(RE)CLAIMING PLAY: AN INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY MOVEMENT TOWARDS PLAYFULNESS

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Whitney Danielle Blaisdell, candidate for the degree of Master of Education in Curriculum & Instruction, has presented a thesis titled, *(Re)Claiming Play: An Individual and Community Movement Towards Playfulness*, in an oral examination held on March 29, 2021. The following committee members have found the thesis acceptable in form and content, and that the candidate demonstrated satisfactory knowledge of the subject material.

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Abstract

This study aimed to closely examine what caregivers of children 9 years of age and younger perceive to be barriers affecting access to play. The current study is a lived inquiry (Dimitriadis, 2016) of my own experiences and of facilitated in-person conversations surrounding play, mostly with caregivers of children aged 9 years old and under. I also solicited hundreds of comments and submissions to a social media account surrounding this research. I used grounded theory methods to analyze the data, and founded a non-profit organization to aid in the application of some of the findings towards my own community.

This study found that individuals can have great agency over the personal and systemic factors that appear to affect play. Awareness and prioritization of play is perceived to be the greatest catalyst to play and affects each of the following categories: The Cost of Play, Extracurricular Activities and Play, the Quality of Early Learning Environment, Mental Health and Play, and (Re)claiming a Playful Self. The participation in (re)claiming of a playful self, children’s play in early learning and school settings, community opportunities for whole wellness, and community opportunities for free play is a fundamental form of self and community compassion that lead to a greater sense of self and social justice.

The current study adds to the study of play and accessibility through an autoethnographic, qualitative approach. It has also led to the creation of a website (Blaisdell, 2019) social media pages (Project Play YQR, n.d.), and some important community partnerships with other community-based organizations as a result of an action-orientation to the research. It also presents potential implications for community policy discussions and highlights the need for greater community education and awareness surrounding play.
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Thank you to the participants who co-constructed this work. My first experience of data collection was sitting under one of your Christmas trees, listening to you as your baby fell asleep in your arms. You’ve taught me more than you know. I remain in awe of each of you. To those who engaged in online conversation surrounding this work: thank you for refining the theory. You have given me the opportunity to do this work in community. This project belongs to you.

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Dedication

To Angela Kelly, Patrick Lewis, Nicole Morrow, Sarah Skinner, and Danielle Tocker, the inaugural directors of Project Play YQR: thank you for your faith, time, direction, and conversation.

To Jonah: Thank you for your endless kindness and patience towards me. As I write this, you sit drawing in front of me. I cherish our afternoons together. I cherish you. To Baby August: thank you for the inspiration, you playful little muse. Your playfulness is magical. To Darryl: thank you for everything. Your companionship is a treasure.
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Chapter One: Introduction


Every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

That member governments shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational, and leisure activity (para. 110).

Through this thesis and its action-oriented by-products, I sought to deepen the understanding of the disappearance of play and how a more playful society might be rendered. Play has been referenced unanimously in the extant literature as one of the most important activities for children developmentally. It is well cited as being critical for the progress of the cognitive, physical, and psychosocial skills of children and human beings (Rubin, 1983). “Play is the work of children and (…) kids need to be able to dig, build, create, hide and explore as part of their everyday play to learn about themselves and their place in the world” (Laidlaw, 2017, p. 147). The focus on the developmental benefits of play for children should not negate the simple fact that play is fun and life is short. It is to everyone’s benefit when there is greater access to play in communities.

The typical hours that adults in North American communities spend at work are steadily growing (Mooney, 2013; Statistics Canada, 2019). Not only are parents working longer and harder, but they are more frequently scheduling their children in programs from a young age in an attempt to ensure their children have what they consider to be the appropriate skills to succeed in life (Onstad, 2017; Melman et al., 2007).
There is currently what Patrick Lewis (2017) has called an “erosion” of play. A symptom of this erosion is a scarcity of spaces that offer free-play opportunities, and an increasing amount of commercial play spaces where one must pay for a safer, supervised experience with an emphasis on skills development. The play structures that do exist for children are seen by children as overly safe and risk-avoidant and they therefore often remain unattended (Gallagher 2004; Moore, et al., 2007; Walsh, 2006). Some of the literature reviewed suggests that caregivers are becoming increasingly fearful of allowing their children to play unsupervised or in areas that children themselves find interesting. In the community book club that is part of the Project Play YQR organization, one of several action-oriented by-products of this study, parents discussing Richard Louv’s *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* (2008) voiced that they are not actually fearful of allowing their children to be independent and play outside because of their children’s safety; they are fearful of judgement and intervention by social services.

Of course, race matters in the discourse surrounding social service intervention. Indigenous families have even more reason to share this concern, as social services intervene most frequently in Indigenous homes. In 2011 87% (up from 80% in 2006) of children in foster care in Saskatchewan were Indigenous even though only 27% of the population of Saskatchewan children were Indigenous at the time (Turner, 2016).

Part of the rationale for this study is to clarify some of the barriers that caregivers face to play. Since parents are gateways to their children’s play, it is essential to understand these barriers in order to increase opportunities for families to explore and for children to reap the benefits of abundant play from an early age. “Parents’ comfort levels are essential to children being permitted to explore and imagine and create their own stories within a space” (Laidlaw
A clinical report for pediatricians outlining the overwhelming benefits of play states that, “the importance of playtime with children cannot be overemphasized to parents as well as schools and community organizations” (Yogman et al., 2018, p. 9). This same report makes a case for pediatricians to prescribe play for children at routine doctor visits. This speaks not only to the many well-documented benefits of play, but to its endangerment.

Through this thesis and its by-products, I sought to better understand how one can be more playful. The central argument that developed is that individuals exercise agency and control over both systemic and personal factors that affect play. The emerging theory supports that playful communities are carefully designed and fostered by individuals and that these actions are an act of reclamation of play. Affecting each category that emerged from this inquiry is the community awareness and prioritization of play.

This study helps is methodologically unique through the utilization of qualitative research, feminist framing, and storytelling to explore parents’ experiences in regards to play. The meticulous self-examination and vulnerability provided by autoethnographic study have added a reflexive and rich quality to both the semi-structured conversations with participant co-constructors and the overall study. This study has implications for community policy discussions and highlights the need for a revitalization of a greater conversation surrounding play.

While studying play accessibility, I created the Play YQR Instagram account to document play spaces in the city and promote free play as a means of connecting this research with the community. Although a lived inquiry study, this research had a strong action component. I assembled a passionate and dedicated board of directors and founded a non-profit organization (Project Play YQR) around this work which has received funding from The Regina Public Interest Group, Cathedral Area Community Association, Government of Canada, Healthy Start...
Kids, City of Regina, and University of Regina Community Engagement and Research Centre. I facilitate a public book club, now in partnership with the Regina Public Library, to penetrate the community discourse around humans and play. I have consulted with the City of Regina, The Early Years Family Resource Centre, and the Regina Public Library regarding their programs and services. I have met with private speech pathologists, local business owners, and other community stakeholders that affect play. These have been valuable opportunities to learn and to share and shape the narrative that is being created around play accessibility in Regina and the surrounding area. I share almost all of my findings on the social media account surrounding this work. I have been consumed by the process of doing this work over the static research thesis you now read. This project has become my playground.

It has been a privilege and a pleasure to engage in this process; perhaps greater than any other fruits of this work have been the personal implications for myself and my family. This project has instilled in me an exceptional passion for play. I have realized the great expanse of the ability to play. I have also realized the great privilege to play; my greatest barrier was an unnecessary busyness which I learned to recognize and control. For others, the barriers they face to play are further out of their control. My spouse worked with me throughout the time I’ve been doing this research to focus our finances. Directly because of the findings of this research, we have worked to gain enough financial control for me to have resigned from my continuing teaching contract. Though I don’t know the outcome of the products of this lived play research, I am invested enough in this play/work/inquiry to want to continue it past when this thesis will be submitted.

Furthermore, I have been surprised by how the implications of this research not only affect the community but are affected by the community. Regardless of whether this is a
purposeful system designed to protect itself and the status quo or not, I have found it nearly impossible to engage in my community effectively while working within the time constraints of teaching in the K-12 system. This work has had such powerful personal implications that I feel I owe the awareness of these findings to the greater community and am unsatisfied with leaving these findings on paper. This is not to say that I am not excited or challenged by writing a thesis; I am. It is to say that it appears there is more work to be done, and I want to participate in that work.

**Purpose of the Study**

My project is a lived inquiry (Dimitriadis, 2016) of prioritizing play and examining what factors affect accessibility to play. The purpose of this lived inquiry is to gain insight into the feasibility of play through the eyes of primary caregivers of children 0-9 years of age. Close attention to: the stories caregivers tell of their time with their children and play, online discussions surrounding play accessibility, experiences founding a community-based organization surrounding greater play accessibility, and my own parenting and teaching experiences may provide a rich understanding of the issue of play accessibility. The following research questions guide this study:

1) What do caregivers perceive as factors that facilitate play?

2) What perceived barriers do people face to play?

Through autoethnography, I hoped to more fully understand my own barriers and facilitating factors to play. This study and its byproducts are tools for reclaiming and revitalizing play through understanding and attempting to remove the various obstacles to play that families face.
This thesis is organized into five chapters, ending with a personal coda. Chapter two provides a review of play literature, exploring theories of play and factors of play accessibility available in the literature as viewed through a variety of databases including ERIC, Education Database, Sage, and Proquest. Chapter three outlines the methodology and describes the ontological and epistemological framework of the study. Chapter four introduces the key findings of the current study and explores parents’ perceived barriers and facilitating factors to play. Chapter five relates findings from chapter four to the extant literature and uses the current findings and the extant literature to make specific policy recommendations, describes the action component to the research, and offers a brief conclusion. The final coda is a third vignette and the last subcategory of findings to conclude this thesis.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

The current thesis will explore the factors that appear to facilitate and hinder play. This literature review will first provide an overview of play, discuss play from a developmental perspective, examine the benefits of play, then examine the existing conversation in scholarship surrounding the factors that appear to affect play. I will more thoroughly review the literature exploring surveillance, safety, and play; shifts in place and play; and play, learning, and schoolification.

Overview of Play

Defining play is almost so ridiculous it becomes an act of play in itself. As Lewis (2017) describes, “play is widely recognizable, but that tends to be where the universality ends, because play is much more difficult to explicate” (p. 10). Philosophers and scholars have been playing at defining play for decades. Lebed (2019) addresses the ongoing discourse on defining play and describes that the diversity of opinions regarding play among philosophers and scholars incline toward two poles: mode or action (p. 1). A mode approach defines play by evaluating the player’s “stance, attitude, mental process or emotional state” (pp 1-2). This perspective indicates that almost any activity can be defined as play depending on the individual and their framing of the present moment. An action approach defines play by evaluating what the player is doing and whether or not they are in some kind of “human social, cultural, or leisure activity” (p. 2). Susan Ross (2020) brings attention to how most scholarly analyses of play are “rooted in Western epistemological and ontological paradigms,” (p. 1) and how these understandings of play as a phenomenon influence how recreation professionals and scholars comprehend and examine play, and design play experiences. Ross (2020) speaks of the necessity to “extend existing play theory and discourse in ways that acknowledge and account for diversity and experience” (p. 2).
advocates for inclusion of a sense of spirituality in the discourse around play. In a book chapter
titled, *The Spirituality of Play*, Patrick Lewis (2019) disrupts the ongoing discussion around
play’s benefits to children’s development to remind readers that the value of play and drive
towards it lies not in any developmental benefits but rather in the joy it brings to its participants.

Anthropologist and leading proponent of play theory Brian Sutton-Smith documented and
categorized almost 100 theories of play and compiled them into a book titled, *The Ambiguity of
Play* (2001). Within his text, play is described within seven different “rhetorics”: Fate, Power,
Communal Identity, Frivolity, Progress, the Imaginary, and the Self. In his article “On the
philosophical definition of human play using the tools of qualitative content analysis”, Felix
Lebed (2019) documents some of the most frequently referenced definitions of play. One such
description is that,

> It might appear that when a man is playing, bent on discovering himself as free in his
very action, he certainly could not be concerned with possessing a being in the world. His
goal, which he aims at through sports or pantomime or games, is to attain himself as a
certain being, precisely the being which is in question in his being. The point of these
remarks, however, is not to show us that in play the desire to do is irreducible. On the
contrary, we must conclude that the desire to do is here reduced to a certain desire to be.
The act is not its own goal for itself; neither does its explicit end represent its goal and its
profound meaning; but the function of the act is to make manifest and to present to itself
the absolute freedom which is the very being of the person (Sartre, 1995/1956, p. 581).

