

“YOU TOLD ME I COULDN’T PLAY THERE”:  
AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION OF CHILDREN’S OUTDOOR PLAY

by

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## ABSTRACT

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Master of Arts, 2017  
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Playing outdoors is an essential component of childhood yet that play is often bound by adult perceptions of safety, risk, and children’s capabilities. Research reflects the positive value that playing freely outdoors has in terms of children’s overall development. However, literature also highlights the impact of a societal focus on safety, which can limit young people’s access to the outdoors and the types of play that they seem to enjoy. The tension that can exist between pedagogical practices and trusting children to be safe plays out within the structure and format of this paper as the motifs of bounding and resistance that can exist in both research and play are unearthed. Drawing on autoethnographic and narrative approaches I explore, share, and reflect upon outdoor play experiences from my own childhood as a means to gain a deeper understanding of how children were and are positioned in society and communities.

*Keywords: risky play; outdoor play; childhood; early childhood; community; narrative; autoethnography*

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to Ken Maguire, who was always so proud and supportive of my academic achievements and knew a thing or two about living a playful life.

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## **Jimmying the Locks**

This paper, which is informed by autoethnographic approaches to research (Ellis, 2004), may seem somewhat contradictory in its nature of design. It contains personal narrative reflections of play and formal, academically styled writings that are interrupted by interjections where a conclusive point is sometimes reached and sometimes not. Furthermore, the voices that are present in these varying texts become somewhat blurred at times, indicative of the complex and intertwined ways of knowing that can be found in both ethnographic processes and products (Richardson, 2005). I make no conscious attempts to silence parts of myself in these different texts as I believe this would be impossible. It is inevitable that my processes are going to be influenced by and responsive to one another.

Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) state that autoethnographers “recognize the innumerable ways personal experience influences the research process” (p. 274). My personal bias regarding the ways I think children’s outdoor play should be approached certainly come to mind here. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) also speak of the many and varied ways of knowing that people hold and value the autoethnographic approach for “eschewing rigid definitions of what constitutes meaningful and useful research” (p. 275). Drawing on Loris Malaguzzi’s poem *No Way. The hundred is There* (as cited in Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993), I find approaching this research in a manner that represents different ways of knowing speaks to my desire to be unbound by the confines of a specific research method. I find the standard approaches of research to be useful in terms of organizational practices yet constricting when it comes to my creative thinking. Malaguzzi discussed creativity as being part of everyday experiences rather than an entity unto itself that is reserved for special circumstances. How one

thinks and understands should not be in opposition with how one expresses themselves but rather should be enmeshed in a complementary manner. Malaguzzi stated “the spirit of play can pervade also the formation and construction of thought” (p. 77, as cited in Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993). I have played with this paper as a means to unbound the research text and as a reflection of my research process. I am drawn to incorporating creative elements into my work and do so here to support my self-expression and my deep-rooted presence in this paper as well as to provide multiple ways for the reader to access and engage with my narrative. I invite you to play along.

Mischievous contradictions in artwork and life have always been both amusing and appealing to me. The incongruity in the writing styles of this paper, and its multiple voices as represented by different fonts and margins, were a conscious decision. My academic voice is reflected in the standard Times New Roman font, size 12 of course, and double line spacing that one would expect to find in a Master’s Research Paper.

Narrative pieces are presented in a manner that may bring to mind an old and yellowed paperback novel that you discover buried on the bookshelf of your summer cottage rental. This typeset is reminiscent of days gone by and intended to evoke nostalgia as I draw you into my past. An old book is a familiar item; however, the stories contained within are unknown until the reader chooses to engage.

*These narratives are followed by text that is more tightly packed in terms of its visual elements but much freer with respect to the thoughts that are held*

*there. Much like an actor's words to the audience, these asides are reflective pieces; an excavation of sorts as I dig and sift through all that has been discovered. Similar to unwanted thoughts that you cannot stop from entering your mind, these interludes will make unannounced appearances throughout this work. They provide a break from the linearity of the text and of research itself. They offer you moments to pause, contemplate and reflect.*

The variations that are found among these writing techniques could be interpreted as mirroring the contrast between the adult structuring of children's outdoor play that seems to now be the norm and the careless abandon with which I played outdoors as a child. This formatting is also representative of resisting regulations. I play with the textuality of this paper much like children may play with the rules that control their play. As a child, parent, writer, and researcher, I have and continue to resist conformity as a means of unbounding myself from the directives and structure that are not my own and can often seem without cause or reason. In that sense, this work is in and of itself risky play.

## The Ravine

### Exposing Contradiction

It was a rather idyllic Sunday afternoon, spent taking our dog for a long walk and then finishing a book on the front porch before dinner. We finish eating but linger around the table telling stories from when my husband and I were young. An Aretha Franklin song was playing in the background – the ‘Queen of Soul’ giving directions and commands as only she can:

You better think (think)

Think about what you're trying to do to me

Think (think, think)

Let your mind go, let yourself be free...

(Franklin & White, 1968)

Our boys clear the dishes and then sit back down to hear me tell the rest of my story: “So after days and days of digging this deep pit, we would get big tree branches and logs to put across the top of it, for a roof. We’d camouflage it with leaves and stuff too so nobody would notice. You couldn’t even tell it was there.” Our youngest son looks wistful, “I like living in the city, but sometimes I wish I had somewhere to play like that.” I can’t believe what I’m hearing, and

in exasperation, remind my son of the ravine that is not far from our house. His response comes sharply and not without an accusatory tone: “But you told me not to go in the ravine because people smoke drugs there!”

I am stunned. I sit quietly for a moment as the reality of his words hit me full force. There is a sense of shock coupled with an uncomfortable embarrassment due to the realization that I have inadvertently obstructed my children’s chances to engage in the kinds of play that I had so enjoyed.

. . . .

That is where the story of my research begins, several years ago, hanging around the dinner table reminiscing about the complex underground forts my friends and I would build during the summers when we were young. My son’s words have echoed in my mind over the past few years, bringing feelings of self-doubt and regret. I considered the differences between my own childhood and the experiences that my children were having. While my early childhood was spent living in a rural environment, by middle childhood I had moved from the farm to the outskirts of a mid-sized city. Older neighbourhood children and youth would regularly play and explore in the nearby woods that were rarely visited by adults. One might think that raising my own children in a large urban centre meant that they had nowhere to experience the type of free

play that I had so enjoyed, however the reality was that there were a number of varied natural settings within walking distance of our home, including the ravine that I had told my children to avoid.

I embark on this qualitative research process pondering children's outdoor play and the rules that are imposed upon that play. While I recognize the value in helping children play safely I think we sometimes neglect to think about what (and whose) purpose some rules actually serve, as well as how they can affect the play episode. Rubin, Fein, and Vandenburg (1983) define play as inclusive of process-focused experiences that are both activated and governed by the players. With this in mind, I began thinking about the nature of outdoor play in general, including how and why adults so often structure it. This exploration will involve digging deeper into children's outdoor play and how bounding that play can be problematic and contribute to the way in which children are viewed and positioned in society.

A phenomenological approach is adopted through the focus of this research on the 'essence' of children's outdoor play (Creswell, 2014). If we consider phenomenology as pertaining to lived experience, both in its origin and as the focus of the research, it can be recognized that the 'data' can be subjective and even enigmatic (van Manen, 1990). Qualitative research in general subscribes to a certain level of ambiguity. The variations in categories of design, such as ethnographies, case studies, and qualitative interviews, can be extensive and can often overlap with one another (Maxwell, 2009). The openness of qualitative research design, in contrast to the more prescribed and linear processes of quantitative research, speaks to me due to its reflective and responsive nature. Drawing on the concepts of poststructuralism I acknowledge that self and subject are "intertwined, partial, historical local knowledges" (Richardson & St.

Pierre, 2005, p. 962). My subjectivity is responsive to the context of my lived experiences as a child who engaged in risky play and my adult experiences as a parent, an educator, and a researcher. My understanding is influenced by the (sometimes) contradictory discourses that are present in each of these personal contexts. Laurel Richardson (in Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) speaks of “nurturing our own voices” (p. 962) as a means to escape the constrictions prevalent in scientific research writing. Approaching my research as an autoethnographic narrative acknowledges that the product, producer, and manner in which this work is assembled and presented cannot and should not be separated. Writing that includes creative and analytical practices creates spaces for entering and thinking about the work in different ways (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). In this sense, ways of knowing can evolve and grow, depending on the response and willingness of the reader, potentially creating new ways to approach an issue or fill a gap.

This work is pedagogic in the sense that it pertains to “the activity of teaching, parenting, educating, or generally living with children” (van Manen, 1990, p.2). Pedagogical research requires sensitivity to the phenomena of children’s lives and worlds, as well as an understanding of the significance of how specific situations are approached (van Manen, 1990). Engaging in writing from “particular positions at specific times” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 962) can be a liberation of sorts, bringing a multiplicity to texts that can make them more accessible and interesting to a wider scope of readers. Richardson (2005) speaks of crystallization, a “postmodernist deconstruction” (p. 963) of the triangulation associated with the validation of traditional research methods. The prismatic nature of a crystal offers multi-faceted views reflective of the multiple surfaces for engagement that I cannot help but employ in this



exploration. As Richardson (2005) states, “what we see depends on our angle of repose” (p. 963). Similarly, the appropriate angle from which to approach this unraveling of children’s outdoor play is abundant rather than singular as a means to illuminate the many ways of knowing and understanding that can be available to us.

With that in mind, I invite you to become comfortable with the uncomfortable as I present these ponderings in this stream of consciousness which I resist calling a thread. A thread binds things together, while my concerns lie with unbinding.

