too, but they're still little (four and seven) and I worry that they wouldn't be able

to stay far enough apart and could catch the virus. I hope kids continue to go out once the virus is gone so ours can join in. I didn't even know there were this many kids in the neighbourhood!

It is worth noting the use of the word “never” throughout this section, which indicates a novelty of behaviour and experiences brought on by the novel conditions that the COVID-19 pandemic created, including going for regular neighbourhood walks, conversing with neighbours, and an unprecedented number of children playing in neighbourhood streets and parks.

Both in-person and online data pointed to a pattern that many parents were relaxing the supervision of their children, and some parents even communicated a correlation between the expansion of their limits on play and play in their community. For example, participant Amanda stated,

Some of us parents [in our neighbourhood] all basically had a conversation, and we were like okay...we are okay with the kids being on their bikes in the street and going to the park together without an adult. None of us had been okay with it before but it was a very conscious decision that we all made together.

Another participant, when describing how she was allowing her son to play in the yard by himself and feeling nervous about neighbour perceptions, said, “We notice that one of our neighbours has a small boy and he's outside lots by himself, so that helps us to feel more...I don't know. Not bad,” suggesting that parental play-supporting behaviour is located in relation to the conduct of other parents in close proximity. Near the end of data collection, one participant submitted an online description of how the lack of school and structured activities that normally occupied children, gave them an opportunity to develop a whole play area where they could spend most of their time together:

(...) my big kids have built so many strong relationships with the kids in our bay. They have their own little bubble and have played countless hours of free uninterrupted play. The things they have done over this year blows my mind. They have made a bike track on the open lot on our bay they literally all play there all day every day. No one has sports or anywhere to go so they play together all the time. It has been nice to really kind of just go back to the roots of free play without feeling like we have somewhere to be or a sport to get to. No schedule.

Many interview participants described how seeing other families outside encouraged them to spend more time outdoors. Families also appeared to learn from one another as they discussed and determined what became new neighbourhood play norms. They co-determined how much the children would be supervised, timelines for heading out in the mornings or returning in the evenings, how far children would be permitted to wander, and how the children would manage playing with and caring for younger siblings.

The enjoyment and importance of getting outdoors for families was such a robust finding in the study that it inspired one organization to apply for funding for families facing financial strain, to purchase Prairie-appropriate outerwear to ease spending time outdoors during harsh Prairie winters. Although they applied twice, their funding applications were denied. Findings also sparked two major organizations to offer more outdoor activities for families and young people. For example, the executive director who initiated this research project started an activity where staff ran the organization's regular programming outdoors in parks rather than in their centre. Such

action components appeared to not only support the desire and joy families experience outdoors, but to make children and families visible in public spaces. The adaptations received enough positive feedback that three organizations have permanently altered their offerings to be more outdoor-based.

### Discussion

The pandemic revealed a fluidity of norms, evidenced by the parental discussions around neighbourhood play and the temporary welcome replacement of structured indoor activities with outdoor, informal, multi-age active play across neighbourhoods. It also revealed, however, an essential opportunity for adults to listen to children and attend to the aspects of school that they most appreciate, made evident by its material absence. What follows is a discussion on the importance of recasting schools as partners in community care and vehicles for children's positioning in public life. The main argument of the paper, supported by findings and an ethics of care, is that the opportunities schools provide for children to play, make friends, engage in arts, move, and feel a sense of belonging are deserving of further attention. Furthermore, in this paper schools are reimagined as partners alongside community-based organizations and municipalities to expand the education and care for children beyond schools' material walls, inviting community participation into schools and child participation in public life. The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequently this study, offered a unique learning opportunity. Although data and findings may have differed had children been the participants in the study, the study's approach to speaking with adults who were listening to children describe how they experience school, play, and the pandemic facilitated adult learning; adults not only learned about their children's experiences, but about their reactions to such learning.

Manyozo (2016) pulls three components of listening from Paulo Freire (1996a, 1996b): listening to evidence, listening to oneself, and listening as a form of speaking. Listening to evidence, in this case, involves listening to children's expressions about school and play, which paint schools as both play-offering and play-stifling institutions. Listening to oneself requires attending to how parents, school staff, community partners, me as the researcher, and you, likely as adult readers, feel and react to children's expressions about school, including what one might learn from such attending. Listening involves, at times, willingness to set aside respective degrees and experiences that render one an expert on education and childhood and being open to intellectual scrutiny by children themselves. Finally, listening involves listening as a form of speaking; one can critique the positions they take just as they critique the positions others take. Adults can refuse to presume that their own writing, speaking, and action components are flawless as they strive to remain fluid, open, and listening, in conversation with others and with themselves. A Freirean (1970) pedagogy of listening turns attention to not only what one hears, but how they react to hearing it and whether the desires of those they listen to are reflected in their actions.