Stone (1955) described play as “free: in which playing is not obligatory; if it were, it would at
once lose its attractive and joyous quality as diversion” (p. 84). Plaut (1979) defines play as, “a
form of action that is pleasurable, freely chosen, intrinsically complete, and non-instrumental” (p. 220). Meier (1980) writes,

there are two major necessary and sufficient components of play stance. First, play is out of necessity, a voluntary endeavour which cannot be forced, externally demanded, obligated, or imposed by necessity, coercion, or any form of duty. Indeed, during moments of play, man is fully his own master. Second, play is an autotelic activity. That is, play is an intrinsic, non-instrumental, self-contained enterprise...the prize of play is play itself...play is herein characterized as an activity voluntarily undertaken for intrinsic purposes (p. 25).

Carlson (2013) describes play as fragile. He writes,

play can always be placed out of reach or snuffed out quickly. Thus, it provides a qualitatively unique engagement with the world in the sense that it is fragile and, for that reason, special. Its fragility makes it a “minority” experience, one that forever lives between the shadows cast by need, duty, responsibility and survival. This temporary nature of play is an attribute that makes it a qualitatively different engagement with the world because it is more meaningful (p. 346).

For the purpose of this study, “play” shall be defined as an engagement in an activity that is purpose-less and all-consuming, which falls close to Huizinga’s (1955) outline of play as, “a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious,' but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly” (p. 13). Brown (2008) elaborates, “if its purpose is more important than the act of doing it then it’s probably not play.” The definition adopted for the current study therefore falls into the category of a “mode” stance on play (Lebed, 2019).
Vygotsky’s Contributions to Play Scholarship

Although his ideas are almost a century old, Lev Vygotsky’s translated (2016/ 1966) writings about play have held enormous influence over western curriculums, preschool programs, and play scholarship. Some more current scholars still return to Vygotsky for solutions to the erasure of play due to intensified schoolification (Bodrova et al., 2013). Vygotsky’s most influential ideas include his theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which he refers to as the arena where a child is capable of completing a task with support, but not independently. Vygotsky argued that play helps children to further the ZPD. Vygotsky’s idea that children reach their highest potential through play has been far-reaching, as is evidenced by the ongoing discourse surrounding his work (Bodrova et al., 2013; Lambert, 2000). Veresov and Barrs (2016) write that Vygotsky’s “play and its role in the mental development of the child” has, “continued to resonate in all discussions of play ever since its publication” (Vygotsky, 2016, p.3). Some of this work’s greatest contributions to the discourse of play include initializing an important discourse on play, defending play as important for children’s development, calling for scholars to abstain from “intellectualizing” play, and in protecting child-directed play as important and distinct from adult-directed or interfered play (Vygotsky, 1966/2015).

Vygotsky’s ideas have not been left unexamined and criticized. Beverly Lambert (2000), encourages play scholars to refrain from referring to Vygotsky’s ideas as a “theory” at all, stating that his work is too theoretically limited in design and rigour to be placed on such a pedestal. Some of Vygotsky’s original thoughts on play have been refined, and almost all of his writings have been further examined and affirmed or clarified, including his idea that children are incapable of playing symbolically until they are 3 years of age (Casby, 2003a).
Terminology of Play

There are many different types of play that are sometimes compared and contrasted against one another. Free play, used interchangeably with “unstructured play” or “child-structured play” is often described as play that is entirely child-directed (Fisher et al., 2013; Holt et al., 2013; Weisberg et al., 2013). The idea of play ever truly being free from adult influence is contested by some scholars who describe adults’ part in either providing the experiences that lay the foundation for children’s play, or for introducing children to content that they use in their play (Brooker, 2011; Wallerstedt & Pramling, 2012). Pretend play is play where children take on different roles and imaginary situations. Pretend play is sometimes, though not always, placed under the umbrella of free play (Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

Scaffold play is play that is child-directed but adult-guided. Adults engaging in scaffold play with children may encourage academic exploration or have an outcome they are trying to achieve through children’s play (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009) but the play is still directed by the child(ren). Wasik and Jacobi-Vessels (2017) add that scaffold play differs from structured play in that structured play, “often involves a specific activity such as doing a puzzle, playing a board game, or playing Simon Says. Structured play often has rules and specific objectives” (p. 770). Play-based learning is described as a playful, child-directed teaching approach with many play elements but still a degree of adult guidance and scaffolded learning objectives (Weisberg et al., 2013).

Active play is defined as unstructured physical activity that takes place in a child’s free time (Veitch et al., 2006). Risky play is play that is deemed to be risky. Although risky play does encompass physical risk-taking, the term ‘risky play’ is broad and includes mental, emotional, and other types of risk-taking in play (Stephenson, 2003). Sandseter’s (2007) exploration of
physically risky play found six categories of risky play: play with great heights, play with high speed, play with dangerous tools, play near dangerous elements, rough and tumble play, and play where children can disappear or get lost (p. 243). Rough and tumble play is play fighting, wrestling, or other risky play where the risk involves potentially hurting or being hurt by a consenting playmate. It appears that the risk discussed by adults examining play is often either not observed by children, or adds to the joy of play (Sandseter, 2003). The discussion of risk in play and the subsequent decline of play as a result of these discussions (Furedi, 2001) are examples of over-intellectualizing play, which, as previously noted, is cautioned against by Vygotsky (1966/2015).

**Playfulness and Play**

Barnett (2006) and hundreds of student participants co-constructed a definition of playfulness as, “the predisposition to frame (or reframe) a situation in such a way as to provide oneself (and possibly others) with amusement, humour, and/or entertainment” (p. 955) and defined four component qualities of playfulness as, “gregarious”, “uninhibited”, “comedic”, and “dynamic” (p. 957). Glynn and Webster (1992) found playfulness to be a relatively stable characteristic of individuals (p. 98) and found a significant relationship between adult playfulness with both cognitive spontaneity and creativity (p. 93). Barnett describes how, “playful people are uniquely able to transform virtually any environment to make it more stimulating, enjoyable and entertaining” (p. 949). Youell (2008) asserts that playfulness is a means of achieving play, and that, “although environmental factors play a significant part in the promotion or otherwise of ‘healthy’ play opportunities, playfulness is a state of mind, and one that is established within a relationship” (p. 128).
Gwen Gordon (2014) suggests that playfulness is, “not a personality trait or a temporary state, but a characteristic of healthy development and well-being” (p. 248) and defends play as a critical part of secure infant-caregiver attachment and child and adult well-being that leads to playfulness and thereby a higher happiness set-point for life. Gordon states, “playing together might be the most radical and effective step we can take toward a higher happiness set point for the world” (p. 257).

**Development and Play**

Erikson (1977) observed that children use play to process difficult scenarios and feelings that they experience in reality, in the safe context of play. Michael Casby (2003b) notes that much of the scholarly work surrounding play and development is done based on a developmental theory offered by Piaget (1945). Piaget’s developmental model of play is outlined in his book, *Play, Dreams, and Imitation in Childhood* (1945). His main theory was that children’s play can be classified into three main types: practice play, symbolic play, and games with rules; and that children master play in one type before graduating in capability to the next. Casby (2003a) presents a developmental framework of play that follows four major ordinal levels of play: sensorimotor-exploratory, relational-nonfunctional, functional-conventional, and symbolic. Casby explains sensorimotor-exploratory play as consisting of “the physical manipulation and inspection of objects, such as grasping, holding, mouthing, licking, banging, and rubbing, by infants” (p. 176). Casby describes relational-functional play as play where children begin relating objects to one another. This can involve, “stacking, bumping, nesting, touching, and pushing” (p. 177). Functional-conventional play involves children using objects in ways that demonstrate their social understandings. Casby offers examples such as cradling a doll, stirring a spoon in a bowl, or kissing a teddy bear. Symbolic play, involving imaginary play using objects as symbols,
rests on the triangulation of decontextualization (dissociation of actions from typical settings), decentration (moving actions away from self), and symbolization (active, purposeful use of symbols) (Casby, 2003a). Casby (2003b) describes the importance of valuing play as having an important “parallel-interactive-supportive” relationship with other early “social, cognitive, representational, communicative, and linguistic aspects of development” (p. 180). Scholars who examine play from a developmental perspective define many of infant and children’s actions as play, and stress its importance: Lai et al. (2018) suggest, “play is never absent in human life, especially for children” (p. 625).

Scholars suggest that play is vital for the social development of human beings. In a study examining the importance of infant-parent attachment, the benefits of play were underscored by the findings that the amount of affection (play) an infant receives affects social behaviours for life (Francis, et al. 2002). Play is cited as a critical activity for children to learn to socialize and interact with others, share and explore ideas of ownership and lending, and negotiate (Gagnon & Nagle, 2004). Free play is highly revered by play scholars for providing children with opportunities for self-expression, creativity, problem-solving skills, independence, and self-motivation without adult involvement (McInnes et al., 2013 & Moller, 2015). Wasik and Jacobi-Vessels (2017) have outlined the role that parental play with children has in encouraging children’s language development. These authors stress the connection between adult-scaffolded, child-directed play for language learning, and emphasize the importance of play in early literacy development because of its role in assisting children to develop oral language.

Overall, play has been stressed as having a critical role in human development from the moment one is born. Besides the role play performs in the development of human beings, the
research reviewed strongly suggests other benefits of play and how it appears not to just benefit the development of the human being but to benefit the human experience of life.

**Benefits of Play**

Research suggests that play benefits a human being’s whole wellness. Active play is understood to make an important contribution to the physical activity of children (Public Accounts Committee, 2007) which has a positive effect on their physical health (Ness et al., 2007; Leary et al., 2008) and on emotional well being (Donaldson & Ronan, 2006). Active play and risky play of all kinds often lead children to gain new skills, which have repeatedly been linked with a general feeling of confidence (Sandseter, 2007), and with social capital not only in early childhood but through middle childhood (Zeece & Graul, 1993).

Active play, distinct from structured but still physically active activities for children, fosters creativity and the ability to solve conflicts (Ginsberg, 2007). Physically risky play contributes to the better development of both fine and gross motor skills in children and contributes to better balance, coordination, and body awareness (McFarland & Laird, 2017). Several scholars (e.g., Stephenson, 2003; Tovey, 2010) proposed a link between a young child’s developing confidence in confronting physical challenges, and their confidence to undertake other types of risks as adults. As the field of play studies has evolved, researchers are continuing to explore the benefits of play towards human beings’ problem-solving skills, creativity, imaginations, (Wasik & Jacobi-Vessels, 2017) and perhaps most importantly, ability to be joyful (Closter & Cleeve, 2008). In one qualitative exploration of children’s barriers and motivators to play, one of the most frequently referenced motivators to play that children experienced was the motivation to be happy (Brockman et al., 2011). Play makes people happy.
Changes to Children’s Play

Considering the many benefits to play, Wasik and Jacobi-Vessels (2017) write that, “play has been described as children’s work and that most of children’s time is (or should be) engaged in play” (p. 770). Yet, the current play climate necessitates that scholars continue to frequently defend play (Trawick-Smith & Waite, 2009) and to attend to the study of its decline (e.g., Brown, 2014; Burke, 2005; Lewis, 2017; Nicolopoulou, 2010).

There is a well-documented loss of play. It appears that there has been a gradual shift in the spaces that children used to play; mostly from outdoors to indoors, and from the community to the backyard or living room (Valentine & McKendrick, 1997; Burke, 2005). Nicolopoulou (2010) describes how play is being “squeezed out” (p. 1) of childhood. Lewis (2017) describes this shift and loss as an “erosion” of play.

As with land erosion, one landscape may be replaced with another through the erosive process, so too in the erosion of play certain kinds of play emerge and push out or eclipse other kinds of play. There are a number of competing narratives yet they all entwine with each other and sometimes augment each other. (p. 11).

Lewis describes the following “tropes” as some of the possible explanations for the shifts in childhood play: commercial media; fear and safety concerns on part of a parent, school, or community; increased emphasis on literacy and numeracy learning; and an ideological struggle surrounding play.

Barriers to play appear to be increasing. Some scholars are documenting a shift towards electronically-mediated play (Bird & Edwards, 2015), which is play with electronics, that is taking precedence over unstructured and other non-electronically mediated types of play. Others are discussing a decline in unsupervised, free, unstructured play (Karsten, 2005; Valentine &
McKendrick, 1997). For children with disabilities, play opportunities appear even rarer. It appears that children who experience disabilities have fewer opportunities to play, play less than their non-disabled peers, and are at risk for health and social difficulties as a result of their play deprivation (King et al., 2009). The factors that hinder play for children with disabilities are documented as impairments, physical inaccessibility, attitudinal barriers, and poor social supports (Di Marino et al., 2018; Tonkin et al. 2014).