*uninhibited, unrestrained, unleashed, unbridled, un*

*comfortable*

My interest in the rules related to children’s play stems from my own feelings about being controlled. I play within the confines of this master’s research paper in a way that not only represents my process of thinking, learning, and knowing, but also reflects my discomfort with control particularly in terms of this risky play, all the while refusing to label it as the metaphor it is. *Resist, resist, resist...*

### **Turning Around**

That casual conversation around the dinner table was, for me, like an alarm going off. It gave me cause to look back and then reflect upon the contrast between my own childhood and that of many children today. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) discuss epiphanies as growing from, or due to, “being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity” (p. 3).

It struck me that within our current Western context children often have very little control over how they choose to spend their free time (Ginsburg, 2011). Max van Manen (1990) discusses the transitory nature of lived experience. We often do not consider or appreciate the significance of specific experiences until the moment has passed. It is only through reflexive thinking and writing that we can evaluate any deeper meaning that may present itself. However, Van Manen (1990) also recognizes that the claimed meaning of a previous lived experience cannot truly capture the entire essence of the original. By analyzing specific past experiences we seek to determine how they are situated in relation to more comprehensive views or as Van Manen (1990) states, “the particular to the universal, part to whole, episode to totality” (p. 36).

My lens comes from being someone who spent my time playing mostly self-invented games, building structures, or climbing trees and exploring outdoors as a young child. I later promoted the same in my practice as an early childhood educator but not always in my role as a parent. This motivated my further exploration of the tension between practices. By committing my lived experiences to a textual representation, I aim to capture the essence of those occasions and I refer back to them to see what can be found there as I look anew. The significance of what these memories hold is interpreted through contemplating, discussing, imagining, doodling, and noodling as I “assign meaning to the phenomena of lived life” (van Manen, 1990, p. 37). By infusing this text with creative elements I aim to appropriate my childhood play experiences in a way that not only relays the story, but also evokes the nature of how they were lived. As Van Manen (1990) states, “to orient oneself to a phenomenon always implies a particular interest, station or vantage point in life” (p. 40). I place myself here in this text pedagogically, as an

educator, a parent, a writer and researcher; my interest is phenomenologically entwined with children and childhood. I aim to present what it is like to play freely outdoors.

Drawing on the works of Rousseau (1762/1921) and Sutton-Smith (1997), I acknowledge my tendency to subscribe to a romanticized view of play when looking back on my childhood experiences. There is an emphasis on the unrestrained and natural discovery associated with free play (Wood, 2014), however it could be argued that my play was never truly free as there was always a degree of power that could be held by older or more assertive children. My early childhood situation was unique. My sister and I, despite her being three years my senior, did not engage in the common arguing, rivalry, or “bossing around” often associated with sibling relationships. While the farm we lived on was not isolated, the few children that lived in the same area that we did were not in close proximity. The lack of alternate playmates may have very well contributed to our amicable bond. In this sense, concerns about the power dynamics and bullying that can exist when children play unsupervised was not an issue for me during my early years. When exploring the differences between children’s current play experiences and those of the past, it can be seen that challenges exist on both ends of the spectrum. I find the degrees of adult supervision and structure that are present in much of the play that occurs today to be problematic. However, I am also cognizant of the potential harm that could have occurred due to the lack of supervision or parental involvement that I was acquainted with.

### **Unearthing Memory**

By looking at my lived experiences in a public realm I explore how my play episodes differ from those of children today. In the telling of this personal narrative I develop a deeper understanding of my/self and the factors that have influenced my roles as an educator and a

parent (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). This work invites conversations and a questioning of how and why children's play is influenced and controlled by adults and what this means in terms of their place within social contexts.

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) state that "humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. Thus, the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world" (p. 2). A key element of this process is for the researcher to "be prepared to follow their nose" (p. 3) and then revisit their inquiry in a reflective manner. Through the analysis of specific past occurrences I explore how they are situated in relation to more comprehensive views (van Manen, 1990). I reflect upon my own play experiences, write them down and set them to music, soundtracks that are indelibly linked in my mind to those moments in time. These provide a narrative that I critique, question, and explore to gain a deeper understanding of how my experiences, values, and biases influence my views and roles as an educator and as a parent (Lindsay & Schwind, 2016). I consider how my own lived experiences as a child engaging in unrestricted, outdoor play relate to the outdoor play episodes that are common for children today. Couched in the theoretical framework of the sociology of childhood, I play with and in themes of children's play and play places, and their significance with respect to the positioning of children in society and communities.

### **Grounding Thoughts**

While the "sociology of childhood" may be a relatively recent theoretical concept, key ideas contribute to a greater understanding of how children are and should be positioned, both in research and their daily lives (Grieshaber, 2007). Groundbreaking works introduced the notion that childhood is a social construction (see James & Prout, 1997) beyond the confines of a

developmental stage and a distinct element of humanity that is subject to cultural context. Positioning children and childhood as being people and a culture that are worth studying supports the prospect of children as active agents (Grieshaber, 2007; James & Prout, 1997). Children possess the capacity and knowledge to determine the course and action of their own lives and as such should possess the right to have their views considered and prioritized in matters concerning them.

In contemplating the rights of children, Mayall (2000) discusses the necessity of reconceptualizing childhood as a means to address the marginalization of children and ensure that their voices are included in society as a whole. Attempts to change or improve children's lives are too often based on the ideals of adults who have professional or personal interests in promoting what they think children need (Mayall, 2000). These views have contributed to the perception of children as being vulnerable and requiring the protection of adults.

• • • •

*For me, this brings playground design to mind as it seems children are rarely consulted on this issue. I can't help but notice the newer playgrounds in my community and others, and wonder who planned them. Recently, I have noticed modular plastic slides that have a circular piece at the top, like a tunnel but not really, and a bump in the middle of the descending slope. These new slides are open, yet have these enclosed entrances, designed presumably to ensure that there is only one way to start the descent; with children safely seated before sliding down. I see these bands of plastic and think of the possibilities: sitting on top of the ring seems like it would be a coveted 'king of the castle' position in the playground. Navigating one's self into that spot would surely offer more challenge and excitement than trying to gain speed on a slide that is designed to slow riders down. I can't help but*

*think the designers, in trying to minimize or even eliminate possibilities of falls from the slide platform, have potentially increased the fall height by a couple of feet. Did this occur to them? How much time have they spent watching children play? Let me rephrase that: How much time have they spent watching children play unrestricted by the aid or direction of adults?*

. . . .

Mayall (2000) discusses the “unprecedented surveillance” (p. 244) some children in Western contexts are subject to as their development is meticulously monitored by both educators and parents alike. Mayall’s concern with this issue relates to the omission of children’s ability to act independently in public spaces. It does seem that this matter is becoming more widespread and similarly infiltrating private spaces as children’s increased use of technology and virtual worlds becomes more prevalent. Nolan, Raynes-Goldie, and McBride (2011) address the benefits of parental guidance rather than parental control when exploring play that occurs virtually. While my interest here is more centered on play that occurs in public and “real” spaces, it can be seen that the concept of surveilling children has become benign, further positioning children as being in need of constant adult assistance to navigate their worlds. Indeed, Nolan, Raynes-Goldie, and McBride (2011) assert that context is of less importance than a child’s ability to actively engage and interact with their world when one is considering their social agency. Thus, if children are to be included in the social order in a non-gratuitous manner then it is necessary to ensure they are not only afforded autonomy but are also consulted for their expertise, particularly in matters of play.

In exploring the history and development of social theories regarding childhood, Albanese (2009) noted that the rethinking of how children are positioned in theories and research is more prevalent in some countries. Notable amongst this short list are the UK, Australia, and Scandinavia, countries where researchers have also demonstrated an interest in exploring children's outdoor play and risky play (see, for example, Bundy, 2009, 2011; Caro et al., 2016; Little & Wyver, 2010; Sandseter, 2009, 2010, 2012). Albanese (2009) goes on to state that "some of the most profound changes in our theorizing about children have been closely connected to international and national shifts in our thinking about children's rights and childhood" (p. 19). Much of the literature discussed in this paper comes from Scandinavia, Australia, New Zealand, and the UK, which is evidential support of this statement. In an effort to address and support a Canadian context, available Canadian research is included in this work wherever possible. That the body of related research in Canada is growing gives hope that shifts in how Canadians perceive and respond to children and children's play may be gaining momentum.

## The Pond

Standing at the edge of the pond, I toss a small pebble and watch the concentric ripples disrupt the clouds that had been reflected on the surface a moment before. I wait, but nothing happens. Next I heave a much larger stone into the water, careful to keep my feet back from the mushy edge of the pond.

Still nothing.

Perhaps he's sleeping.

Or maybe he is out looking for food. I turn and survey the tall grass, using my forearm to shelter my eyes from the sun. I watch for movement and listen for any rustling sounds.

Nothing.

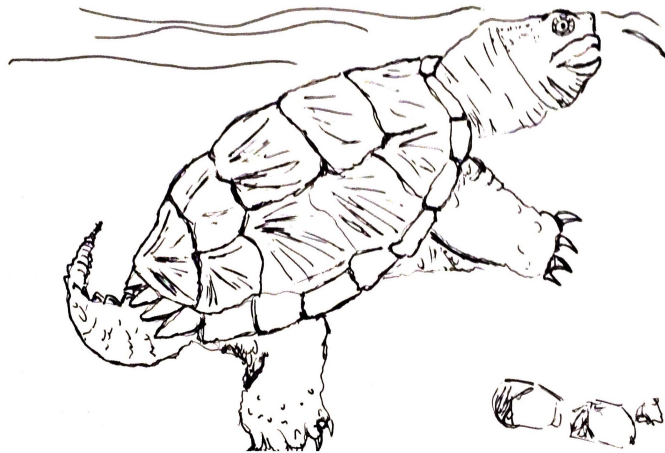
As I turn back to my pond, what might have been a small bubble rising from the murky depths catches my eye. Maybe he is there after all. I scatter a handful of



small stones across the water and continue watching for more bubbles. Hopping from one foot to the other I start to hum a song that I like and then sing the few words that I know in hopes of enticing him out of hiding: "Come and get your love, come and get your lo-ove" (Vegas, 1974).