There is power in children's expressions of finding meaning, joy, and belonging in some of the most unrecognized (the arts, recess) and even accidental (hallway conversations) parts of their school experience. When children expose gaps in care, it can bruise the egos of theorists, researchers, teachers, administrators, and parents who have invested time, passion, energy, and expertise in the creation of a caring public school system. Adult feelings of tension and discomfort, mine included, add layers of learning and evidence to this action research study.

Findings from the study suggest that a more caring public education system would provide further support for play, including in-class and out-of-class opportunities for children's play and

exploration. Scholars continue to raise concerns about the disappearance of recess in schools (Global Recess Alliance, 2022; McNamara & Sahlberg, 2020), sometimes replaced with indoor breaks from curricular content that nevertheless lack the informal and unstructured conditions that outdoor recess offers, and that adults in this study learned are important to children.

The study's findings and discussions in this paper do not cast schools and teachers as enemies; in fact, quite the opposite. One need only recall the description of the food that schools provide or the story of the child crying after seeing her teachers and school staff drive by to gain a sense of the care that teachers, schools, and school staff provide children. Pressures to create a false binary between curricular learning and play are a long-standing issue, often deriving from outside of school and teacher imaginations (Pyle & Danniels, 2017), while many teachers themselves habitually champion play and care for children. Children longing for the play opportunities schools provide and the friendships they foster are echoed in this paper and in the extant literature (Souza et al., 2020; Szpunar et al., 2021) and demonstrate the aptitude that schools have for fostering the undervalued and precious thing that is friendship (Held, 2006).

The issue, therefore, is not that schools do not provide care; it is rather that they do so amidst ongoing per-student defunding (Statistics Canada, 2019, 2024) and growing student numbers (Hunter, 2023; Statistics Canada, 2023), as well as chronic teacher burnout which affects teacher social-emotional competence and children's school experiences (Oberle et al., 2020). The issue is not that schools are not engaging and joyful spaces where children want to spend their time, but that the school qualities which engage and spark joy for children seem to be cast as an afterthought in the public imagination.

By limiting access to schools and structured children's activities, the pandemic created conditions that, as shown through this study, had potential to increase neighbourhood cohesion and trust while ultimately increasing play. Neighbour relations strengthening the playfulness of a community is aligned with Schoeppe et al.'s (2015) finding that children living in neighbourhoods with high social cohesion are granted more freedom and space to play than those living in neighbourhoods with lower social cohesion (where cohesion is characterized by friendliness, helpfulness, trust, shared norms, and values). Cortinez-O'Ryan et al. (2017) and Faulkner et al. (2015) demonstrate how the visibility of play tempts further play. This idea is congruent with the current study, which showed that as children play more often in their neighbourhoods, their play itself seems to invite more play. Public positioning of play promotes public playfulness.

### **Possibilities and Imaginings**

The study described in this paper involved action research, which aims to facilitate participation in creating a more just society rendered through the study itself (Fine & Torre, 2021). A pedagogy of listening (Freire, 1970; Manyozo, 2016) and ethics of care (Held, 2006; Noddings, 1986) required careful and reflexive listening coupled with caring action components. However, there are limitations as an individual researcher, and even as a collective of invested organizations, in creating just and caring systems and societies.

I now move into an exercise of imagination, in which I invite the reader to indulge in speculative futures where children's desires, as expressed in this study, are thoroughly attended to. This section invites larger-scale dreaming and planning of action steps for schools, in partnership with community-based organizations, municipalities, ministries, and other organizations invested in the care of children, to implement and thereby increase play and social justice for children and their role in civic life. This is part of emergent listening (Davies, 2014), where instead of listening

to what has been said, what has been heard, what has been repeated, what is already known, and what protects the status quo, the listener listens for possibilities of being and knowing that may be unknown and unfamiliar. It is a speculative, caring exercise, involving thinking of care as not only an individual human matter (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017), but in also using care to imagine how children's daily lives might be better, in different and more caring worlds.