Though there are many factors to play, the reviewed literature suggests that the greatest factors in the changes to play are an intensification of concern for children’s safety, shifts in the geography of play, and increasing schoolification with a false dichotomy between learning and play. The remainder of this literature review will explore the scholarly discourse surrounding these factors. An important demographic to consider when exploring attitudes surrounding play is the attitude of children themselves. Though children’s perspectives on play are less frequently available in the literature, several studies have sought to include children’s voices in the discourse on play that are included in this review (e.g. Barron, 2014; Brockman et al., 2011; Burke, 2005; Karsten, 2005; Sandseter, 2007).

**Surveillance, Safety and Play**

Playgrounds are now being designed with very few opportunities for children to take risks (Stephenson, 2003). Several play scholars have criticized the focus on an overly safe childhood (Nihlén Fahlquist, 2013; Harper, 2017; Lewis, 2017) and describe how limiting risk to one’s children appears to have intensified the workload of parenting and working with children (Furedi, 2006). Furedi (2001) describes, “physical injury of children is no longer accepted as an unexceptional fact of life of growing up. Contemporary perceptions of childhood regard such injury as ‘unnecessary’ and a reflection of irresponsible parenting” (p. 28). Lewis (2017)
describes how, “the safety concerns of parents, communities and schools that often [see] children under constant supervision or rather surveillance by an adult, immersed in an environment and message of ‘play safe’/ ‘safe play’ that is realized through highly structured play controlled by adults, which could be construed as containment” (p. 11).

Children in Western cultures spend more time in front of screens than they spend being active in outdoor environments, partially due to safety concerns surrounding risky play and an intensified expectation that children be safe and supervised (McCurdy et al., 2010). It appears that some families use structured activities (which, depending on stance, may or may not fall under the present definition of play for the purpose of this study) as a means to supervise their children, thus being a barrier to play. Anderson, et al. (2018) found that “parental supervision emerged as the most significant and consistent predictor of organized activity involvement” (p. 1706). They describe that there is,

- a direct quantitative link between parental supervision and involvement in structured organized activities. Parents high in supervision may also use organized activities as a means of increasing supervision of their children, in that organized activities provide a consistent, adult-supervised, structured space that parents can send their children to and know of their whereabouts during work times (p. 1707).

Karsten (2005) describes what she calls the “backseat generation” (p. 286). She writes,

These are the escorted children whose time-space behaviour is characterized primarily by adult-organized children’s activities. Some of them play outside from time to time—and have scooters and skateboards to play on—while others hardly ever do. They attend music classes, sport lessons and so on every week, and go rather frequently to the cinema or a museum, or on another type of studious leisure outing (p. 286).
Although one study revealed that living in affluent, safe, and orderly neighbourhoods were predictors of involvement in more structured activities (Dearing et al., 2009), a more recent study found that a lack of safety in neighbourhoods also contributes to increased participation in structured activities and that parents who perceive their neighbourhoods to be unsafe place their children in structured activities as an attempt of risk aversion (Anderson et al., 2018). It has also been found that families who belong to marginalized communities (based on race, sex, and gender) are less likely to visit parks for free play than those who are not marginalized. However, it was found that they will participate in and place their children in community structured programming occurring at parks and that this pattern revolves around perceptions of safety (Powers et al., 2020).

The precedence of safety over play appears to specifically be a barrier to rough and tumble (R&T) play (Lewis, 2017, Tovey, 2010). It was stated that children engaging in R&T play are frequently told to stop by adults, who use risk aversion as a determinant of whether children should be allowed to play in various ways (Cevher-Kalburan & Ivrendi, 2016; Harper, 2017). Parent’s attitudes towards risk-taking and play can facilitate or hinder their children’s participation in physical play (Boufous et al., 2004; McFarland & Laird, 2017; Sallis et al., 2000) and risky play (Little et al., 2011; McFarland & Laird, 2017). Laird et al., (2014) found that although many parents enjoyed and fondly remember their own childhood experiences with unstructured and unsupervised outdoor play, they are unlikely to allow their children the same freedoms due to their safety concerns for their children. McFarland and Laird (2017) explored educator and parent attitudes towards play and found that early childhood educators believed that risky play was important for children and provided opportunities for children to engage in risky play. The same authors found that the attitudes of early childhood educators living in Australia
were more positive towards risky play and they provided more play opportunities for children than in the United States. In the United States, there appeared to be more fear of litigation than in Australia (McFarland & Laird, 2017). Harper (2017) heavily criticizes the current power that perceptions of risk have over parents and communities and ultimately calls for policy changes that would allow parents, educators, and youth care practitioners to, “allow for outdoor risky play in their programs without fear of litigation” (p. 329).

The attitudes that people have towards play appear to be constructed by their societies. One study by Allin et al. (2014) found that many mothers’ perceptions of risk were mainly negative and had been framed within what they perceived to be dominant structures around good and bad mothering in their societies. Sandseter et al. (2011) determined that parents’ intensely protective parenting styles may result in anxiety in their children and can affect children’s attitudes towards risk-taking and play, making children their own barriers to play. A study exploring parenting styles and play opportunities for risky play found that what was deemed as overprotective parenting was a barrier to play (Cevher-Kalburan & Ivrendi, 2016).

Parents with a democratic parenting style appeared to have supportive thoughts regarding risky play, but did not necessarily create opportunities for risky play for their children. The opportunities that they provided for their children appeared to be influenced by several other factors, though did certainly include their perspective on the benefits of risky play. Parents with permissive attitudes facilitated the riskiest play for their children. The authors of the study (Cevher-Kalburan & Ivrendi, 2016) do caution that though risky play is important for the development of many of children’s skills, “it is essential for permissive parents to set limits to prevent children from higher risk of injury and at the same time to provide opportunities for fostering such skills” (p. 360). The authors of the study suggest that fostering positive parenting
practices should be considered as a means of providing enhanced opportunities for risky play. Ball et al. (2008) advocate that parents and adults working with children adopt a, “safe as necessary” as opposed to “safe as possible” attitude when managing risks in children’s play.

Sandseter’s (2007) exploration of children and risky play found that children’s attitudes towards safety are generally such that the risk of getting hurt is part of the motivation for play. When the thrill of risk wasn’t a direct motivator for play, Sandseter observed that it was still rarely a deterrent to play. A five-year-old female participant in Sandseter’s study said of climbing great heights, “yes it’s a little bit scary, but it’s great fun--I often land on my bottom, and that hurts a bit--but it's great fun anyways!” (p. 244).

Children who have participated in explorations of play and risk aversion often demonstrate enjoying risk in play. It even appears children’s creative resistance of control and close monitoring (Barron, 2014) resembles play. Brockman et al. (2011) found that children enjoyed play and some of children’s reported main motivation to play was to be happy, as previously mentioned; to relieve boredom, which included the boredom associated with watching television, and; to feel, “a sense of freedom, or escape, from adult control, rules or structured activities” (p. 464). One child said, “we all want to be able to make sure we can do sometimes what we want - not what adults want” and another expressed, “I like playing stuff that’s sort of like freely, so you don’t have to play against a rule” (Brockman et al., p. 464). One method of gaining freedom and escaping from adult control that children have reported to use was to take the family dog (if applicable) for a walk. Children described how their parents appeared to feel they were safer in the presence of their dogs and were therefore granted more freedom if they had their dogs with them (Barron, 2014). Children in the study described meeting up with other
friends and their dogs together to walk and play, and that parents generally felt safer if they knew their children were amongst other children and dogs.

There also appears to be an increase in the supervision of children via mobile devices. The intense monitoring of children, particularly via technology, is “a phenomenon never experienced in previous generations” (Barron, 2014, p. 401) but is a central characteristic of modern childhood (Rasmussen, 2004). Marx and Steeves (2010) state that there are also surveillance apps and programs for parents to monitor their children’s device use. Marx and Steeves describe how these surveillance technologies are also marketed towards parents in an effort to appear to reduce risk towards children and increase safety. This ability to track children with mobile devices is a global trend (Rooney, 2010). Barron (2014) notes that the individual monitoring of children by their parents via mobile phones has replaced societal surveillance. Karsten (2005) describes how in the 1950s and 1960s, “the freedom of movement and the rather large territory described by the former children is striking” (p. 280) and notes that this freedom of movement was, “accompanied by frequent comments about the control exercised by various people, such as neighbours, family members, older siblings, and even the police” (p. 281). One participant said, “if they thought something was up, they’d shout at us. Yes, there was strong supervision in the street” (p. 281). The contrast in the literature suggests a replacement of community ownership and accountability towards its children with intense personal surveillance of children by their parents, via mobile devices.

Valentine (2004) asserts that parents often actively control and restrict their children’s use of space since they are unwilling or unable to trust their children’s ability to manage their own safety in public spaces. Barron (2014) makes an interesting argument that,
the mobile phone can be transformed by children into a highly efficient device to enable them to both negotiate and resist surveillance thus increasing their autonomy and independent mobility. Children are not passive recipients of parental surveillance and power, rather they are increasingly playing an active role in negotiation with parents and actively resist monitoring their everyday lives (p. 401).

The actions children in Barron’s (2014) study describe to resist surveillance from their parents using their mobile devices include sending untrue text messages regarding their location, deleting text messages, turning their phones off, letting their batteries die or telling their parents their batteries were dead, ignoring calls and pretending that their phones were on silent, sending messages in languages their parents wouldn’t understand, and telling their parents they had run out of credit for their phones and were unable to use them.

Although mobile devices may offer parents greater control and surveillance of their children, children themselves identify mobile phones as a facilitator to play (Brockman et al., 2011). Children described how their mobile phones appeared to give them licence to engage in active play away from their parents because they could use them to keep in touch with their families while physically away from their homes (Brockman et al., 2011).

One study that explored children’s perceptions of their own barriers and facilitators to play found that the children who participated in the study generally understood their parents’ fears surrounding safety to be fair, and perceived them to have little effect on their active play (Brockman et al., 2011). Children’s perceptions of their own barriers to play included safety concerns, but their concerns mainly centred around older children in public play spaces who would sometimes intimidate, bother or pick on younger children. Female participants reported
that their own fears, which, “mainly related to feeling intimidated by groups of teenagers, were more likely to limit their active play than those of their parents” (Brockman et al., 2011, p. 465).

**Shifts in Place and Play**

Children perceive the availability of open green space to be a factor to their active play (Brockman et al., 2011). The lack of space available to play appears to have been brought into discourse in the 1990s (Aitken, 1993/1994; Katz 1994). Aitken (1994) predicted that urbanization would diminish children’s access to spaces reserved for play, which he warned might result in a decline not only in their quality of life but also in some of the skills that play supports. Katz (1994) argued that public parks and playgrounds suffer disinvestment as a result of economic restructuring. Valentine and McKendrick (1997) found that the area outside of a child’s home where they might play had shrunk significantly over time and children were thought to spend at least 60% less time playing outdoors than the generation before them. However, their findings demonstrated that at that time children were, at least, still playing. There wasn’t a significant reduction in time spent playing; there was a significant increase in how much time children were playing under direct adult supervision.

Lia Karsten (2005) examined play and urban space from the perspective of different generations. She found that there has been a sharp increase in children’s spaces indoors at home and a decrease in play spaces outside of the home. This has correlated with an increase in children spending time indoors and a decrease in children playing outside. Karsten describes that this is partially because the average number of residential square meters per person has increased considerably over recent decades. She reports, “It used to be very common for a family with several children to have only a three-room apartment: The parents would sleep in the living room or an alcove, the daughters in one of the bedrooms and the sons in the other” (p. 276). She cites a
major increase in cars, streets, and parking lots in urban areas as one of the reasons for the loss of outdoor playspaces. There has been a complete shift in the availability of playspaces for children, from outside to inside (Karsten, 2005). Yoon and Templeton (2019), describe, “it’s an adult world, and children happen to live in it” (p. 56). And yet, it appears that from a children’s geography perspective, children’s spaces have not been erased but rather shifted and have infringed upon what used to be parental indoor space. Karsten (2005) explains the changing character of indoor space at home:

> It is illustrated by the presence of individually used and well-equipped bedrooms, which offer a lot of play possibilities and an escape from parental control (Solberg, 1990; Sibley, 1995) (...) second, daily negotiations result in democratizing the access to other spaces (besides the own bedroom) where children’s play is facilitated and even ‘outdoor play’ is tolerated (...) we saw examples of outdoor play performed indoors, such as hide and seek, and the building of huts. This phenomenon manifests not only the transformation of what used to be adult space into contemporary child space, but also the enlarging of the home space for play and the intruding of traditionally outdoor activities (...) into home space: playing outdoors indoors.