AGAIN, nothing.

I toss one more stone in a high arc before turning to take the path that would lead me home.



. . . .

*The pond was on the edge of our woods and, while I am not sure of the exact distance, I would estimate it to be about half a kilometre from our house. I am also not sure of my exact age at this moment in time. Based on*

*the soundtrack that is fixed in my mind with this memory, I believe that I would have been about five years old. The toe-biting snapping turtle that was rumoured to make the pond his home was an effective method of keeping me out of the water. According to adult authority every pond in the vicinity seemed to have a resident snapping turtle. The commonality of these turtles certainly occurred to me as a child but the reasoning behind such tales was not given much serious thought until adulthood. Were these carnivorous turtles merely a myth used to keep children away from the water? My childhood logic weighed the possibilities of so many reptiles. I knew there had been at least one snapping turtle. My sister and I, using a wheelbarrow, had hauled home what was left of its scavenged carcass and stored it in an old shed that had been commandeered for a clubhouse. Several hot summer days later my mother eventually discovered the source of the retch-inducing stench that had taken over our property. This tale became an oft-repeated legend, part of our family history. This proof of the existence of at least one turtle, coupled with a fear of having my toe bitten off, kept me from indulging in many afternoon paddles and frog hunting expeditions. There was no need for any additional form of control or surveillance. Reflecting on this memory, I bring my own experiences, from my role as a parent and an early childhood educator. I appreciate the trust and autonomy that is evidenced in this memory. I wonder about the relationship between the snapping turtle stories of my childhood and the warnings of drug activity in the ravine that I passed on to my own child. My parents never told me to stay away from the pond, just to stay out of the water if I valued my toes. They trusted that I would keep myself safe with the turtle merely serving as an insurance policy. I told my son to stay away from the ravine and in doing so I let my own fears outweigh my trust in his ability to play safely. I eliminated an opportunity to evaluate and manage risk. Not only did my actions keep him out of the ravine, I inadvertently reduced the amount of time he spent outdoors.*

*. . . .*

## **Playing with Fear**

By today's standards, my parents' methods of promoting my safety would surely be deemed negligent. However, as I think back to this tale of the turtle, I cannot help but notice parallels with Indigenous uses of stories and myths in parenting. I recall reading the book *A Promise is A Promise* (Munsch, Kusugak, & Krykorka, 1988) to children in an early childhood program. The story is a work of fiction that incorporates the Inuit myth of Qallupilluit and was a frequently requested favourite among the children in my care. Qallupilluit, troll-like monsters that live beneath frozen water, wait to snatch children who venture on to the ice without their parents. David Anauta (2016), a nine year old author of his own Qallupilluit tale, asserts that these stories are designed to instill fear in children thus providing a means to keep them from harm when they are out playing in their Northern communities. Cajete (2017) discusses stories as being fundamental to traditional Indigenous ways of knowing. It is through deep connections with myths and stories that children can develop an understanding of self and the societies and communities within which they interact. Employing stories as a mode to convey information gives children space to contemplate, reflect, and determine how the knowledge they have gained may fit into their life. Cajete (2017) states that:

Thinking and communicating 'poetically' through the structures of myth is a natural expression of human learning which has been evolving for the last 40,000 years. Mythopoetic orientations are apparent in most children before they learn how to read. Indeed, children at this 'illiterate' stage of their life show amazing metaphoric thinking and storying skills reflecting their natural poetic nature. (p. 124)

According to Eder and Holyan (2010), this less structured approach to sharing information with children allows them to see themselves in the story which can help them to understand how it may or may not be pertinent to their own lives. So while the intended message may originate with the adults, the power is placed with the children as they will ultimately be the decision makers in these instances. The ability to assess levels of risk present in a situation and then evaluate that, in contrast to the potential benefits, is a skill that can prove useful in many aspects of life. Research suggests that children as young as four and five can both identify and address the risks associated with outdoor play equipment (Little & Wyver, 2010). This supports the view that children have the capacity to independently manage the time they spend outdoors.

It can be seen that the Qallupilluit and the snapping turtle in my own story serve as a means for adults to govern children's actions in ways that avoid specific direction or structuring of their play. In this sense, these stories speak not only to the development of ethics in children (Eder & Holyan, 2010) but also in terms of the adults who tell the stories. By using these tales and myths as a means of informing children's decision making, adults demonstrate a level of trust in children's own capacity to function in the world that is not often present in Western society today. On the surface it can be seen that there is trust in children to interpret and internalize the conveyed message in an effective manner, however an additionally interesting aspect of these tales is the incitement of fear. Trusting that children have the ability to face and manage typical childhood fears, such as monsters, promotes the view of children as strong and resilient beings (Albanese, 2009; James & Prout, 1997; Mayall, 2000) who can not only conquer challenges of the imagination but also the sometimes scary situations they may encounter in their everyday lives.

Sandseter (2010) explored children's interest in being scared and their innate desire to engage in the types of play that arouse feelings of fear. This notion, perhaps first suggested by Huizinga (1938/1970) and further developed by Caillios (1961), primarily entails the excited feeling that comes with vertigo and losing physical control of one's body. It may be a reasonable assumption that there is a connection between thrilling types of physical play and the nervous excitement that can be associated with stories that contain scary elements.

Children may seek out experiences that scare them, however I can see using fear as a means to regulate children's behaviour as being problematic and unethical. In the most basic sense it is a rather cruel approach to managing children's actions. Moreover, inciting fear could infringe upon a child's ability to feel safe. It could also be said that the notion of insulating children from fear is not only next to impossible but further contributes to the view of children as fragile beings. I certainly did not feel afraid when playing near the pond and it appears Anauta (2016) corroborates my thoughts on this as he asserts, "I am not scared but I do not play on the ice because I do not want to die" (n.p.). While these may only be two accounts, attention should be paid to the idea that stories can be internalized based on one's personal context (Cajete, 2017). What induces fear in one child may not do so in another. Furthermore, by immortalizing fears they can become less threatening which can help children to feel empowered and better equipped to face that which may scare them (Elman, 2016).

I discussed Anauta's story with a colleague who pointed out how the author helps us to see the "humanity" (M. McGlynn-Stewart, personal communication, June 24, 2017) of the Qallupilluit. The protagonist in the story, a young boy, has been transformed into a desolate monster and in turn snatches other children to try to relieve his loneliness. In this sense, Anauta,

himself a young boy, has created a situation where he can identify with the Qallupilluit and readers can sympathize with the monster as a lonely being. Anauta (2016) makes mention of *A Promise is A Promise* (Munsch, R. N., Kusugak, M., & Krykorka, V., 1988) in his author statement, declaring that although Munsch is his favourite author, he feels the Qallupilluit story he wrote himself is the better one. I cannot help but appreciate the confidence in this statement and have to say I agree wholeheartedly. This is one story, created by one boy, yet it can be seen that in his own narrative Anauta (2016) has managed to not only determine a way to lessen the Qallupilluit as a formidable creature, but also maintain the message regarding the potential dangers of playing on the ice. He has effectively confronted and overcome his fears while resolving the best way to ensure that he is safe when playing outside on his own.

A main contributing factor in children's increasingly limited access to unsupervised outdoor play seems to be parental fears. My childhood memories of being outside are primarily centered on experiences that were uninhibited, included elements of risk, and did not involve any adult presence. When these instances did involve structure or organization, it came from our own ever-evolving rules that were always open to interpretation and revision, as the play and players required. Milteer, Ginsburg, and Mulligan (2012) explore the societal shift that seems to have contributed to a decrease in children's outdoor play. Concerns about children playing unsupervised are typically related to safety issues that can be both physical and environmental. In the past, neighbourly relationships allowed for situations where children's supervision and safety was less of an issue, as there was often an adult available to monitor them even if it was done informally. Milteer et al. (2012) express that today, we often do not know our neighbours

and that parents and guardians tend to keep children indoors or registered in organized programs as a means to ensure that they remain safe.

Beyond concerns for children's safety, Manno (2016) discussed societal perceptions that have come to equate negligence with parents who allow their children to play outdoors independently. Manno (2016) states that “because this shift conflates neglect with non-conformity, those who favour traditional notions of child-rearing are unlikely to implement their own parenting style out of fear of intervention” (p. 675). This view comes from an American lens and is centered on the possible legal outcomes for parents who allow their children to play unsupervised. The outcomes are not dissimilar from actions related to safety concerns, as both situations see children with fewer opportunities for unrestrained free play. Taken together, it can be seen that these societal changes with a focus intended to keep children safe may actually be placing their health and well-being at greater risk as time spent indoors often involves sedentary and passive activities including those involving screens (Manno, 2016; Milteer et al., 2012). This limits occasions where children are employing the planning, evaluation, social, and problem solving skills associated with play, particularly when it is self-directed.

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*And this is where I can relate, at least as a parent. It is not difficult for the overwhelming love we feel for our children to cloud our better judgement. As an educator, I was well aware of the benefits associated with free exploration and natural learning, yet an almost uncontrollable desire to protect my children from any kind of harm somehow overrode that knowledge. I could hear myself thinking ‘no, don’t say that’ or ‘it’s okay, they will be fine’ but I found it challenging to let them take risks or play outdoors unsupervised. This was due in part to a fear that they might get hurt ... but*

*most often coupled with the fear that others might judge me as being an irresponsible parent. Perhaps the ease with which my parents were able to let me freely explore and play had less to do with societal views and more to do with physical context. The rural setting meant the likelihood of neighbours keeping an eye on me was at best slim. Where Milteer et al. (2012) saw observant neighbours as an element that could promote outdoor play I can see how it could also be viewed as limiting children's independent play. My parents did not have any concerns about the judgement of others because our isolation provided privacy, something rarely found in urban settings. Had I spent my early childhood in a more densely populated setting perhaps my parents (and as a result, my own) approach to outdoor play would have been very different...*



## The Barn

We lead the 'city kids' into the barn, passing the now unused pigsties. Back when the barn was rented to neighbouring farmers, I would take great delight in throwing cobs of corn to the snuffling sows and their wee babes. I was mindful of warnings to stay on the right side of the fence, especially when piglets were in the mix.