Imagine if, to address spatial inequities such as neighbourhood attractiveness being a factor to accessing play, municipalities and funders were to support schools in creating well-resourced outdoor school grounds that facilitate play, learning, and community gathering. The study's results help imagine how communities might be more equitable and joyful if all public-school grounds were cultivated as vibrant, exciting, aesthetically pleasing places for families and children to spend time. To fully realize their role in community care, municipalities and funders could contribute to more equitable communities by collaborating with and supporting schools in creating attractive outdoor spaces for children, plants, animals, and families. Such care, when considered alongside the results of the current study, may assist in asserting children's position in public life, creating conditions of possibility for various forms of care for children and children's reciprocal care in the community. School grounds might then be positioned as community hubs for play and connection. However, engaging in these imaginings means overcoming poor funding support for education and recalibrating the prioritization that indoor classroom environments and materials often take over schools' outdoor spaces (McNamara, 2013).

School grounds could become welcoming places with community murals, gardens, biodiversity, and changing outdoor galleries where, after school hours, children and families want to spend time, relax, play, and learn. Children might sometimes engage in uncomfortable power relations with the more-than-human world, and be confronted with evidence and thinking about the climate crisis (Nxumalo, 2019). Such interactions and entanglements could invite new ways of co-caring and being alongside one another.

I now invite readers to imagine the vibrancy of communities if children's sense of belonging was to overflow the margins of their school grounds and if educators invited children to co-create communities filled with aesthetics of play. Municipalities would plan multi-use pathways and introduce traffic-calming measures around schools, helping to fortify children's safety and ability to play outdoors in their communities. Part of children's education would involve planning their route to school and coordinating walk-to-school groups, presumably enhancing neighbour relations, social cohesion, independent mobility, the right to privacy (UNCRC, 1989), and play opportunities within neighbourhoods.

I invite the reader to imagine how schools could become community partners alongside libraries, galleries, parks, and municipalities by involving children in painting hopscotch squares along sidewalks and bike paths, installing basketball hoops and small-scale play areas, maintaining gardens, composting, displaying connectable components of walkable stories around communities, painting park benches, creating community murals, and co-curating revolving local art galleries to engage and delight the public while welcoming and establishing children as important participants in public life. Just as this study has highlighted teachings from the community to improve schools as community spaces of care for children, it has also highlighted teachings from schools that can improve the community. The findings of the study suggest not only a new appreciation for the caring and joyful attributes of schools inside their walls but also turning aspects of the school inside out, so this care flows freely into the community, void of a container.

Finally, I invite the reader to imagine how communities shift and change because children are a visible and tangible part of them. From this study, I learned that as children are directed and influenced by their neighbourhood aesthetics, the neighbourhood aesthetics are also directed and influenced by children. Questions emerged, such as: What new aesthetics of play appear? How do streets, alleyways, bees, houses, buildings, ants, fences, benches, shops, libraries, art galleries, community spaces, and bus shelters respond to the consistent presence of children? How might civic life shift and change with children's increased presence and participation? What other ways might community-based organizations, parents, and school administrators participate in the collective care for children?

### **Limitations and Further Research**

The greatest limitation of this study is that children were not directly engaged as research participants. Therefore, all children's expressions and experiences have been relayed by adult family members. This study was strengthened, however, by the added layer of witnessing how adults listened to, cared for, learned from, and relayed children's experiences, thoughts, and desires. However, there is a need for further research that works directly alongside children themselves to explore the role of schools in providing community care to children and creating playful, just, and child-friendly communities. A second limitation is that the study is, to some degree, context-limited to the specific mid-sized Canadian Prairie city where the study took place.

### **Conclusion**

The pandemic offered an opportunity to understand the care that quality schools provide to communities: places where children not only learn but are cared for, sheltered, and sometimes provided with food; where they are given opportunities to socialize with friends, move, develop and foster hobbies, and have access to books and materials to take home. When children could no longer physically attend school, the pandemic revealed public schools as the meaningful spaces of community care that they are. However, the COVID-19 crisis also revealed the fragility and flaws of schooling in its current form, including that some of its most caring qualities that children find most meaningful, including its opportunities and spaces for play, garner little attention and resources.

Through its focus on play as community care during the pandemic, the study discussed in this paper has revealed the importance of play and a sense of belonging for children in schools that could be expanded outside of schools' material walls; in doing so, children would not only be invited into public life, positioning them as important participants in society, but society would also change and bend as it cares, publicly, for children. The paper has offered teachings for schools and school staff, but also for parks, municipalities, galleries, libraries, and other community-based organizations as partners in caring for children and asserting their role in community. Examining children's play amidst the COVID-19 pandemic revealed findings that compel further research and action projects that explore the role of schools in transforming communities into playful, child-friendly centres.

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