Although children are increasingly playing indoors, they appear to consistently express a preference for outdoor play (Burke, 2005; Sandseter, 2007). In a study where children were co-constructors of an examination of spaces to play (Burke, 2005), children photographed their play spaces. The final collection of photographs contained 70% outdoor spaces versus 30% indoor spaces, which was described as an indicator of the importance of outdoor spaces to children. More children also photographed open spaces than any other category of spaces. Burke (2005) was surprised that the children took only 3% of their photos of playgrounds.
expressed that “natural materials and environments were very important to them and they reported how adults appeared to have little insight into this feature of children’s play” (Burke, 2005, p. 50). This is consistent with other research available on land use that suggests that visitation to natural spaces facilitates play (Powers et al., 2020).

Parks are typically public and available to the community, but proximate access to parks is less available in lower-income neighbourhoods and more available in higher-income neighbourhoods (Rigolon, 2016) and rural areas (Zhang et al., 2011). Powers and her colleagues also found, however, that perception of a park being within walking distance affects one’s park visitation, and this perception rests on one’s “membership in multiple marginalized groups” (p. 377), and that as membership in multiple marginalized groups increases, individuals are generally less likely to visit parks. Karsten (2005) concludes that, “today’s children play outside less frequently and for less time, have a far more restricted home range and are subject to far more interference from their parents. Concerns about children’s increasingly eroded position in public space are rightly expressed” (p. 283).

**Play, Learning, and Schoolification**

It has been well documented that play within the primary grades, starting at kindergarten, is declining at least in part due to the increased focus on teaching academic skills to children at an earlier age (Bergen, 2002; Gunnarsdottir, 2014; Miller & Almon, 2009; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Stipek, 2004). Stipek’s (2004) research examined teaching practices across kindergarten and first grade in the United States involving 314 classrooms. She concluded that teachers are using more didactic teaching methods relying on direct instruction in classrooms with students who teachers believed had challenges associated with poverty, and were Black, Indigenous, or people of colour. Stipek writes, “the major contribution of [her] study concerns the systematic
differences found in the nature of teaching. The more low-income children, children of color, and lower achieving children in the school, the more didactic teaching and the less constructivist teaching [practices] were observed” (p. 561). Didactic teaching is teaching that is more scripted and involves direct-instruction and adult-directed learning. Constructivist teaching relies on Piaget and Vygotsky’s theories of children as constructors of their own learning, and often involves play as a form of learning (Stipek, 2004). Thereby, access to play in schools rests somewhat on the privilege that children experience and the biases of their teachers.

In their U.S. based study, Miller and Almon (2009) describe,

too few Americans are aware of the radical changes in kindergarten practice in the last ten to twenty years. Children now spend far more time being instructed and tested in literacy and math than they do learning through play and exploration, exercising their bodies, and using their imaginations. Many kindergartens use highly prescriptive curricula linked to standardized tests. An increasing number of teachers must follow scripts from which they may not deviate. Many children struggle to live up to academic standards that are developmentally inappropriate (...) at the same time we have increased academic pressure in children’s lives through inappropriate standards, we have managed to undermine their primary tool for dealing with stress - freely chosen, child-directed, intrinsically motivated play (p. 15).

Canada’s kindergarten classrooms and primary grades have also undergone an academically, didactic focused shift leading to some scholarly critique (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Lewis (2017) writes, “once the curricular hub of the primary grades (Pre-K to 3) in Canada, play has been unable to escape the forces determined ‘to produce to compete and contribute to the global economy armed with utilitarian workplace literacy’ (p. 11). One study explored children’s
agency over their time at school and found that children quickly learn if they may be afforded time for play, if at all, and will cooperate as a class to gain it (Yoon, & Templeton, 2019). One child in kindergarten who participated in the study described some of her school experiences to one of the researchers, sharing,

did [my mom] tell you that we sit down so much?! [Taking on the teacher’s voice] “sit down on the rug, sit down on the chairs, sit down on the rug, sit down on the rug!” And she doesn’t want us to talk, almost. Even when we’re playing she wants us to be quiet and she wants us to whisper...Then we try to get loud and then she hears us and she’s like, “Stop.” We have to. Then she claps. Then we have to follow what she does, and then she says, “K-2, it’s getting very noisy!” (p. 55).

The authors described that some children perceive school as an, “adult-controlled space where children do as they’re told until they can play with each other.” Yoon and Templeton (2019) blame neoliberal conditions in schools for the lack of play, saying “children’s agency is limited by neoliberal policies that implicitly regulate children’s performances (p. 56)” and describe neoliberalism as, “an idea that promotes individuality, free-market economies, and profit-making” (p. 56).

Including more play in schools appears to be a complicated equation. Educators attending to the rigorous discourse surrounding methods for in-classroom teaching and learning surrounding play are navigating often conflicting research on what is best practice (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). For example, though pretend play has been found to support the development of self-regulation and emotional regulation skills (Goldstein & Lerner, 2017) which are certainly skills that aid learning, Lillard et al.’s (2013) review of teaching and play criticized the connection between pretend play and learning. Baron et al. (2020) found a slight decrease in self-
regulation in children who engaged in more pretend play. There are also diverse viewpoints on the school and teacher’s role in play (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). While some authors argue for the inclusion and protection of play in schools (Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006), others argue that teachers are controlling and “hijacking” play (Goouch, 2008, p. 95). There is a dichotomization between play and learning and each is viewed as distinct from the other in the classroom (Pramling Samuelson & Johansson, 2006). These dichotomies, “compound the challenges faced by teachers who report conflicts between mandated curricula and preferred instructional practices” (Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

Hirsh-Paasek et al., (2009) describe how the increased focus on academic learning at an early age (often referred to as “schoolification”) is transforming pre-kindergarten/ preschool and younger children as well. Nicolopoulou (2010) explains, “this emphasis on more didactic, academic, and content-based approaches to preschool education comes at the expense of more child-centred, play-oriented, and constructivist approaches, which are dismissed as obsolete or simply crowded out” (p. 1). Nicolopoulou (2010) highlights recent trends in research that have been “exaggerated, misinterpreted, and misunderstood” (p. 1) as a vehicle for the erasure of play in early childhood programming. Her explanation is simple: that the recent trends in research that highlight the early years as a critical time for learning have caused a reframing of children’s early years as a time where early academic learning must take place. Whereas preschool was once offered as a play-based environment for low-income and disadvantaged children to gain emergent literacy skills and exposure, it appears that middle-class parents have opted into using preschools to give their children what they feel is the necessary preparation for academic learning once they enter kindergarten.
In Maynard and Waters’ (2007) study examining educator use of outdoor spaces, the supposed dichotomy of play and learning was evident in many participants’ responses; one teacher said they “needed to be convinced” (p. 259) of the learning benefits of child-directed play in the outdoor environment. Another asserted, “if we are to develop outdoor learning, I don’t like to call it outdoor play, we need to ensure there is a real purpose to it” (p. 259). Many teachers in the study referenced the academic expectations that parents had of their children as a barrier to play. One principal described, “our parents have high expectations--they think in levels, you have to read by [the age of] five” (p. 260).

Although the reviewed literature largely points to a flawed education system and play/learning dichotomy as a barrier to play, there do appear to be many examples of schools and early learning environments supporting play. Dowdell et al. (2011) found that children’s access to the natural environment and early childhood educators, parents, or teachers who are interested in supporting the child(ren)’s interest in the natural world have been proven to be effective facilitators to children’s play. They also found that a focus on the development of positive relationships amongst children in childcare centres facilitated play. Wilson (2008) articulated that in order to support greater access to play and learning, it would be helpful for school teachers to view play and exploration in nature as an important learning tool rather than simply a “break” from learning.

Considering the well-documented positive effects of the natural environment on children’s learning and play (e.g., Coates & Pimlott-Wilson, 2019; Malone & Tranter, 2003; Malone & Tranter, 2004), one study sought to better understand the effect of green school grounds on children’s play. Dyment and Bell (2007) describe school ground greening as,
a growing international movement that focuses primarily on the design, use and culture of school grounds, with a view to improving the quality of children’s play and learning experiences. Schools around the world have embraced the notion of school ground greening and are transforming hard, barren expenses of turf and asphalt into places that include a diversity of natural and built elements, such as shelters, rock amphitheatres, trees, shrubs, wild-flower meadows, ponds, grassy berms and food gardens (p. 953).

Findings included that the landscape around a school greatly affects children’s opportunities for play and learning. Greening school yards appeared to provide a more harmonious play environment while increasing the range of enjoyable, non-competitive, open-ended forms of play at school. 82% of the participants surveyed in Dyment and Bell’s (2007) study indicated that they felt the link between play and cognitive development was strengthened through the use of green school yards. The activities that children engaged in on green school grounds included, “gardening activities, observing and feeding birds, hatching and releasing butterflies, capturing and releasing animals (e.g. tadpoles, bugs), building shelters, sketching and art and generally studying and exploring nature” (pp. 959-960).

Early childhood educator and teacher attitudes towards play have been found to have great control over how much play a child will experience in their care (Little et al., 2011; Sandseter, 2007; Stephenson, 2003). The reviewed literature on play, learning, and schoolification suggest that these attitudes are crucial for improving the state of play in schools and early learning environments.

Overall, the literature reviewed suggests that there is currently a rapid erosion or erasure of play and that the factors most affecting this disappearance are safety concerns taking precedence over play, a shift in the geography of children’s play, and an intense schoolification
and false dichotomy between school and learning. The present study seeks to not only gain a richer understanding of the perceived factors that hinder or support play, but also to apply the findings in order to foster a more playful community.
Chapter Three: Methodology

Play and Story in Qualitative Research

I have approached qualitative research with awe and curiosity. I have selected a blurring of methodologies that mirrors my subject quite closely by selecting a playful way to construct a version of knowing about play accessibility. My use of autoethnography and grounded theory is both play and narrative intertwined.

When I began my graduate studies, I read the book *Dissident Knowledge in Higher Education* co-edited by Marc Spooner and James McNinch (2018). Whereas before I had been searching for a box or formula in which to contain and understand how I would go about the process of research, the chapters of this book empowered me to be creative and critical in selecting and constantly examining the process of gathering and weaving together stories. When I say that this research mirrors my subject, I remind the reader of my definition of play - “an all-consuming activity where the process is greater than purpose.”

When it comes to the process of inquiring, I am intrigued by this notion of being, “less concerned with what people [are] revealing but more with how they [interrogate] the work of doing the inquiry” (Denzin, 2018, p. 47). This almost exactly echoes my definition of play applied towards inquiry. Furthermore, I was intrigued by Marc Spooner’s question in this interview with Norman K. Denzin, “(...) I think too of the Indigenous movement, where it is about a relationship with the community. What do we bring to the community that might lead to better practices but not a journal article?” (Spooner, 2018, p. 49).

I would describe my approach to inquiry as action research with autoethnographic elements, borrowing techniques from grounded theory for my analysis. My grounded theory work is constructivist and adheres most closely to how Charmaz (2014) applies it. I leaned into
and thoroughly enjoyed the flexible and open-ended exploration that grounded theory promotes, and attribute many of the unexpected findings to the playfulness of this research method. Heavily inspired by Carolyn Ellis (2004), I examined myself more than I examined any other participant. I had intended to study my experiences and document barriers and facilitating factors that came up to play. I openly lived out this research and am still a living inquiry (Dimitriadis, 2016), coming increasingly closer to understanding the intricate web of play barriers and accessibility. Being a mother of two small children and living in Regina sets me within my study demographic. Ethically, I feel most comfortable studying people with whom I share similar experiences and alongside whom I can also survey myself. The autoethnographic nature of this work lends a sense of comfort, relatability, and interest to conversations on this topic. My participants seemed at ease and to trust me with their stories and experiences. I also trusted them and shared openly, which led to greater articulation and self-understanding.

I have found one of the most challenging aspects of undergoing autoethnographic inquiry has been narrating my own stories and experiences. Some of the autoethnographic work completed towards this inquiry is not included in this paper, but has offered me a sharp understanding of how some of my own experiences continue to affect me and how I engage with play. As Ellis (2004) describes,

honest autoethnographic exploration generates a lot of fears and self-doubts - and emotional pain. Just when you think you can’t stand the pain anymore - that’s when the real work begins. Then there’s the vulnerability of revealing yourself, not being able to take back what you’ve written or having any control over how readers interpret your story (p. xxii).
She continues, “for example, you may come to understand yourself in deeper ways. And with understanding yourself comes understanding others. Autoethnography provides an avenue for doing something meaningful for yourself and the world” (p. xxii).

**Method**

**Participants: Selection Process**

I employed purposeful sampling (Bungay et al., 2016) for this study, as I was searching particularly for participants who have children up to 9 years old. I wanted to gain at least one participant who had moved to Regina in the last 5 years, preferably from outside of Canada. It was ideal that this study reflect a diversity of experiences, including speaking with a caregiver who has a family member with an exceptionality (including but not limited to a physical handicap, speech delay, behaviour challenge, or other challenges that can possibly inhibit access to play even more than is usually expected). In order to select participants for the interviews, I posted a request for expressions of interest on the public social media account surrounding my research (Project Play YQR, n.d.). I was done recruiting participants after about 36 hours. To obtain informed consent, I directed them to a website surrounding my research with an uploaded PDF of my consent form (Blaisdell, 2019b). We reviewed this form before they signed it at the beginning of each research conversation.