Nobody wants to face down an overprotective mother.

Now that the pigs are gone the sties hold little interest for me. The hayloft above contains much greater opportunity for exploring, adventure seeking, or just curling up with a book. Time spent in the barn is focused on the front hayloft, as the wooden floor of the rear loft had rotted through, leaving gaping holes in some spots. A swing had been installed in the front, hanging from a thick beam at the edge of the loft, so we could swing out over the edge. Bales of hay and straw would be unfurled and tossed over the edge to create a soft landing, highly necessary when we decided to launch ourselves off the swing and take flight. Timing was everything here because if you

jumped too soon or too late there was risk of landing on the concrete floor.

We proudly show our visitors how to jump, both from the swing and from the edge of the loft. No dice. The older of the two girls is not having it and there is no way that she is going to swing, jump, or engage in any of our antics. We carry on with our fun, scrambling up the ladder and heaving ourselves into the open air over and over until the dappled light is filled with the sneeze-inducing dust of stale hay.

I pause to catch my breath and wipe my eyes, now reddening in response to the allergen filled air. I watch the others. Perhaps spurred on by her younger sibling's wild jumps into the haystack below, the elder sister sits gingerly by the edge of the loft and ever so slowly shimmies forward until she is perched over the door frame below. I am not sure if someone suggested she should just slide down from the edge or if she came to that on her own. Whatever the case, she gradually leans far enough forward that gravity takes over ...

but somehow - I'm not really sure how it happens, but somehow, the bottom of her pants catches on the track of an old sliding door that had at one time separated the sties from the loft area. The girl, who had ignored her better instincts, is now hanging completely upside down in the doorframe, spinning like a trapeze artist. We shriek

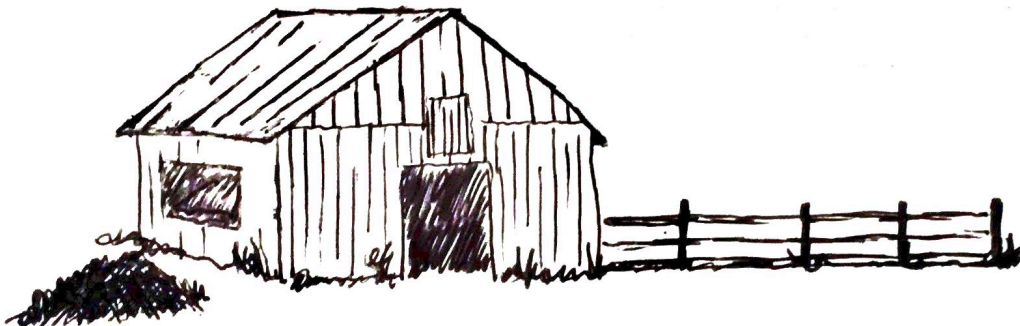
(maybe even laugh, if truth be told)

and then fall silent at the sound of a rip and a sudden jerk of movement as she descends a few inches lower.

We watch in horror

(and possibly in awe)

as another rip causes her to hang even closer to the ground, still slowly rotating above the pitted concrete floor. Someone takes off at full tilt to fetch a grownup...



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*I cannot recall the eventual fate of this girl; the most prominent element of this memory is the ripping sound of her pants followed by horrified silence as we waited to see what would happen. I'm sure the event played out much more quickly in real life than it does in my memory, but one never can be sure. At any rate, this story speaks to concerns about safety and children's unsupervised play, but also to the influence of context in relation to children's play and risk taking. I wonder about any significance that may exist between the play of rural children and those who live in urban settings. Perhaps this girl's unfortunate experience playing in our barn was due to her having fewer opportunities to engage in risky play and learn to gauge her abilities. She certainly seemed aware of her fear and lacked confidence in her ability to safely and accurately complete the jump. I don't recall any peer pressure being applied; in fact we were so engrossed in our own fun that we barely noticed her until she was dangling by the pant leg. In the case of this particular incident, I resign myself to not knowing the cause of her resistance, followed by an obviously conflicted decision. However, it gives me cause to wonder about the general value of risky play and the influencing factors related to children's outdoor play experiences.*

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## **Skirting Danger**

Little and Wyver (2010) assert that young children are capable of evaluating and responding appropriately to risks involving play equipment. In the context of school playgrounds, increased parental and educator concerns about children's safety can impact adult

supervision and therefore interfere with children's physical activity levels and their ability to develop essential risk management skills (Hyndman & Telford, 2015; Little & Wyver, 2008).

Much of the literature exploring children's outdoor risky play comes from Scandinavian countries, New Zealand, and Australia (for example, Bundy et al., 2009; Bundy et al., 2011; Caro et al., 2016; Little & Eager, 2010; Little & Wyver, 2008, 2010; Sandseter, 2009, 2010, 2012), where children's engagement in outdoor pursuits is considered to be an important aspect of culture and identity. However, while views in Norwegian culture have traditionally been supportive of outdoor pursuits and children's ability to engage in risky play, it now seems that a similar societal focus on children's safety and bounding of play has begun to infiltrate the culture (Sandseter & Sando, 2016). There has been a shift in attitude with an increasing attention on child safety and injury prevention although the number of severe injuries in Norwegian early childhood education and care settings is few. This leads to concern regarding the impact this limiting of play may have on the pedagogical approaches of educators, responses of parents, and the well being of children. Children may have increasingly limited opportunities to engage in activities that lack structure or certain outcomes thus it can become challenging for children to develop the evaluative skills that support effective planning and decision making. As Peter Gray (2013) states, "we prevent [children] from learning how to take care of themselves" (p.214). It would seem this could compound the negative impact of adult's direction of children's play as inexperience with making their own decisions could lead to children being uncertain and dependent on the instructions of others.

Gray (2013) explored what he calls a "directive-protective parenting style" (p. 214) that has evolved in response to societal changes in both neighbourhoods and families. Like Milteer et

al. (2012), Gray acknowledged the idea that not knowing one's neighbours can lead to less time outdoors for children, however, he also brought to light the effects of more demanding work schedules and decreasing family sizes. Gray suggested that smaller and more geographically fragmented families have led to us having fewer interactions and less experience with children. Thus, when new families are started our inexperience can lead us to look to parenting experts who often incite fear regarding every malady or mishap imaginable (Gray, 2013).

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*I think back to the stack of child development books from my early childhood education program that I dragged out as references when I was newly pregnant. I quickly added to this stack, wanting to learn all I could about this new being that I would soon be responsible for. Coming from a small family that immigrated to Canada when I was very young meant that I had limited experience with infants. There had been no younger siblings or cousins to practice on and any babysitting jobs I had were generally with older children. As Gray (2013) accurately stated, I sought out answers from the so-called experts. In many instances this advice was conflicting and sometimes in opposition to my instincts which only added to the confusion of being newly responsible for a child. Looking back, I think my role as an early childhood educator came into play here as well. Although I promoted exploration and play-based learning in my practice there was also a focus on children's health and safety. Perhaps the regular discussions regarding childhood illnesses and other concerns that I engaged in as an educator of young children contributed to my own anxiety and protectiveness as a parent. I often wonder if the discrepancy between how I played as a child and the way I guided my own children's play would have been less had I not been an early childhood educator for so many years. Much of the parenting literature I read and certainly my pre-service education, maintained a developmental view of children. This 'ages and stages' manner of looking at*

*how children grow and learn seems to mean adult decisions about children are based on linear steps rather than individualized circumstances. In the context of these books, risk was often presented as being something that could endanger a child because it was beyond their assumed ability. There was also the risk of children not performing at the expected level for their developmental stage. In this sense, risk was presented in a negative light; something to fear and avoid.*

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Sandseter and Kennair (2011) explored risky play from an evolutionary slant. It is suggested that risky play could have evolved due to psychological reasons. During infancy, humans initially developed intrinsic fears to protect them from dangers that existed in the surrounding environment, such as falling from heights or wandering off in the dark. In terms of parents and caregivers, it is thought that their evaluation of risk may be influenced by those roles and “may increase adaptive worry in order to keep children safe” (Sandseter & Kennair, 2011, p. 264). For children, risky play served the purpose of a motivator as it provided a pleasurable thrill when children experienced elements they once feared. Play that involved elements of risk associated with these fears could gradually lead the child to overcome their aversion as they enjoyed the excitement that was evoked by their behaviour. Sandseter and Kennair (2011) further suggest that inhibiting children’s opportunities to engage in risky play can lead to greater instances of anxiety in children as it limits their chances to master challenges within their abilities. It would seem there is a need to determine an effective means to reframe risk as being beneficial rather than something to avoid. Adults may be more equipped to manage their own worries about protecting their children, as they become more comfortable with the concept of

risky play. In turn, this could alleviate some of the anxiety that children may feel when occasions to experience challenging situations have been limited.

A concern with this evolutionary theory, as explained by Sandseter and Kennair (2011), is that it maintains a developmental focus on children with references to ‘normal’, ‘universal’, and ‘age relevant’ processes. Presenting children in this way echoes the linear process of development that can continue to play on adult fears, particularly those of parents. While I appreciate the messaging regarding the positive attributes of fear and risk, the position taken here is problematic in terms of advancing children as capable individuals (Mayall, 2000; James & Prout, 1997). This theory maintains a deficit approach to children as risky play is presented as a deterrent to anxious and phobic behaviour. While I recognize the culminating effects of worry, insecurity, and anxiety that can come with the overprotection of children there may be greater value for both children and adults by placing emphasis on what is to be gained rather than what we wish to prevent. As Gray (2013) stated, “the surest way to foster any trait in a person is to treat that person as if he or she already has it” (p. 219). If we want children to be confident and capable then it seems we need to treat them as such. When instances of worry do arise in children perhaps we are best to turn our attention to helping them develop coping skills to manage their anxiety instead of fearing their vulnerability (Hewitt-Taylor & Heaslip, 2012) as much of the available literature geared to parents and educators leads us to do.