**Data Collection**

I collected and generated data in three different ways. Birks and Mills (2011) touch on the differences between collecting data from participants and generating data alongside them. This study both generates and collects data as I autoethnographically study my own experiences and reflections in/on/ inspired by them, and conduct interviews and interact online with participants.
I have co-constructed some of my data through autoethnographic conversations (Ellis, 2004). I conducted nine one-on-one interviews, and two focus groups (one with five people and one with four people). I started with two individual interviews, then facilitated the first focus group. After the focus group, I asked one participant if she would be willing to meet with me one-on-one so I could attend to her story more closely. I followed this conversation with seven more individual interviews, one more focus group, and ended with a final individual interview. The conversations took place with caregivers who had children ranging in age from birth to 9 years of age. One participant had no children but asked to participate in the study and offered invaluable insight. In total there were nine individual interviews and two focus groups. Two of the participants in focus groups also participated in a one-on-one interview.

I had initially planned for the conversations to be between 60-90 minutes long, but almost all interviews ran over 90 minutes. At around the 120-minute mark in most of the interviews I, unfortunately, had to end conversations because of my own time constraints. This speaks to the interest that the participants had in this topic and the richness and relatability that autoethnographic study lent to these conversations. The conversations that were part of this work were vibrant, thought-provoking, and challenging yet enjoyable.

All of the one-on-one interviews took place in relatively quiet and private areas either in a participant’s or my own home depending on the relationship and comfort, or in a private area of a restaurant or cafe. I considered the “intimacy of setting” recommended by Hall and Stevens (1991) to achieve greater rapport with my participants. The first focus group took place with myself and four other mothers in a private room that I booked in a coffee shop. Because there were some interesting patterns revolving around gender emerging, I also arranged a conversation between my spouse, two other men, and myself.
The two other fathers I invited to participate are friends of my spouse and me. I was excited to invite my spouse into this work because not only did this make me more comfortable with the other fathers and most likely them with me, but it felt nice to share some of this work with him and for him to experience the rich nature of these conversations. Inviting my spouse also had a positive effect on our relationship and our co-parenting. I enjoyed hearing him discuss his childhood and I can see how his childhood is reflected in his parenting.

I chose to use focus groups because, “the assembly of people with like interests is effective in engendering conversation as each participant responds to and feeds off the others” (Birks & Mills, 2011, p. 76). I chose to conduct at least one of the focus group interviews early on in the collection phase because of the potential group interviews have to “generate initial concepts for later follow up in individual interviews” (Birks & Mills 2011, p. 77). This turned out to be excellent advice from Birks and Mills since as mentioned, I did ask one participant for a second interview.

Based on recommendations by both Charmaz (2014) and Birks and Mills (2011), I drafted a set of open-ended questions to guide my interviews (see Appendix A). In her book, “The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel About Autoethnography”, Ellis (2004) says, “I start with my personal life and pay attention to my physical feelings, thoughts and emotions. I use what I call ‘systematic sociological introspection’ and ‘emotional recall’ to try and understand an experience I’ve lived through” (p. xvii). This is how I generated my interview guide: by first attending to my own experiences with barriers and facilitating factors to play and writing from these experiences.

The interviews were all conversational in style. This interview-style aligns with Charmaz’s (2014) philosophy that interviews may fall between loosely guided explorations of
topics to semi-structured and focused questions. I heeded the guidance that, “the grounded theory interview is dependent upon the ability of the researcher to travel a path through the interview with the participant. The greater the level of structure imposed, the less able the interviewer will be to take the optimal route” (Birks & Mills, 2011, p. 75). Some of our conversations went completely astray from the interview guide and I feel that these tangents, rants, and stories cast the most light on the larger collective story we are telling.

The second data generation method was to be through personally assessing and attempting to remove my own barriers to play, and to discover and articulate what facilitates play for me. Through this exploration, I continue to study myself alongside my learning about barriers to play. This work provides an opportunity for the critical examination of my own relationship to place, play, and my children. It allows me to reflect on my identity and how motherhood and academia shape or sometimes seem to erode this identity. My interviews with caregivers were autoethnographic in nature. I explored alongside my co-constructors, transcribed our conversations, and sometimes inserted my own narrative notes into the margins of my transcriptions (Ellis, 2004). I have included autoethnographic memos in my work which makes my positioning in this study particularly transparent while also holding me, “accountable for [my] actions and decisions as the researcher facilitating this process—writing reflexive memos is the most truthful and methodologically congruent way to meet this need” (Birks & Mills, 2011, p. 55).

A surprising result of this autoethnographic work is that I not only identified my own barriers to play alongside participants but also realized the abundance of unnoticed barriers I faced; my participants sometimes described barriers that were applicable to me as well, though I hadn’t previously noticed them. I have therefore been able to examine my life with a magnifying
glass for barriers to play, and have attempted to remove the barriers that are within my control. This exercise, of stepping back and forth from my own experiences and the data and using each to improve the other has increased my theoretical sensitivity. Glaser (1978) discusses the development of theoretical sensitivity through immersing oneself in the topic in various ways. Birks and Mills (2011) describe a researcher’s level of theoretical sensitivity as, “deeply personal; it reflects their insight into both themselves and the area they are researching. Secondly, [it] reflects their intellectual history, the type of theory they have read, absorbed, and now use in their everyday thought” (p. 11). Charmaz (2006) adds that theoretical sensitivity is nurtured through viewing the data from multiple vantage points to compare against one another. She writes, “theoretical playfulness enters in. Whimsy and wonder can lead you to see the novel in the mundane” (p. 245). My distinct vantage points as both a mother and primary classroom teacher, coupled with my own wonder towards play have thereby become helpful analytic tools that heighten theoretical sensitivity.

My third and final data collection method is the use of elicited prompts through the public social networking site I have developed. This includes elicited material, defined by Charmaz (2006) and cited by Birks and Mills (2011) as, “produced by participants at the request of the researcher” (p. 82) since I conduct surveys to gain feedback from users online. The online participants have also greatly shaped the Project Play YQR non-profit organization through informing what they would like to have documented, how they prefer to receive information, and what is helpful to them; and some of them have volunteered to help construct the resources of the non-profit. This information has also provided some insight into the research and is a means of “co-production of knowledge” (Tuhawai Smith, 2018, p. 27).
Data Analysis

I have used coding and memoing as defined by Charmaz (2014). Charmaz describes coding as, “the pivotal link between collecting data and developing an emergent theory to explain these data” (p. 113). She says that coding generates the bones of the analysis. As per Charmaz’s (2014) instruction, I attended to initial coding, naming each line or segment of data. I then revisited the data and my initial codes in what is called focused coding, a selective phase that uses the most significant or frequent codes to further sort and make sense of data. As I moved into focused coding, this helped to “advance the theoretical direction of [my] work” (Charmaz 2014, p. 38). I appreciate Charmaz’s (2014) description that, “the move from initial to focused coding is often seamless. For most of [her] analyses, focused coding simply [means] using certain codes that [have] more theoretical reach, direction, and centrality and treating them as the core of [her] nascent analysis” (p. 141). In my experience, focused codes started to emerge before I revisited the data, and more towards the latter stages of initially coding the transcribed interviews. Revisiting the data helped to further focus codes and develop a theory. Subsequently after focused coding, one generally moves to theoretical coding in grounded theory; theoretical codes, “lend form to the focused codes you have collected,” and “may help you tell an analytic story that has coherence” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 150).

I wrote heavily in the margins and on top of my printed transcripts, then used sticky notes and index cards to code my data, as described as an appealing method for visual people by Birks and Mills (2011). There are computer software programs, such as NVIVO, available to help with grounded theory analysis but these electronic methods were unattractive to me.

My data collection (interviewing), coding, and analysis happened simultaneously, allowing coding to assist in shaping data collection and make a richer exploration (Charmaz,
As aforementioned, I frequently used the social media community to share work with and solicit feedback from. Consequently, while I was collecting, coding, and analyzing, I was also in a sense, checking to see if my tentative findings were resonating with the larger community.

As I was collecting, coding, analyzing, and affirming, I was also memo-writing. Memo-writing is “the pivotal intermediate step between data collection and writing drafts of papers” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 162). Memo-writing involves “stopping to analyze your ideas about the codes in any- and every- way that occurs to you during the moment” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 162). Employing autoethnographic memos, my memos often contained my personal thoughts or experiences regarding play accessibility to either aid in my analysis of the data at hand, or to actually use the data to help analyze my own experience. I maintained a bank of memos I kept on a document accessible both on my phone and laptop. Memoing and analyzing my own thoughts and experiences like this and using them to enrich and strengthen the emerging theory while also applying the emerging theory to further understand myself was as Ellis (2004) warns, a difficult process.

My memo writing, as Corbin and Strauss (1990) recommend,

[continued] until the very end of the project, including the writing itself. Sorted and resorted during the writing process, theoretical memos provide a firm base for reporting on the research and its implications. If a researcher omits the memoing and moves directly from coding to writing, a great deal of conceptual detail is lost or left undeveloped (p. 10).

It is critical to understand that the emergent theory will continue to be developed. Once on paper, this version of the emergent theory becomes its own entity. My own applications, understandings, attention to and development of the theory will, however, continue to flourish.
The theory will continue to develop and shift as I continue through my ongoing lived inquiry, and it may be strengthened by further research and new perspectives. Using a constructivist perspective, I approach this inquiry understanding that especially because the theory is largely from autoethnographic study, it rests on my perspective which has been constructed by my experiences. Therefore, my position, privileges, and interactions are an inherent part of this theory.

**Approaching (a) Truth**

The examination of a study based on its methodology, validity, and integrity is necessary to ensure that the overall study is worthy of the time and attention paid to it by both constructors and readers. Studies can influence policy and practices, and therefore have dangerous implications for societies if integrity is not carefully examined, but can positively affect communities if held to a high standard of rigour (Long & Johnson, 2000).

There is a long, living, and important discourse surrounding what brings a study closer to describing (a) truth. I align my inquiry practices with a constructivist and feminist perspective and have therefore constructed this theory and study from an understanding that within each human being is a constructed truth and reality that is therefore separate from every other being, depending on how their reality has been constructed (Charmaz, 2014). The majority of my participants are women, and I conduct my study with an understanding that the stories women have shared with me are not generalizable to all women and that women’s lives are varied and distinct (Harding, 1987). There is not one single universal truth but rather, a multitude of truths that exist within each being.
Each scholar and human being may interpret and apply feminist principles uniquely, such is the nature of human beings from a constructivist perspective. The way I have approached my research aligns with three basic feminist principles as described by Hall and Stevens (1991):

1. a valuing of women and a validation of women’s experiences, ideas, and needs;
2. a recognition of the existence of ideologic, structural, and interpersonal conditions that oppress women; and
3. a desire to bring about social change of oppressive constraints through criticisms and political action

First and foremost, constructivist and feminist scholars demand that researchers shed the invisible voice of authority often utilized by more positivist scholars, and employ language that is reflexive and open to criticism by the reader. Throughout my writing process, I have attempted to use language that centres my narration and co-construction of this theory. This work, and my constructed reality, rest on my identity and privilege as a white, 30-year old, cis-gender, heterosexual woman of able body and mind.

While reliability traditionally means the replicability of study results, the constructivist feminist lens begs researchers to consider thoroughly attending to their research processes to ensure dependability (Hall & Stevens, 1991). Prolonged engagement, persistent observation, use of multiple observers, comparison of multiple data sources, and comparison of individual versus group accounts and spontaneous versus elicited data are all ways suggested to verify dependability in one’s inquiry (Hall & Stevens, 1991, p. 19). I have attended to each of these suggestions thoroughly throughout this study.

My placement directly within my participant pool and environment is an example of prolonged engagement and persistent observation, allowing me “a significant length of time in
contact with respondents individually and with the topic generally” (Long & Johnson, 2000, p. 33). My engagement with the community organization and social media accounts surrounding this research has also offered me extensive time interacting with members who fit within my general demographic and who are intricately tied to my research topic.

Co-constructors have lent their own perspectives, experiences, stories, and observations to this project in such a way that their own realities are intricately woven into this larger narrative. Triangulation of qualitative data sources is described by Long and Johnson (2000) as, “the employment of multiple data sources, data collection methods, or investigators” (p. 33). Long and Johnson’s (2000) interpretation of triangulation of sources has been achieved through the use of multiple data sources which have not been triaged but rather maintained as equally important assets that challenge, verify, and strengthen one another. Both individual and group accounts have been gained through the use of both individual and focus group conversations. Elicited data was gathered through the social media account and autoethnographic conversations. Spontaneous data, which proved to be remarkably valuable, was gathered through autoethnography memoing. It was also unexpectedly gathered through spontaneous submissions to the social media account, and through participants circling back with more insight after our conversations if they thought of something they considered relevant to our topic or if reflection on our conversation prompted new, often rich insight. Delightfully, this was a frequent occurrence.

I have upheld the fidelity of my co-constructors’ stories by frequently weaving long quotes and entire stories as evidence into my study. Such a practice aligns with feminist methodologies and views of credibility by presenting “such faithful interpretations of participants’ experience that they [participants] can recognize them as their own (Hall &
Stevens, 1991). My co-constructors have been articulate in their expressions, and I would like for my reader to read their words directly.

Guba and Lincoln (2005) describe the importance of ethical relationships and interactions with participants as a form of authentic and valid knowing (p. 209). They stress the importance of reciprocity and “the extent to which the research relationship becomes reciprocal rather than hierarchical” (p. 209). Since the onset of recruitment with participants it was transparent that I would not be giving back to participants directly. That being said, participants understand that I offer an abundance of my time towards advocating and creating awareness surrounding play within my participants’ community. I have used the emerging theory to inform the volunteer book club that surrounds this project, implement play programming with teen mothers at the Shirley Schneider Support Centre, and to communicate the emerging needs of caregivers with major stakeholders and organizations in the community such as The City of Regina, The Regina Public Library, the Early Learning Centre and the Regina Early Years Family Resource Centre. There is an understanding that the time, and sometimes painful self-examination that participants have generously undergone is being reciprocated in their community.
Chapter Four: Findings

In this chapter, I share some of the co-constructors’ stories and explore the categories that have emerged from the data. *The Cost of Play,* and *Quality of Early Learning Environment* explore systemic barriers to play. *Extracurricular Activities and Play* and *Mental Health and Play* appear to be both systemic and personal play factors. The final categories, *(Re)claiming a Playful Self* and *Education and Prioritization of Play* emerged as empowering categories that demonstrate the individual agency over play and playful communities. A final subcategory to *Education and Prioritization of Play,* called *Awareness of the Preciousness of Life* is offered with a vignette, *A Final Story,* in a personal coda at the end of this thesis. The co-constructors’ stories are interspersed with two autoethnographic vignettes: *The Swinging Bridge,* and *The Screen Door* are presented in italics. I will first begin by introducing the participants.

Study Demographics

The participants in this study range in age from their mid-twenties to late forties. All participants currently live in Regina or the surrounding area. The following descriptions of the participants in the study will offer the reader some knowledge of their backgrounds, interests, daily life, and a basic understanding of what their play affordances might be. Since I wanted my participants to be active co-constructors in this study and have agency over how they would be presented, I invited each participant to co-write their profiles. They were each invited to answer an email questionnaire by filling in information that they felt was relevant to the play abilities of themselves and their families (Appendix B); after I wrote the profiles, they then had the opportunity to view and edit their specific profile. The reader should be aware that not every participant responded to my invitation to co-construct their own profile so some of the profiles I
have written on their behalf with the information provided before and during our play conversations. These profiles are unique from one another; since findings included the importance of one’s upbringing, family structure, play network, socio-economic status and day-to-day schedule I circled back to my participants and asked them to provide the information that they felt may have most affected their play. In short, play is more personally rooted than I had originally understood and I felt it necessary to provide detailed profiles. Even still, these profiles provide a narrow view of these participants and cannot possibly wholly describe these human beings and the complexities of their lives and what affects their play. Furthermore, these conversations happened over the winter of 2019/2020, and all the information is accurate to that specific timeframe. I have chosen to provide my own profile first since I have remained at the centre of this study.

The reader is encouraged to consider my own experiences and potential biases, and how I may have centred my own voice and experiences in my analysis of this work.

**Participant Profiles**

*Some names are pseudonyms and some are not, at the request of each individual participant. I have not distinguished between which names are pseudonyms and which are participants’ real names to offer each participant and their children (if applicable) a sense of confidentiality.*

**Whitney**

I have a large family and strong support network in Regina and three of my five siblings live in Regina. I am particularly close with my two sisters. My biological mother lives in Michigan and although I miss her and think of her often, she suffers from alcoholism and addictions. I’ve seen her twice in the past ten years. My spouse’s family lives in Manitoba and we are close with them and see them frequently. At the time of the conversations I was a full-
time teacher and part-time graduate student. My spouse is a teacher. We have two boys, who were ages 18 months and 3 years old, and attended childcare full-time at the time of the interviews. We live in a house in Regina within walking distance to several indoor and outdoor free and public play spaces. My spouse sometimes travels for his music work which means I am managing on my own with the children but in turn he supports me in pursuing my own passions, including a pottery practice. This research and the development of Project Play YQR have also been sources of creativity and play.

Chantel

Chantel has a support network in Regina that she describes as consisting of not only some family but also friends and physical locations such as her dance studio and the Early Learning Centre. Chantel is a full-time teacher and owns and teaches in a dance studio. Chantel is a single mother by choice to two boys through embryo adoption. At the time of our conversation her boys were almost-three, and ten months old. Both her boys live with her full-time. At the time of our conversation Chantel was on maternity leave with her youngest son and had pulled her eldest from childcare to be with him as well. Chantel lives on a busy main street in Regina but is quite close to a walking path. There are limited parks in her area and she describes the nearby playgrounds as small and lacking equipment. Although Chantel has some (though limited) playspaces nearby, she doesn’t always feel safe in her neighbourhood.

Jennifer

Jennifer was raised in Ontario and has lived in Regina for 6 years. Neither Jennifer nor her spouse has any family in Regina and they do not have a large support network in the city. Jennifer’s husband sometimes travels for work which leaves her solely responsible for their home, children, and two pets. Jennifer wrote that her husband’s shift work and sometimes
unpredictable travel schedule can be tiring. She is also hesitant to invite others to her home because of one of her pet’s behaviours which makes it extra challenging when her spouse is gone because this scenario creates an added layer of isolation. Jennifer fondly remembers her unstructured play experiences that she enjoyed as a child.

Nicole

Nicole has lived in Regina for 6 years. Her parents were sixteen and twenty-one when she was born. Nicole describes her play memories as unsafe. She often faced harsh rejection and discipline for her attempts at play in her home. Nicole has a large family in Regina but has been increasingly applying boundaries to her extended family members as what she describes as an important form of self-care. Nicole has a support network of friends. Nicole had her children at a relatively young age and therefore most of her friends do not have children yet. Nicole’s ex-husband does not provide financial support for their children; he does, however, take them for overnight visits a few times per month. At the time of our conversation Nicole was working full-time from home and pursuing her bachelor’s degree at the University of Regina. Her children were 3.5 and 7 years old. Her youngest attended childcare part-time and her eldest was in school full-time. Nicole and her children live in a two-bedroom apartment within walking distance of the community elementary school and several parks and playgrounds.

Alice

Alice has a large family and a strong support network. At the time of our conversation, Alice was a Core Leader at a high school in Regina and a part-time sessional instructor at the University of Regina. Alice’s children are 5 and 8 years old. Her youngest attended part-time Kindergarten and part-time childcare. Her eldest was in school full-time. Alice and her family
live in a house that backs onto a green space and is within walking distance to parks, running and cycling trails, a creek, and shopping.

Alice believes strongly in the benefits of risky play and takes many steps to ensure her children have opportunities for risky play. Alice’s family enjoys camping, travelling, and playing a variety of sports together.

Sonia

Sonia has lived in Regina for the past 30 years. Most of Sonia’s immediate family lives in Regina or Moose Jaw. Her mother provides the majority of support for her family; she is retired and lives nearby. Sonia is a Human Resources consultant and graduate student at a post-secondary institution. Her spouse is a Director for the Government of Saskatchewan. Sonia’s family lives in a house within walking distance to a park, Regina Public Library branch, and the outdoor summer Early Years Family Centre. Sonia’s son was 2.5 years old at the time of our conversation and attended full-time childcare. Sonia greatly values play for her son.

Amanda

Amanda has a small family but they are close. Her small extended family gathers every two or three weeks for Sunday supper and card games. There are some recent challenges navigating a newly separated and blended family since Amanda’s father has recently separated from her stepmother. Amanda has many friends who create a wonderful support network. Amanda was a social worker on maternity leave at the time of our conversation and her spouse is a teacher. Amanda’s son was seven months old at the time. Her family lives in a house close to a leisure centre, walking paths and playgrounds, and parks. Amanda fondly remembers her play experiences, particularly with her grandfather.

Wade
Wade has lived in Regina for 20 years. Wade's wife’s family lives in Regina and his family lives in Saskatoon. His spouse’s family spends winters in Arizona and Wade’s family visits Regina frequently. Wade and his wife are both passionate about their work and do their best to balance their work, family, and passions and ensure the other partner is able to do the same.

Wade is a high school principal in Regina. He also coaches university basketball. His partner is an entrepreneur. They have two children who are 4 and 9 years old. They live in a house within walking distance to parks, paths, and the Ducks Unlimited Nature Refuge.

*Etienne*

Etienne is a musician and sometimes teaches. He has two children who are 2 and 4 years old. He lives within walking distance to parks, a library, and the Early Learning Centre. His spouse is a teacher. Etienne and his spouse have a large support network in Regina. Etienne is particularly close with his parents who are quite supportive. Etienne and his family value play and enjoy creating scenarios that foster unstructured play for their children.

*Maria*

Maria grew up in France and has taught in several different countries. Maria does not have children. Although she does not fit into the purposeful sampling used for this study, Maria felt she had some insight to provide to the project and an interview was arranged. She has gained a support network partially through the Regina Newcomer Welcome Centre. Maria prioritizes play as an adult and enjoys many public spaces and services around the city. Maria has gained insight on the connection between play, place, and social structures through her travels and living experiences in different geographic locations. Maria attributes many of the positive qualities she sees in herself as an adult to her playfulness as a child.
Nolan

Nolan was born in Yorkton, Sk. He has lived in Regina for 23 years. Nolan and his spouse have a large support network of both family and friends in Regina. Nolan and his spouse both work full-time in the city and their son, who was one at the time of our conversation, attends childcare full time. Nolan and his family live within walking distance to several parks and a splash pad. Nolan is currently working on studying outside of work. His spouse has been supportive of his studies but it takes time away from his family.

Millie

Millie lives and works in Regina. At the time of our conversation, her son was approximately 18 months old. Millie’s spouse also works full-time in Regina and their son attends childcare full time. Millie has a background studying science and enjoys teaching children about science and getting outside to explore nature.

Amber

Amber has lived in Regina for approximately 25 years. She and her spouse both have large, supportive families who live in Regina. They also have a close friend support network with many children the same age as theirs. At the time of our conversation Amber was on maternity leave from her position as a full-time social worker and part-time graduate student. Her husband is a full-time engineer. Her daughter was one year at the time of our conversation and she attends childcare full time. Amber and her family live within walking distance to a park, Regina Public Library branch, and the outdoor Early Years Family Centre.

Crystal

Crystal grew up in Wadena, Saskatchewan. She lives with her son and his father in a house in Pilot Butte, Saskatchewan and commutes to Regina for work. Crystal has a support
network, although her parents do not live in the city. Crystal’s son Henri was two at the time of our conversation. He had suffered from many health problems. Henri was born 12 weeks early, spent several months in NICU, is a cancer survivor, has had several surgeries and chemotherapy, and has suffered profound hearing loss.

*Darryl*

Darryl was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba and has lived in Regina for the past 14 years. Darryl has a strong support network in Regina and in Manitoba where his family lives. Darryl is a full-time teacher when a contract is presented. When without a contract he substitute teaches and works on music. I am Darryl’s spouse and I was a full-time teacher and part-time graduate student at the time of the conversation. Darryl encouraged me to resign to pursue further studies and Project Play YQR while having more time to spend with our children while they are young. Darryl believes strongly in one having the ability to pursue their passions if their privilege allows for it.

**Vignette No. 1: The Swinging Bridge**

*Darryl and I were returning from his family farm in Manitoba. I was in the early write-up stages of this thesis and it was the day after I had found out that my mother’s sister had completed suicide. My mother-in-law offered to keep the kids for a couple of days while we returned home to spend some time alone together and for me to focus on my studies without distractions. I had never had to confront a loved one taking their own life. More than anything it was simply, and overwhelmingly, sad. Pauline was kind, loving, and sensitive. She was exceptionally intelligent. She adored her adult son, my cousin, and they had a close relationship. I felt scared. I had looked up to her. My mother’s mental health has deteriorated since we were children and their other sister is in jail for committing arson for the second time. She suffers*
from paranoid schizophrenia and burned down two homes to destroy evidence of something that
does not exist.