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*It does seem like there is a slight shift that is occurring in terms of messaging to adults about children's play. Growing concerns about children's decreasing physical activity levels and increasing use of screens seems to have*



*heightened interest in reconnecting with nature and the outdoors. While I have questioned the influence of my early childhood educator practice on my parenting (a word that I am reluctant to use), I also wonder about the impact of our urban environment. Would things be different if we lived in a rural setting, such as the one that I enjoyed during my early years? Visits to a friend's rural home (and vice versa) when we both had young children certainly highlighted the differences related to the environments they were growing up in. When visiting us, my friend's children were wide-eyed at the business of the city and seemed overwhelmed with negotiating traffic, both vehicular and pedestrian. On the other hand, my children struggled with stray branches in the woods and threatening insects while visiting our friend's home. Having grown up with woods as my backyard and the barn as my playhouse, I felt an inner embarrassment. It seemed that my own children had become the 'city kids' from my past.*

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Literature exploring the differences between the play of urban children versus those who live in rural settings is limited. Creighton, Brussoni, Oliffe, and Olsen (2015) present a Canadian perspective that explored fathers' views on play in three different contexts: rural, small urban, and large urban settings. A focus on how different genders approach play is beyond the scope of this paper, however much of the available Canadian research on children's risky play is centered on health and safety (Brussoni et al., 2015; Brussoni, Olsen, Pike, & Sleet, 2012; Tremblay et al., 2015). While Creighton et al. (2015) explore the roles of active play from the view of a single gender, the urban-rural comparison and Canadian context are both unique and valuable to this work.

Creighton et al. (2015) found that fathers in the large urban setting viewed active play as a means to promote their children's physical and emotional development, and self esteem as they became proficient in new skills. These children mostly engaged in active play pursuits within the city that were closely supervised by their fathers. While the fathers expressed enjoyment of spending this time together, wanting to oversee their children's activities was related to a desire to keep them safe. In comparison, the fathers in the small urban setting saw active play as affording opportunities to enjoy the outdoors and become tough. These fathers appreciated active play more for instructive purposes than relationship building. Learning through exploratory ways were viewed as supporting development, which could come from both good and bad experiences. Acquiring the ability to manage risk and determine limits were seen by these fathers as beneficial to their children, with minor injuries being viewed as opportunities to learn and build character. Similar to fathers from urban contexts, rural fathers also spent time outdoors with their children yet the role of these experiences was centered around the development of skills related to functioning in their rural setting. In contrast to the urban fathers, play was valued for building independence and self-determination that could develop into necessary life skills associated with their rural context. Learning to fish or use tools may be a part of children's play; however, these are valued skills that speak to the self-reliance that can come from living in a rural context (Creighton et al., 2015).

While all of the fathers in this study (Creighton et al., 2015) supported the notion of risky play as a means to foster confidence, development and competence, the fathers in the urban setting were in favour of close supervision for safety reasons. Risk taking by these children came in the form of structured activities such as swimming or skating that were supervised by adults.

A notable point was that although these urban fathers seemed to have concerns about the safety of unsupervised play they also appeared to maintain an awareness that the stranger-danger they experienced was unsubstantiated. This speaks to the matter of societal influences that can inhibit children's access to independent play opportunities. Fathers from both urban and rural settings also regarded active play as being valuable for children and maintained a view of children that was focused on strengths (Creighton et al., 2015). Taken together, this information could be useful in advancing views of children as competent and capable beings that are founded in the sociology of childhood (James & Prout, 1997; Mayall, 2000).

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*While the available literature exploring rural-urban contexts is limited, it seems that there are differing parental views that can influence how children are able to play. My thoughts constantly return to the girl suspended upside down in my barn. I imagine her outdoor play to have included much more supervision than anything I was used to. Perhaps strict rules or a lack of decision making opportunities had contributed to her fate that day. The fact that neither myself or my older sister can recall if this girl actually fell or was rescued somehow leads me to believe that the latter scenario is what took place. Certainly, a headfirst fall onto a concrete floor would have been much more eventful than an older person coming to unhook her pant leg, thus, registering in at least one of our memories. While telling this story to others I have occasionally joked that this "poor girl has probably been scarred for life." However, in retrospect I like to think that this is not the case as it places her in that vulnerable space that is bound by deficit views of children. While I have no way of determining the truth about the outcome of this memory, I prefer to imagine her telling this anecdote much like I do: as a hysterically funny story that doubles as a cautionary tale about hazardous, rather than risky, play.*

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Sandseter (2009) identified risky play activities as those that bring together thrills and excitement with the perceived risk of being physically injured. Together, children's actions, based on their perception of risk, and the features of the physical environment will determine the level of risk that exists in the play experience. Little and Eager (2010) expanded on this idea of risk to include occasions when we must decide what action to take, even though there is no guarantee of what the outcome will be. This broader view acknowledges the fact that some play decisions may result in injury, however, it is important to note that small cuts, scrapes, and bruises are part of a typical and healthy childhood. When there are opportunities for children to explore through play, they can become more aware of their abilities and limits as a means to inform their play decisions.

Bourke and Sargisson's (2014) study explored the playground preferences of children under the age of fifteen in New Zealand. Through natural observation they found incidences of children developing new ways of engaging with the play equipment, which differed from the intended use and frequently involved elements of risk. Hyndman and Telford (2015) saw a similar response from nine to thirteen year old children in Australia who reported that perceived boredom led to their breaking of playground rules and engaging in risky play. While these studies included children beyond the early years of childhood, these findings (Bourke & Sargisson, 2014; Hyndman & Telford, 2015) suggest that restrictive rules and efforts to design play spaces with safety in mind may actually instigate play experiences that could compromise children's safety.

Caro et al. (2016) and Hyndman and Telford (2015) offer two recent examples of studies examining children's perspectives on outdoor play related to their playground use and physical activity. It is noted that the youngest of these children were nine which may be considered to be beyond the scope of early years practice, however, participatory studies of this nature are limited. A commonality that was found among the participants in both of these studies was a general dislike of rules that controlled or limited play. Caro et al.'s (2015) study of Dutch nine to twelve year old children highlighted that children appreciated the necessity of some rules but wished to provide input on what should be controlled and thus, gain more independence on the playground. A flexible playground and rules that focused on social and physical safety, rather than restricting their actions, were thought to be indicative of environments that would support play that was both active and fun. Hyndman and Telford (2015) asserted that the nine to thirteen year old Australian children in their study expressed that teacher imposed restrictions on outdoor play indicated a desire to eliminate students' risky play. Children appeared to feel these measures could inadvertently contribute to a lack of stimulation, increased injuries, and lower physical activity levels. The children in these studies were well aware of the tension that can exist between adults and children when it comes to having fun, yet they also recognized the potential concerns of having either too few or too many playground rules (Caro et al., 2016; Hyndman & Telford, 2015). This supports the view that children are capable of making decisions about how they can and should play.

It appears both the Dutch and Australian children had the capacity to acknowledge that safety is a consideration in their play (Caro et al., 2016; Hyndman & Telford, 2015). It is also notable that all of these children perceived adult imposed rules to be controlling (Caro et al.,

2016; Hyndman & Telford, 2015). It seems that a common theme expressed by these children is that their interests, insight, and guidance should be at the forefront in terms of playground design and the related rules that are developed.

Beattie (2015) and Green (2013) are two examples that give voice to younger children which is unique and may provide a stimulus for filling a gap in the literature. These studies also provide a North American perspective that advances the notion that children have an intrinsic inclination towards play that may include elements of risk (Sandseter, 2010). Green's (2013) study explored the 'special places' of three to five year old American children and determined that children of this age also desired some control over their outdoor play. Spaces beyond the structured confines of their backyards were more likely to achieve the designation of a 'special place'. Green (2013) proposes that children may have felt better able to dictate the rules of play when they were outside the boundaries of their yards. Yet it is also noted that these children appeared to value the support of their parents while venturing beyond the perimeters of the more organized spaces. This may be considered indicative of young children requiring a greater level of supervision than the older children in the studies conducted by Caro et al. (2016) and Hyndman and Telford (2015). Indeed it seems some of the children in Caro et al.'s (2016) study maintained this perception as they expressed a need for young children to have playgrounds that are safe.

This is not to say that younger children are not attracted to play that includes elements that could be considered risky. Acknowledging that there is a gap in the literature when it comes to including young children's views on environmental education, Beattie (2015) recently explored a three year old Canadian child's perspectives on outdoor play. Beattie's (2015)

interests were focused on the child's favoured activities when playing outdoors and also included the child's thoughts about playing outside and characteristics of this child's outdoor play. This exploratory case study found the child's play preferences to be centred around play that was 'fast'. This desire was expressed repeatedly and with excitement through the child's drawings and on playground visits involving swings and slides (Beattie, 2015). While these findings are based on the play preferences of one child, Beattie (2015) and Green (2013) remind us of the necessity to ensure that children's individuality is central to their play experiences. Decisions about how children should play that are based solely on 'ages and stages' do not respect children as beings in their own right.