I had been in a daze since the previous day. Darryl mentioned something about planting
a tree for my aunt in our yard to care for and though this was a kind thought, the cliché nature of
this felt further isolating.

As we made the drive home from the farm without our children for the first time in over 4
years, Darryl mentioned that he saw a sign that read, “Wolseley: Town of the Famous Swinging
Bridge” and asked me if we should go take a look.

Darryl is not spontaneous or adventurous in a traditional sense. Our three-hour drives to
the farm and back only ever involve going from point A to point B, with possible breaks only to
get gas and use the washroom if absolutely necessary. These things happen at the same stop, and
we do not pick up snacks. Darryl, who pays attention to road signs and has made the drive from
his family farm to Regina countless times, has read this sign hundreds of times. His offer to
explore outside the route to our destination to visit the swinging bridge was characteristically
extraordinary. I understood his expression of love and affection towards me; play is the sixth
love language.

We find the swinging bridge. It’s gorgeous. It’s mid-afternoon on a Monday in the middle
of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring and there’s no one to be seen. There are flowers neatly
planted and greenery everywhere. We walk out onto the bridge and I am surprised at how it
immediately swings. I can’t help but smile. It’s a long, narrow bridge over water; no matter how
seriously I try to walk across it, I cannot keep it from swinging. The feeling engages the whole
body. The muscles in my core activate to try to keep me stable. The wind pushes the bridge,
further extending its swing and affecting which muscles engage to maintain my stability. The further I stagger towards the middle of the bridge, the stronger the smell of freshwater grows.

I realize how silly I must look stumbling across this bridge. I look at Darryl and how ridiculous he looks doing the same and am filled with immense gratitude and love for him in this moment; for knowing me and offering me this experience at this specific time. He tries to make the bridge swing as much as he can and I do the same. We try swinging the bridge in a synchronized fashion and we try swinging the bridge out of unison to feel how this affects the bridge and our respective bodies. We go to different areas of the bridge and try standing close together and far apart. We don’t use words to communicate what we each want to do and how we want to explore the bridge; we mostly just laugh.

We visit the gazebo at the other end of the swinging bridge and admire its beauty. We head back towards the car. Darryl goes ahead of me and waits at the end of the bridge for a while. I stay still on the bridge and let it gently swing me. I think of my aunt. I don’t have a religious background. Whereas before I felt lost and confused in how to process death and particularly suicide and that I was lacking the necessary information to categorize these new thoughts and feelings, I now realize that I have the freedom to categorize my thoughts and feelings in whatever ways might feel good and useful. I am grateful for this.

I fear that the world offers an overwhelming amount of opportunities to feel sad and discouraged. Play is not frivolous. Play is not useless, nor is it a waste of time. Play is not something to attend to when we have completed our work. This prevalent attitude is an insult to the precarious nature of life. It is dangerous.

I thought maybe venturing to find a swinging bridge and laughing with my spouse would feel inappropriate the day after learning of a family tragedy. It didn’t. I won’t plant a tree in my
garden for Pauline. I will pay closer attention to opportunities for play and happiness, and take them. I have learned that this is a great privilege.

When I meet Darryl at the end of the swinging bridge, we read about the bridge on two large signs posted at its entry. We learn that the bridge was originally built in 1902 and has had to be completely rebuilt twice. The current bridge, built in 2004, was reconstructed using donations from Wolseley and surrounding area residents. In each of the new constructions of this essential pedestrian bridge to access the Wolseley downtown, the playful swinging nature of the bridge has been maintained. On one of the signs in loving memory of the first bridge and gratitude towards donors, this poem is written by Stephen Sciver:

Once anchored on this mighty block, the old swinging bridge was ours to walk,  
To wildly frolic, spill and sway, the centre of our childhood play.  
Or to stop a while...to contemplate...how it bore each generation’s weight.  
Thank you, old friend, your work is done, your new sister now can join the fun.

Section II: Findings

Throughout this multi-methodology inquiry, I have continuously returned to my research questions as stated on page 5 of this thesis to both focus and open my inquiry. The research questions are: 1) What factors do participants perceive facilitate play and 2) What perceived barriers do people face to play?

In the section that follows, I will present the main categories surrounding play accessibility for residents in Regina and the surrounding area. They are: The Cost of Play, Quality of Early Learning Environment, Extracurricular Activities and Play, Mental Health and Play, (Re)claiming a Playful Self, and Education and Prioritization of Play.

People are drawn to play; such is demonstrated by the ease of recruitment towards this study and even by the ease in which Project Play YQR has gained volunteers and secured
microgrants for our projects. The attraction to play, however, does not resemble the attraction of something new and mysterious, but rather to an old familiar comfort. Many people connect play with nostalgia. The way participants discuss and seem to feel about play and creating greater opportunities for play is not as if they are creating something new but rather, protecting or taking something back. The main argument of this study is that, although systemic barriers to play exist, there is hope in (re)claiming play. Individuals appear to have great agency over reclaiming a playful self and playful community.

Reclaiming play appears to be perceived as a worthwhile act of resistance. The categories of reclaiming play are intricately interconnected. The following figure, titled (Re)claiming Play, offers a visual demonstration of how the categories exist in tangent and in tension with one another and how the awareness and prioritization of play affect each category.
The co-constructors of the emerging theory have demonstrated powerful individual agency over their own playfulness and opportunities for play in their communities. They have collectively taught me that we are not passive users of playful communities, but rather, architects of them. The following categories, the Cost of Play, Extracurricular Activities and Play, Quality of Early Learning Environment, Mental Health and Play, (Re)claiming a Playful Self, and Education and Prioritization of Play contribute to an overall narrative that points to the human being’s ability to reclaim play.

**The Cost of Play**

The current findings suggest that there can be a cost to play. This cost involves the sacrifice of time to work and earn money and the inflexibility of parents’ time due to perceived increasing work demands. It also appears that living within walking distance to playspaces that participants feel safe walking to and playing in is a financial privilege. Participants have expressed that playgrounds that are suitable for younger children are geographically located in more affluent areas. The perceived increasing commercialization of play advertises toys and kits to children that appear to entertain them, but that hold the potential to lower their play stamina, further eroding play in addition to costing families money. There appear to be new financial expectations placed upon play which participants describe as having co-opted the child’s birthday party. These systemic play accessibility factors are explored in the following subcategories: Work and Play, Work (in)Flexibility and Play, Walking Distance, Capitalism and Play, Birthday Celebrations, and the Privatization of Play.

**Work and Play.** The first question on the interview guide (in Appendix A) asks parents to describe their typical day. Time as a barrier to play continues to come up throughout this study and it becomes clear that parents are forced to manage play around their work schedules. In a
conversation with several fathers, the first question is, “What would be something you think facilitates play?” and Darryl immediately responds, “time obviously facilitates it, if you have time away from work and other demands.” Etienne answers, “yeah I was going to say like, schedules like flexible schedules or having less permanent commitments or like, having that flexibility offers more time for sort of impromptu playtime.” In our individual conversation amber describes, “you see your kid what, like three hours a day or something depending on what time they go to bed not to mention when they first go to daycare they’re exhausted and want to go to bed at like six?” How little time parents have to be with their children or to dedicate to their own play is distressing when one sorts through the data. Below are descriptions from two participants to give the reader an idea of what a weekday might look like for parents of young children who maintain a typical day job.

The first illustration is taken from Crystal’s conversation. She admittedly has the most challenging schedule of the participants, although some participants work 12-hour shifts sporadically which forces them to sometimes spend entire days without seeing their children at all and makes it challenging to develop a routine with their families.

Crystal: Okay well I guess I’m going to work now so we would get up and then honestly he’s got some issues with sleep like he’s got obstructions so he doesn’t sleep very well. He seems to sleep better in the mornings than he does at night. Although that seems to be improving but I don’t know, it’s kind of hit or miss so I let him sleep til like 6/6:30am even though we are out of the house by 7 am. And I will physically dress him while he’s sleeping and then I get him in the car. We go to daycare. He’s at daycare by 7/7:15 am. In that timezone. Daycare is great because he has no separation anxiety when I drop him off and I don’t have any anxiety when I drop him off ’cause like, where I was prepared for
that because I’m anxious anyways but he likes all the ladies that he’s with and they really love him and he’s spoiled. Then I go to work...um because of the roads and I’m driving in from Balgonie. I did cut my lunch breaks to a half-hour from an hour. ‘Cause when I had an hour I would go for walks and stuff but now that it’s down to a half-hour that’s really limited. Come home so we’re home by...I pick up by about 5:30 pm, we are home by about 5:45/6 pm depending on the roads. Then it’s honestly me trying to make supper and him doing his own play thing. Then I’m so - I used to read a lot but it’s honestly a lot of Netflix or Crave or something, like he falls asleep 8:30/9:30 pm kind of late. And then when he goes to bed I’m so tired I don’t even make it to 10 usually I’m out. So I don’t actually have a lot of play I’m trying to do that on weekends it’s actually one of my New Year’s resolutions is that I was, I am typically, because I like people and I feel when I meet people they think I’m really outgoing and stuff but I actually don’t - I like to be on my own so much.

To summarize Crystal’s day, she wakes up before 6 am, gets her son physically dressed while he is still asleep in order to leave the house by 7 am, and drops him off at childcare between 7 am-7:15 am. She goes to work where she has cut her lunch breaks down to only a half-hour, then picks her son up at 5:30 and isn’t home until 5:45/6 pm. Her son falls asleep between 8:30-9:30 pm and Crystal is so exhausted she goes to bed directly after him.

The second illustration is the lightest illustration of all the participants who were still working and not on maternity leave. Every participant of this study worked full-time or was on parental leave at the time of their conversation with the exception of Etienne who had a more flexible work structure, which he immediately identifies as a facilitating factor to play. It was
unintentional to interview only working parents or those on parental leave, but the lack of participants who are unemployed might speak to the increasing rarity of parents who aren’t in the labour force (Statistics Canada, 2016). Alice expresses gratitude at how much time she gets to spend with her children since she is able to both drop them off at and pick them up from their school bus stop, even though she works full time:

Alice: So I guess it starts pretty early. We are all up at about, I’m up early before the kids at about 6:30 am. I get up, and get myself ready before I get the kids ready and usually I’m a morning lunch packer so pack lunches and water bottles and make sure the kids’ stuff is ready to go and then we wake the kids up and they’re responsible for kind of getting their rooms tidy and getting themselves dressed and then we have breakfast together and kind of chat about the day. Kind of see what everyone has planned and make sure everyone’s schedules align so that no one gets forgotten. And then my partner heads out to work and I’m fortunate that I get to stick back with the kids and walk them to the bus stop in the morning. And then I get in the car and I go to work so that’s kind of my morning schedule and then I work full-time as a teacher so I’m not with my kids all day and then um I pick them back up at 4 o’clock off the bus and in the evenings usually um right after school is sort of some downtime for everybody. Just, everybody being at school all day long we all need a little bit of a break so the kids will go downstairs and they will play and I will get supper ready or just have a minute to myself. And then um, yeah after supper it’s usually some winding down time. We do some reading or some puzzles and then yeah we just kind of spend some time together and then yeah it’s bedtime and...then we just do it all over again so...it’s busy. Yeah.
Work (in)Flexibility and Play. The inflexible nature of the typical work schedule also proves to be a barrier to play. In one digression I share with Amber during our conversation, I express the frustrations I sometimes felt as a teacher surrounding how children’s time in the classroom appears to revolve around parents’ work schedules, limiting any creativity that might be used to evaluate the structure of the student and teacher school/workday.

Amber: But seriously. But you’re right. You’re totally right. And like a teacher in particular is a job with zero flexibility. If you even want to call in sick look at how much work that is for you (...) Yeah. You really have to peek another look at your job, hey? Like for me I can never leave at lunchtime. If I need to leave at lunch that means another staff has to cover any emergencies that would come up on my unit. So if there is a code blue or a stroke or anything major like that another staff would have to step in and deal with it and it’s such a big ask that I don’t do it often obviously, no one does so I am completely stuck at work all day. I can’t leave. I can’t leave to move my car so I get tickets all day like it’s just...it’s ridiculous. You know, like no flexibility. But what do you do? It pays my bills, I like it, it’s just really hard. It’s a really hard thing.