Taken together, these four studies (Beattie, 2015; Caro et al., 2016; Green, 2013; Hyndman & Telford, 2015) support the notion that children perceive outdoor play as an area where they are capable of determining their own boundaries. While adult efforts to look out for their physical or social safety may be appreciated by some children, attempts to control children's explorations and play with risk are not. Guiding children in the development of risk assessment skills can support their ability to play in ways that are both autonomous and safe (Ball, Gill, & Spiegel, 2013a). Part of this responsibility includes identifying the difference between hazards, risks, and being safe as outlined in the *Managing risk in play provision: Implementation guide* (Ball, Gill, & Spiegel, 2013a). This document intends to guide adults in determining how to weigh the possible benefits of an activity against its potential risks. It can be seen that by drawing on the information provided in this guide, a risk can be equated with the chance of a less than optimal outcome. Cuts, scrapes, sprained ankles, and even broken arms are not life threatening injuries and there is an awareness that they could occur during play. Ball et

al. (2013a) identify hazards as being the probable source of an injury, such as nails in the trunk of a tree that a child wants to climb. It is asserted that eliminating all potential hazards is not a reasonable reality, or even a desirable one. Rather, we should learn to identify possible hazards and then respond based on individual assessment. In the case of the tree, an appropriate response would be to remove the nails or climb elsewhere. According to Ball et al. (2013a), “bad risks and hazards are those that are difficult or impossible for children to assess for themselves, and that have no obvious benefits” (n.p.).

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*This is where the challenge lies, as evaluating what constitutes a bad risk can be subjective. In terms of the narrative presented here, the barn held many hazards that we either addressed or avoided. We covered the concrete floor with hay and we steered clear of the rotted hayloft at the back of the barn. The play that I experienced in my barn was filled with good risks and some hazards that I learned to navigate successfully, while the play of my less experienced visitor featured bad risk and a hazard in the form of the sliding door track that snagged her pants.*

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## Underground

I brush dirt from my hair and wait for my eyes to adjust to the dark. The smell of faintly damp earth penetrates my nostrils, a reminder of the intense heat and scarcity of rain that has permeated the summer. Underground, the fort offers a cool reprise from the day's heat, even with eight pre-adolescent bodies filling the space. Slivers of daylight sneak through small spaces between the logs and branches that form the roof. I don't mention that I am thankful our camouflage of dirt, decaying leaves, and small branches has not prevented these small shafts of light from getting through the log roof. Complete darkness is just too dark for me, and I am happy for the limited visibility we have. Someone has brought a tape player and we listen in anticipation to the eerie opening chords of a favourite song, waiting for the moment when we can belt out the lyrics that we all know so well: "Generals gathered in their masses, Just like witches at black masses..." (Iommi & Osbourne, 1970). Hidden as we are in our private space beneath the surface, we are oblivious to level of our noise and bask in the electric excitement that comes from

knowing [thinking] we cannot be found. We meet at the fort daily where we sing songs, tease, and laugh. We are children; doing nothing and doing everything depending on the version of events you want to consider. Until one day the fort is hijacked by someone's older brother and his friends and we have to start scouting new locations and developing revised plans to build anew.



. . . .

*The fort building activities that I engaged in during my youth involved many elements which are now often categorized as 'risky play'. We easily manipulated tools that are often considered to be adult items. We navigated potentially dangerous elements, such as fire and deep pits, and would travel through the woods on our own to meet up with each other. This is not to say*

*that we engaged in these activities without thought. In fact, I recall mentally acknowledging the possibility of a collapse when I first crawled down into that underground fort. My reassurance was that someone had intentionally included two entrances in the plan, thereby building in an escape route. I also recall thinking that there were enough of us that we would be able to create a path out, if necessary. We had spent time jumping up and down on the roof to test its strength before venturing underground. In the event that anyone happened to walk by, we wanted them to cross the roof unaware that we were hiding below. So while we did not necessarily consider our play to be risky the attention paid to these details indicates that we knew there was risk of injury that needed to be addressed before using our fort. I clearly felt that the fun that would be had in the fort was beneficial enough to outweigh the chance of injury.*

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## **Loosening the Bolts**

While not a familiar term during my 1970s and 80s childhood, ‘loose parts’ were certainly part of my everyday play. The use of tools and play that involves ‘loose parts’, such as logs, wood slices, tires, and hay bales, is part of a growing body of research that supports providing children with these natural and found materials to promote safe access to risky play (Bundy et al., 2009; Bundy et al., 2011; Caro et al., 2016). Materials that do not have a predetermined play purpose can allow for children’s own ideas and interpretations to be more easily inserted in their play. Loose parts materials seem to be a natural fit with the physical-knowledge approach as it is grounded in the way children use and respond to the objects they come in contact with (Kamii & Devries, 1978/1993). Although loose parts provide multiple ways for children to experiment with the movement and mechanics of objects, many educational

settings seem to shy away from them due to concerns about possible injuries and the necessity of their prevention.

When educational settings do implement the use of loose parts materials in their playgrounds, the effects of their inclusion have shown benefits for children in a number of ways. For example, Bundy et al. (2009) introduced loose parts to an Australian primary school playground in an effort to increase children's physical activity and explore teacher's perceptions of any changes in risky play opportunities for children. Interestingly enough, findings did not show an increase in injury occurrence but did indicate an increase in children's activity levels, creativity, and social play. Loose parts often have no clear intended purpose so from a child's point of view, there may be little preexisting social knowledge. This may have contributed to the observed increase in creative and social play because children were free to impose their own rules and purposes onto the materials (Bundy et al., 2009). Kamii and Devries (1978/1993) asserted that physical-knowledge activities were beneficial to children who were less inclined to experiment during play due to their fear of being wrong, or the regulations they were bound by. In this sense, the open-ended nature of play with loose parts may enable these children to explore more freely as there are no obvious 'right' or 'wrong' ways to use the materials.

Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff (2008) propose that academic skills can be supported by both free play and play that is guided by educators. They also speak to the necessity of children spending time outdoors, particularly when outdoor play is seen to be in decline. Taken together these assertions support the inclusion of loose parts materials as an essential and indispensable element of early years play spaces. These materials offer flexibility and potential as they do not have a predetermined purpose and children have the ability to move materials around the

playground. This opens opportunities for children to continually construct and reconstruct their environment according to their own abilities and play requirements. The types of play that loose parts seem to incite, including social, creative and risky play, support the skills that Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff (2008) feel will prepare children for the future. It seems there is a need for early childhood practice to be more responsive to the expressed needs of children by highlighting the importance of loose parts materials in framework documents and standards of practice.

While loose parts can be one way to provide children with more autonomy in their play there is still the tension with respect to adult control over issues that concern children, particularly in the case of play. Winner (1986) illustrates the historical pattern that has led to the “justification [of] authority” (p. 129) and adult control over children’s actions. According to Winner (1986), the underlying motivation for authority is a political one. In particular, this can be seen in elements of design that can support the formation of habits related to authority and power. When one considers the affordances of loose parts, in contrast to the limitations of fixed playground materials, the elements of design that control children’s behaviour become apparent. Fixed playground equipment can control children’s play experiences in ways that may be both subtle and overt. This is an intriguing thought that gives cause to question how political factors may permeate thinking without us being fully aware of its presence. Who is influencing the decisions that are being made for children and what is their motivation?

The notion of authority and children’s play can be examined through a two year study that aimed to increase school children’s physical activity levels through risky and imaginative play spaces (Farmer et al., 2017). Primary schools in New Zealand were provided with some initial start-up funds to make playground changes and were encouraged to relax playground

rules. Educators also introduced loose parts such as tires, ropes and logs into the playground. Notable amongst the themes that emerged from this study was a change of attitude on behalf of the educators. Educators observed children's play and waited before intervening during outdoor play supervision as opposed to always defaulting to "No." This seemed to lead educators to question the motivation behind many of the previously existing playground rules that limited where and how children could play. In turn they began to think more deeply about the play itself rather than the rules of the play space. Many of the playgrounds also became unbound in terms of physical space, with few or no areas of the school's outdoor space being off limits to the children. There was also a removal of rules that divided the play space according to children's grade level. By prioritizing the children's ability to play freely over the need for rules and authority, the educators could see the increased play opportunities that became available to the children and thus, the new physical and social skills that could develop through their play. Some of the schools did report to Farmer et al. (2017) that there were parental and educator concerns regarding safety but there were also many new families attracted to these schools due to the more relaxed approach to outdoor play.

Related to the concept of authority is the issue of surveillance (Nolan, Raynes-Goldie & McBride, 2011). Parental fears seem to be a main contributing factor in children's declining access to unsupervised play. Pressure to ensure children are busy and safe may actually be placing their health and well being at greater risk (Ginsburg, 2011). Children need opportunities to learn how to assess risk and weigh the potential benefits against outcomes that may be less favourable. These skills will help them to negotiate decisions while playing outside yet are transferable to all areas of life. Constant supervision promotes the perception of children as

vulnerable beings who are in need of adult protection, rather than capable social agents. While there is certainly value in providing for children's safety there is also a need to promote parent's ability to empower children when it comes to decision making. In a society where parents are often dichotomized as either 'free range parents' or 'helicopters', it can be challenging to know where to place the bounding lines in terms of our children's play particularly when that play takes place outside. Even when parents are present as their children play there can be a degree to which the level of supervision provided is deemed adequate, or not, according to the subjective standards of other adults. The tense and changing balance that exists between keeping children safe and supporting their risk-taking behaviour is of concern and appears to grow as structured activities and the supervision of children becomes the norm.

Huizinga (1938/1970) explored both this tension and the concept of play as a voluntary activity. This tension speaks to the precariousness of play; there is a certain amount of chance that can be found in play that is loosely bound yet possibility can also be easily eliminated in the name of safety. The societal focus on structured, adult-supervised activities for Western children seems to have greatly reduced the amount of free time available to them (Sutton, 2008). While these activities may have the appeal of being fun they can often lack the imagination and unpredictability that are enmeshed in children's free play experiences. Formalized activities can be based on systems that involve conformity and structure and are thus more closely related to work than play. It could be argued that some children find these activities enjoyable; however, not all that is enjoyable is play. While Huizinga (1938/1970) spoke to the notion of rules and the presence that they had in all instances of play, my concern lies with who has determined the rules. The freedom to choose how and what can be played is the foundation where all play

should begin. If these decisions are being made for children rather than by children, then the source of any tension that existed there seems to have lost its authenticity and purpose. Leaving space in children's days, where they can have the freedom to explore their own interests and abilities, could create opportunities where tensions of a personal nature can be better explored. Play that has been structured by children themselves allows them to develop the self-regulation and negotiating skills that can support them as they navigate decision making (Gray, 2013). Being driven by internal motivations can serve as an effective means to foster confidence, creativity, and adaptability in ways that are more meaningful and promote continuity of these skills across the lifespan.

The tension between free play and play that is bound, as discussed by Huizinga (1938/1970), is related to children's capacity to negotiate the risky elements that can occur during free play in the outdoors. The ways in which adults approach children's risk taking behaviour is particularly interesting as it seems to change and adapt as children's capacity to negotiate risk increases. Huizinga (1938/1970) discussed a baby reaching for a toy as an example of taking a chance while playing. This stands out as being reflective of the actions that take place when children are learning to walk. Grounded in elements of uncertainty and risk, learning to walk sees parents and carers engaged in enthusiastic encouragement. However, once this feat has been accomplished the focus turns to control and containment in an effort to prevent every instance of risk imaginable. Objects that hold interest and appeal to young children are removed to higher spaces out of reach, baby gates are installed in an effort to blockade possible dangers or children are simply placed in 'play pens' to ensure they are safely corralled. What began as a child's playful experimentation with their body can lead to frustration as we attempt to eliminate



the possibility of chance from all of the risky experiences mobility might bring. In Western society there exists a growing industry of endless devices that are designed to further ensure children's safety, such as toilet locks, video monitors, and even knee-pads for infants learning to crawl. These pieces of equipment bolster the assumption that children are susceptible to injury and therefore reinforce parental anxiety, and their duty to constantly watch over children and keep them safe.

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*I wonder how this constant observation may influence children's actions. It seems that continually being watched could lead to self-consciousness. The contrast between my own memories illustrates that point, in both my actions and the music that my memory has attached to these events. My childhood visit to the pond presents itself as an almost whimsical experience while the scene in the fort contains elements of drama and an almost forbidden sense of fun. These stark differences went unnoticed until my current reflections. The almost innate desire to hide, away from the prying eyes of adults, speaks to the control that I felt the need to escape in later childhood. There was a sudden expectation that I would have rules to follow and this was something that I had rarely experienced as a young child. This was perhaps related to the move away from the secluded security of the farm. Another contributing factor could have been the new and different dangers that could become a concern as I approached my teenage years. Whatever the reason, these new demands were reflected in my choice of play and play spaces. If you are going to control me, I am going to hide.*

• • • •

The culture of children, and how adults often attempt to infiltrate or exert control over it is particularly interesting. This issue has become significantly more prevalent in recent times

although as Jenkins (1998) points out, there have been different societal opinions on the amount of freedom children should be afforded. Jenkins (1998) discussed the necessity of children liberating themselves from parental rule as a means of preparation for future independence, however, this places the emphasis on what children are going to ‘become’ rather than on what they currently ‘are’ (Albanese, 2009; Mayall, 2000). In an effort to recognize children as independent thinkers and actors it would be beneficial for the emphasis to be on their current identities. When examining play that is less closely supervised by adults, the way that children and youth are currently viewed in and by the public is problematic. By today’s standards, it seems children who are in public without close proximity of an adult to direct their actions are seen to be either at risk or delinquent, dependent on their age. Furthermore, adults who allow their children the freedom to explore independently are often subject to being judged as irresponsible parents or carers.

The prevalence of the shift in this vein is clear when one considers that almost fifty years ago children were seen as “people going about their own business within their own society” and “fully capable of occupying themselves under the jurisdiction of their own code” (Opie & Opie, 1969, p. 5). A growing body of research related to children’s risky play (Brussoni et al., 2012; Bundy et al., 2009; Bundy et al., 2011; Hyndman & Telford, 2015; Little & Eager, 2010; Little & Wyver, 2010; Sandseter, 2009; Sandseter & Sando, 2016) indicates that it may be time for another swing of the pendulum that Jenkins (1998) speaks of with respect to societal views about children’s autonomy.

• • • •

*While I wonder if it is possible for children to experience autonomous play in their communities that is reflective of my own memories, I also appreciate that those experiences are situated in a context of their own. It seems that the value is not in trying to replicate those types of moments for children, but to continue to use them as a point of reference as I explore how children were and are positioned in society.*

### **“Don’t Fall”**

As I near the park playground I slow my pace, allowing my dog to sniff and nose around while I take in the young children playing on the climber. A child of about three or four is climbing up the ladder and chattering excitedly to an adult below. “Be careful”, I hear the adult say. This is one of the common phrases that I hear directed at children when I am out walking my dog. It is intended to protect them, but in fact controls them, and I find myself stiffening every time I hear it. I wonder how many times I must have given voice to the very same words. I am sure many of the parents, educators, and care providers who toss these words around do not even realize what they are saying or the frequency of their warnings. I continue past the playground and leave the park, returning to the sidewalk that runs alongside an old stone retaining wall. There are many such walls in my community and I pass them often while walking my dog. Halfway up the block I see a child triumphantly succeed in pulling themselves up onto the wall, roll onto their side, and push themselves into a standing position. Slowly placing one foot in front of the other they begin

their balance beam routine, arms stretched out into space for equilibrium sake, not unlike an airplane. Then comes the unavoidable warning: "Don't fall" the adult calls out in a singsong voice, planting the possibility of danger where moments before there was none. This makes me wonder: how does one respond to an order such as 'don't fall'? Surely intentional falls are a rare occurrence. I know how I would like to respond, but I don't. At the end of the block, the dismount is accompanied by urges to 'be careful' and fervent offers of assistance in the form of a hand to hold, regardless of the fact that the child appears to be both physically and mentally capable of much greater feats than this. I resist the urge to interrupt this scene and many like it, but secretly and silently I cheer on the balancers as they refuse help and leap into the air...



• • • •

*While 'be careful' seems to be the battle cry of the adults in the playground 'don't fall' is the phrase I hear most often on the sidewalks. The retaining walls, intended to hold back the earth, have for me become symbolic of the intent of those adults on holding back their young charges. Children wanting to climb and conquer these walls seems to be inevitable, and also symbolic of their need to break free from the restraining boundaries that adults can so often impose. It is a way for children to assert themselves as capable and independent beings. Seeing this tension play out in the public space of my community brings me back to my questioning around how children seem to be positioned and treated within our current societal context. There is no doubt for me that unnecessary bounding of children's outdoor play can be detrimental for many of the reasons related to the development of physical, social, and cognitive growth of children which I have discussed. However, shifting the gaze from an angle that is focused on protection to one that illuminates proficiency will need to happen through many small and precise steps, not unlike those taken atop of that retaining wall.*

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## **Reframing Risk**

Through this exploration of children's outdoor play it can be seen that the changing ways in which we live can contribute to the ways in which children are viewed within Western society. It seems that more geographically dispersed families, messaging from media and parenting experts, and not knowing one's neighbours have been contributing factors in leading to focused attention on children's safety and protection. While it has been acknowledged here that making provisions for the safety of children is considered to be a worthwhile and necessary endeavour, actions and regulations in this vein can often go too far in attempting to eliminate all potential risks. Research has indicated that anxiety can be linked to children's inexperience with the problem solving and decision making opportunities that can come with risky play (Milteer, Ginsburg, Mulligan, 2012; Sandseter & Kennair, 2011). It seems that a cyclical situation has been created where adult concerns related to safety lead to views that see children as being vulnerable and thus incapable of appropriately judging their own play decisions. This can limit children's outdoor play opportunities and chances to practice and develop skills such as climbing, assessing heights, and knowing one's own limits which in turn can leave them vulnerable to injury. Determining where the balance between safety and risk lies can be challenging for adults due to multiple contextual considerations such as the differing individual needs and abilities of children and the variety of settings where children's outdoor play can take place. Recommendations in terms of reframing risk should be equally diverse and adaptable to a variety of situations.

When considering the supervision of children during outdoor play, common concerns seem to be related to physical safety and how one who allows their children to play outdoors

independently may be perceived by other adults. In an effort to once again normalize the idea of children playing outdoors without the direct supervision of an adult I look to the street-play initiatives that have been growing in popularity in the UK. Closing residential streets to traffic for predetermined and regularly scheduled times creates situations where children can experience free play in their community. This initiative has been recently adopted here in Canada, with Earth Day Canada organizing a pilot project on a number of Toronto streets in July and August of 2017 (Earth Day Canada, n.d.). The concept of these programs is to simply place barriers at either end of a street and allow the children to play. While there are volunteers on hand to ensure that no traffic enters the street, they are not responsible for supervision of the children (Earth Day Canada, n.d.).

I first heard of these street play programs from Tim Gill (personal communication, May 15, 2015), a UK play advocate who writes and speaks on the benefits of risky play. While I appreciated the simplicity and potential of this concept as an effective way to get more children playing outdoors, I had concerns about structuring and bounding of play that could come from the presence of adults. It seemed to me that many adults would find it challenging to resist organizing a street ball tournament of some sort or imposing restrictions on the children's play. Gill assured me that in his experience this may initially happen to a small degree but as these 'playing out' days became less of a novelty the parents seemed to spend the time socializing with other adults rather than directly supervising the children's play.

It seems initiatives that promote free play in public spaces such as residential streets can not only increase children's opportunities for free play outdoors but also allow people to become better acquainted with their neighbours. These street play initiatives seem to hold great potential



in terms of children's access to spontaneous outdoor play, as Milteer et al. (2012) expressed that not knowing one's neighbours was a deterrent to allowing children to play outdoors. Casually observing children's play, rather than being directly involved, may provide instances for adults to see children demonstrate their capacity to negotiate their own rules and structures for their play. These street play initiatives could create openings for adults to become accustomed to the idea of children playing outdoors and help to normalize unsupervised play in communities, particularly in urban contexts.

If adults can become comfortable with children engaging in unsupervised or loosely supervised play and the risky behaviours that could occur in those situations then perhaps older children and youth may be less inclined to feel the need to hide from adults, as I did. While it is acknowledged that children seem to have innate desires to create secret or special play spaces (Sobel, 1993), it also seems likely that this could stem from wanting to evade the judgment and control of adults. While I imagine that these events would be primarily attractive to families with young children, the potential to change how children and their play are perceived in public could also benefit older children and youth.

An important factor in terms of the feasibility of these programs would be the ease with which permits are available. Municipalities should take steps to ensure that the process of obtaining street closure permits is simplified, with regards to required paperwork and logistics. For example, allowing flexibility for methods of physically blocking streets off for play could facilitate communities' ability and willingness to provide street play opportunities. Waiving permit fees that are usually associated with street closures could ensure that street play options are financially accessible to all communities. This could create situations where families living

on the same street could organize their own street play days, rather than relying on organizations to do it for them. Promoting such initiatives seems to hold great potential, not only in terms of changing adult perceptions of risky play, but also in advancing the view that children are valued members of the communities that they live in.

On behalf of Play Scotland, Play England, Play Wales, and PlayBoard Northern Ireland, Gill, Ball and Spiegel (2013b) co-authored the *Play Safety Forum Risk-Benefit Assessment Form* as a tool to help adults determine the appropriateness and value of specific risky play opportunities. This document contains a fillable form and information related to children's risky play and an example of a completed Risk-Benefit Assessment form intended to support educators and carers in making decisions about children's risky play situations. Promoting and expanding on this type of messaging to all adults that have pedagogical interests in the play of children could nurture the reconceptualization of risk in terms of children's outdoor play. However, determining effective methods of delivering information, particularly to families, can prove to be challenging. One recent initiative that could address this need is an internet-based Canadian project called Outsideplay.ca, which is a collaborative effort between the University of British Columbia, BC Children's Hospital and the BC Injury Research and Prevention Unit (outsideplay.ca, n.d.). Geared towards parents and carers, the site provides clear information that fosters positive attitudes towards children's outdoor play and adult perceptions of risky play. Through the use of interactive video scenarios, practical information, and resources to promote concrete changes in behaviour, it seems this tool can help adults acquire positive ideas about children's outdoor play. This shifting of adult perceptions can help to increase adults' confidence when it comes to supporting children's risky play and independence.

Another step towards promoting the rich and varied play experiences, which children have expressed as being desirable, would entail the inclusion of children when designing outdoor play spaces. This could prove to be an effective means to both deepen adult understanding of children's thoughts and needs, while also prioritizing the rights of children in situations that pertain to them and their lives (Grieshaber, 2007). Creating the space for open and ongoing dialogue with children can advance a more participatory and equal atmosphere, further promoting the agency of children and elevating societal perceptions of their capabilities.

As previously mentioned, children have expressed a desire for playgrounds that are flexible (Caro et al., 2016). Implementing loose parts into daily practice could be an effective way for educators to offer children the types of exciting and flexible play they want without compromising the necessity of injury prevention. If adults and children engage in a collaborative screening of the materials to remove or repair any broken or potentially hazardous items this could provide opportunities for dialogue related to risk assessment. Adults may gain confidence in children's abilities to assess risk based on personal abilities and thereby, be better able to trust them in making appropriate play decisions when using loose parts materials.

There appears to be a limited availability of literature regarding the use of loose parts to enhance children's play. While the concept of implementing loose parts into children's play spaces appears to be rather uncomplicated, Farmer et al. (2017) did express some notable considerations. Procuring and then storing the materials were both revealed to be areas of concern for educators who participated in this study. An appealing element of loose parts materials is that they are often 'found' materials or items that are not wanted by others, such as old tires and logs. This means that the cost is often minimal or non-existent however, locating

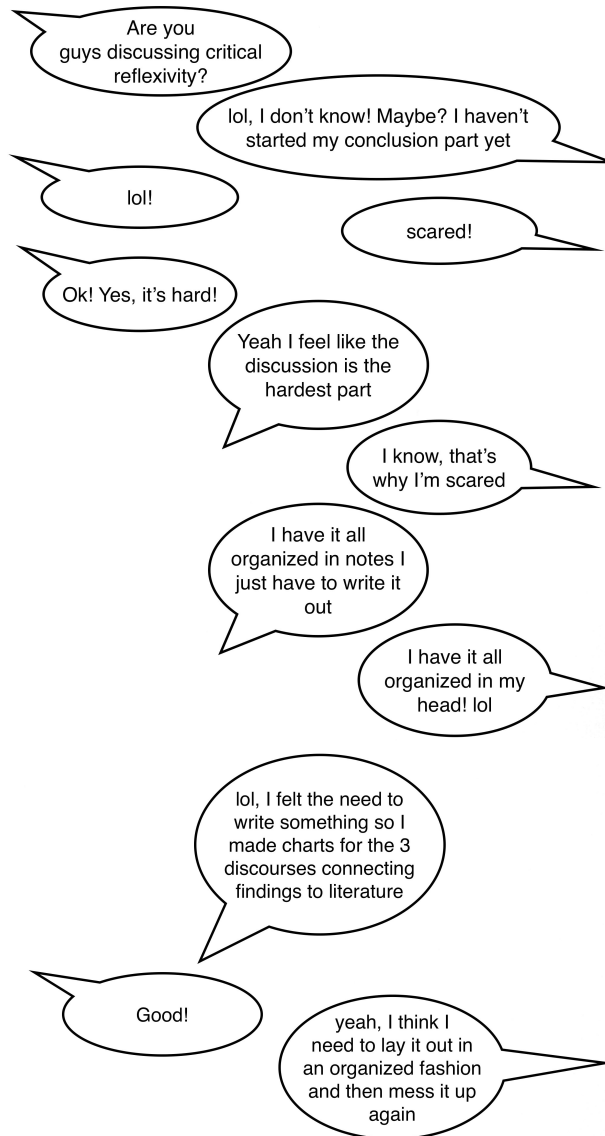
and collecting these items can require a considerable amount of time and effort that many educators may find prohibitive. Farmer et al. (2017) also asserted that storage of the loose parts materials was an issue for schools. When considering the use of loose parts in a Canadian context it becomes clear that both storage options and the materials used would need to be appropriate for a wide variety of weather conditions. It does seem that the benefits of using loose parts materials could far outweigh these potential concerns, particularly in terms of children's creative and social play (Bundy et al., 2009) and reframing educator's perceptions of risk (Farmer et al., 2017). More research exploring the use of loose parts, particularly studies reflective of our Canadian context, could be an effective means to inform best practices and promote children's access to unbounded play.

In looking back at play experiences from different stages of my childhood, I often felt the contrast between my own play and the play of children today was closely related to time and how our perceptions of children have changed. While I certainly believe that changes in time and societal views are strong contributors to the ways that children can be seen as requiring protection I found the differing views from rural contexts, as presented by Creighton et al. (2015) to be a particularly interesting element of this work. There is value in exploring how perceptions of children can differ according to the settings in which they live. Further research exploring the contrasts between the outdoor play of children in urban and rural contexts could be beneficial in terms of fostering adult views that are more comfortable with children bounding their own play. However, I am also cognizant of the fact that the play that occurs in rural spaces will always differ from that in urban settings. While there I feel there is a need to reframe risk, particularly in terms of children's play, it seems there is also a need for urban communities to prioritize spaces

that allow free play to occur. If municipalities and educational institutions employ design and policy processes that are more attentive to and inclusive of children's views then perhaps societal perspectives of children can be shifted and create openings for more freedom and risk in children's outdoor play.

## Unshackled

A message alert pops up on the screen of my phone. With a quick glance I can see that it is from my MRP writing group:



I reach for a notebook, ready to bite the bullet and start organizing and analyzing all that I have written and thought over the past months. Although I

take great efforts to avoid structure I also know it is an essential part of my process. I begin grouping together what I have unearthed and look for connections, overlap, and contradictions.

I do not make a chart.

I do jot little notes and drawings as each thought pops into my head. I tease out what I know is there and look for anything that might be embedded in the muddiness that I am trying to preserve. I think about tension; my determination and need to create something that resists the constraints of academic writing. That tension plays out within this paper, yet there is another desire just below the surface: the aspiration to 'get it right'. I am concerned about how far I can push against the boundaries that are imposed by those in the position to do so. This inner turmoil plays out on my keyboard. I type and delete and retype, all the while looking for that balance between my academic and personal voices; the balance between risky play and being safe.

In the final weeks of writing I have returned to that Aretha Franklin song that was playing in the background so many years ago. It has become my MRP

theme song and I often listen to it in the morning as I review and revise what I wrote the day before. I can hear it playing now but the music is not coming from my headphones. The stern directions for me to “think” are coming from upstairs; from my son’s room to be exact. It occurs to me that Aretha has become contagious, passing from me to my son. I smile at the contrast of her authoritative voice commanding us to be free:

Yeah, think (think) think about what you're trying to

do to me

Yeah, think (think, think), let your mind go, let

yourself be free

You need me (need me) and I need you (don't you know)

Without each other there ain't nothing we can do

Oh freedom (freedom), freedom (freedom), freedom, yeah

freedom

Freedom (freedom), freedom (freedom), freedom, ooh

freedom

(Franklin & White, 1968)



## **Appendix**

### **Stories From the Road: Broken Locks**

This link will provide you with an opportunity to experience the oral presentation I prepared for this paper as it was intended, being read aloud with musical accompaniment.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TA0Y3l9ZbaQ&feature=youtu.be>

Wilk, B., Commerford, T., Morello, T., De La Rocha, Z. (1992). Killing in the name [Recorded by The Apples]. On untitled single [Vinyl 7", 45 RPM]. London, UK: Freestyle Records (2). (2007).

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