This rigidity in work schedules affects people even outside of work. Amber shares,

I’ve never worked a job like this I was only in this job for nine months before I got pregnant (...) so it was a huge shock for me and I noticed what an impact it made and I know that’s going to be really hard for me parenting, coming home and knowing that I will have such little time with [my daughter] and I want it to be well spent so yeah that’s going to be really hard.
The commercialization of human beings appears to extend beyond just our time, even attaching itself to our will to do good. Darryl, Alice, Wade, Etienne, and Amber, who all work in education, social work, and the arts, have expressed the challenges of adjusting to the amount of unpaid work expected of them. The high turnover rate of teachers in their first five years of teaching is often attributed to burnout due to work overload and increased documentation demanded of teachers (Lindqvist et al., 2014). It appears that Amber faces a similar challenge in her social work career, stating:

I hope that sort of mind frame will be a little bit different because I was so much more inclined to stay late, unpaid, and take on extra stuff because I felt like I could and I truly was one of the only staff members without kids and I wanted other people to be able to do those things so I would work Christmas Day so other staff didn’t have to and stuff. So that will just be different now. So yeah. That will be a big change but also like, I will have to reexamine my career for sure.

The rigid work schedule most people adhere to also affects the time that they spend away from work. During the few hours caregivers have outside of their jobs, domestic tasks take a great deal of time. Many families also schedule structured activities for their children on evenings and weekends, as is further explored in the subcategory, Capitalism and Play. Families appear to struggle with how to spend the little time they have together.

The reader may notice that of the time that parents do have with their children, very little may be reserved for play. The domestic tasks of childrearing fall under what is typically viewed as unpaid or invisible labour. This work is so intense that Eve Rodsky (2019), author of Fair Play, describes that many mothers refer to the time from arriving home from their workplaces to
putting their children to bed as the “second shift.” The men who participated in this study appeared to also take on a large part of the domestic and childrearing responsibilities in their homes. Those who worked outside of the home appeared to also arrive home from work to this “second shift.”

Unfortunately for many people, technological advances have created a structure where even the first, traditional office shift blurs into home life and feels never-ending. Even though they put a full day of work in at the office, many people still bring work home with them. Wade says, “for me I struggle to shut down from work...and I’ve gotten better about keeping it out of sight from myself. And that’s just something I’ve been working on this year. Because I receive stuff [on my electronic devices] all the time.”

Crystal shares that, “play is having the time (...) a lot of families just have this....just time. We just don’t have the time. But I do realize that a lot of my friends have their kids in like, a million things. And I don’t with [my son].”

There do appear to be structures in place that facilitate play by offering parents the ability to work, earn money, or have financial support to care for their children. Paid parental leave was referenced by several participants (9) as facilitating play for those who were eligible and went on a paid parental leave, and hindering play for those who were ineligible for and therefore could not take a paid parental leave. To illustrate how paid parental leave affects families and play, we can examine the days of two participants who were on maternity leave at the time of our conversations. The first example is from Chantel, who is on maternity leave and has pulled her toddler from childcare to be with her during her leave. She describes,

We typically try to leave the house once a day for my own sanity (laughs.) I try to be home for all three meals, though, if at all possible. Usually we may - the oldest doesn’t
nap anymore so - we are not confined to having to rush home and my youngest can still nap in the bucket seat so we can be out whenever so our day is like:

- Wake up
- Be at home for a bit
- Breakfast, get dressed and ready, maybe play some more at home or go on a play date or go to mom’s group or go to the EYFC or something and come home for lunch.

If we go out in the morning we usually stay home for the afternoon. If we go out for the afternoon...like if I know we are going out in the afternoon we usually stay home in the morning and we don’t do much in the evenings because it’s kind of like...ah! Supper, bath, bed.

Amber, who is nearing the end of her maternity leave with her only daughter at the time of our conversation, describes her day.

Amber: So right now in the winter I would be...so she’s doing two naps still, so in the morning it’s just home and breakfast before her first nap. And then in between naps she has about a three-hour window so I always try to do one outing, like get out of the house in the winter. So we will um, like meet up with friends, or go to Amazing Adventures or a learning centre or something so it’s pretty play-based for the most part. And then usually the rest of the night is at home. Whereas I feel like in the summer we are doing so many different variations of play and I feel like in the winter right now it’s strictly like, in between naps is what I’ve got and the rest of it is just like...normal day to day stuff that I don’t feel are as playful or beneficial to her life in any way (laughs) other than like, learning how I make dinner and do housework and stuff.
Vignette No. 2: The Screen Door.

My spouse, Darryl and I, are inside. We are several days into his summer holidays from teaching and my resignation. I have just come out of the office to take a play break, which I’ve learned to do when my mind starts to wander since being sent home to work during the pandemic. Our 4-year-old is outside playing with a water gun, shooting us through our back screen door. Darryl has been standing just inside the door. He brings my attention to the screen and to how the water collects in each individual square. He points out how interesting the water looks suspended in the screen in tiny squares and comments on their resemblance to Tetris tiles. I have no idea how long he has been sitting here. He shows me that if I run my finger along the water droplets suspended in the screen, I can move the water in a pattern and the water will slowly disappear. It’s like magic. We sit for a while, admiring the water on the screen and making the water disappear with our fingers. I glance over at Darryl and notice how relaxed and youthful he looks before I head back into the office to continue writing.

Walking Distance. Whether or not one’s home is within walking distance to play spaces that a family enjoys has been demonstrated as paramount for play accessibility. Nolan says that, some days I found it would be a bit of a struggle just for me to want to go out and do some of these things because every once in a while to do something different within walking distance is tough. There’s only so many directions to go and so many things to do.

Amber observes, “even for me when I don’t have a car, I can navigate something that’s close to me but that’s just because of where I live.”
To further understand walking distance as a perceived factor to play, I asked the Play YQR Instagram community what type of factor Walking Distance appeared to be: 50 out of 58 (86%) of those who responded to the survey expressed that they felt that living within walking distance of play spaces is a financial privilege. Some of them also described how feeling safe while walking in one’s neighbourhood can be a financial privilege. Chantel also said she doesn’t feel very safe walking around her neighbourhood and that this is a financial barrier. One online participant wrote, “definitely a financial privilege. The great/cool playgrounds seem to be in newer developments.”

Some participants expressed feeling relieved and relaxed if they understood that they were in a space that was appropriate for their child; this appears more difficult to come by for parents of infants and toddlers than for older children. Some participants from the Instagram community sent messages describing that playgrounds suitable for younger children or that have spaces reserved for younger children are all new playgrounds that are, again, only within walking distance of affluent neighbourhoods in the city. One participant wrote in, “especially younger kid focused parks- always in the newer areas.” Nolan describes, “I found while off it was tough to find a playground that functioned well for kids under three years old.” Playgrounds that parents perceive to not be age-appropriate for their child seem to result in parents remaining in extremely close proximity to their children, helping them frequently, and constantly saying “no.” This is understandably frustrating for both parent and child and this becomes a barrier to play. Nolan describes,

They’ve got a wheelchair ramp up there and like, I thought like, “hey this is awesome because he can walk up the ramp. It’s only a couple feet off the ground.” I still had to watch him because I don’t want him to do a faceplant off because that’s not going to be
great for your face. It was a lot more exciting to be like, “hey you can actually do this on your own! I’m still going to be watching and here with you but I don’t have to be worried that you’re going to fall like, three feet, four feet and cripple yourself.

Amber brings up an interesting community issue saying, “people who are on leave...they usually have kids under 18 months old. So you can go to the EYFCs, which are great. They just don’t have those risky play structures that are still okay for her.”

**Capitalism and Play.** I ask Maria what differences she observes between France and Canada in terms of how people play and she highlights the disparity in, “the amount of money people are willing to spend to entertain their kids in Canada vs. France.”

Maria: I remember on the rainy days we would like steal the umbrella from one of the porches when we were like parading the street and imagine circus stuff and all of that of like, you know, nowadays it seems like kids always need the kits. “Here’s the glue here’s the colour here’s the cloud here’s…” you know? And I feel like because they’re all so used to us delivering ready-to-consume playful products, you know? Maria is describing the trend towards entertainment over play, mostly due to the privatization of play and for-profit companies creating entertaining items, toys, and “kits.”

In a conversation with Alice, we start discussing money and the increasing privatization of play. Alice has just asked me, as many participants do, why she isn’t seeing many children outside. I respond,

People talk about...this is so fascinating to me. Money influences what people do and it seems like people create a habit or sort of playing in a way that, they sort of spend what
they have if that makes sense. So people don’t go and enjoy free play spaces or enjoy playing outside…

Alice: Because they can afford more?

Whitney: Yes. And it’s become a barrier. I had a meeting with someone from the City of Regina and they brought up, when they offer free programming, depending on what area it’s in (...) it just doesn’t even work because people feel uncomfortable attending something that is free because they can afford to pay for it. And that’s really interesting.

Alice: That is interesting.

Whitney: So money is a barrier even if…

Alice: You have it. That’s interesting.

Alice is quite aware of the privatization and commercialization of play. She shares her experiences:

We become, yeah, I think it also becomes a competition too, when you’re talking about those who have money like, you’re around the hockey rink and it’s like, “oh what do you have your son in?” They’re listing three or four or five activities, and I’m going...and in my mind I’m totally tallying those up but I’m also thinking like, when do you have time as a family? Which I think is really important (...) And on the other side of money too, you’re just being hounded. They know that...you know, you’ve got your kids in these activities so there must be some money behind it. So I took them skiing for example last year. And they did very well because they’re two little athletes and they can skate. So two similar movements. Well then I was approached to put them in private lessons and have them join the ski club. I’m like, “no thank you” so it also comes with this expectation that you have money so therefore you will or you must and you maybe want to put them in all
these things too. So that’s something I’ve noticed too us you almost get...bombarded.

You know, your kids need to be great. They need to be the best next thing let’s put them in this.

Even though hockey programs can be expensive, paying for the hockey itself is still only part of the cost. The time commitment, transportation, and meals outside of the home come as added expenses of structured activities. The families who have their children in activities outside of school share that they purchase meals on the go up to four times per week.

The expense of sport and structured activities affects play in several ways. Parents of young children are often in a challenging financial position; they are potentially financially recovering from a paid or unpaid parental leave, have childcare costs, or are carrying a large mortgage as mentioned previously in this category. When a parent is pressured to spend a significant amount of money on one child’s activities, it can disproportionately affect the whole family and their financial freedom to spend money in ways that better support play for everyone. For example, Amanda shares:

Even if [hockey is] the one thing in the world that will make him the happiest...I still don’t want to write that cheque. Because our quality of life impacts him and he’s a part of it and so you’re sad because you can’t play hockey but if we’re writing you cheques for $5000, maybe we’re not going camping this summer.

The privatization of play hasn’t only affected children, but adults as well. Many parents discussed connecting with their partners through either getting a babysitter or inviting family over to babysit, then heading out for a meal. Several (6) participants are unsatisfied with this however and are curious to find other options for play. Etienne says,
even if you have the money to do that sort of thing, we’re talking about RRSPs, and we’re talking about all this financial stuff where just because you’re in a financial situation where those outings can happen doesn’t mean that you want to put the money into them. You know, back to the money situation. Like, I was blown away recently by talking about little changes to do financially for the future, and it goes a long way when you look at those meals and those outings.

**Birthday Celebrations.** One of the ways that we can most efficiently analyze the effect of the increasing commercialization of play and how the rejection of the increasing financial standards set on play is to examine what society has done with children’s birthday parties, which, interestingly, came up frequently both in conversations and through online submissions around this thesis. There is a growing awareness that birthday parties have somehow become increasingly complicated and significantly less fun than how parents remember them being in their own childhoods. The privatization of play seems to have created a standard around birthday parties that involves spending money.

Amanda broaches the topic of birthday parties and describes how the standard for birthday parties continues to rise and become increasingly competitive. She says, “you know...like birthday parties. That’s a form of play... you know, ‘we did this and now we’re doing even more.’ I just remember eating cake with my friends and running around with my mom. That was fun.”

Alice describes some of her own challenges with birthday parties. I find a lot of joy in planning the party and seeing how happy they are and getting them involved every year...I want birthdays to be remembered really fondly with my kids, as
my partner remembers his and how, you know, versus mine, I think because of when I was born in December but I want them to look back and you know, there will be certain times of their childhood that they remember and even the pictures of those moments and those parties, like I do (...) but yeah they probably cost like, between 400-500 bucks by the time you have food and an activity and like...yeah, it’s not cheap. And it’s become a….it almost feels very competitive like, you’ve gotta...you had this party and this person did this, it just...it’s definitely become a thing and I think like, even if you just looked at the services offered in Regina and look at who is offering parties and how much more um, options you have, it’s pretty wild. Yeah.

Maria shares in conversation,

when we were kids like, no birthday party and if you want to have a birthday party then you organize it, you make a card, you invite your friends, you bake the fucking cake and then when your friends come you entertain them. Like, nobody was going to do the work for you or spend money on that, you know? That was supposed to be part of the fun.

Crystal’s story is particularly illustrative. Her son was born over 3 months early. He was in NICU for several months, suffered hearing loss, was diagnosed with cancer as a baby, and has survived surgeries and chemotherapy. It has been a lot of work keeping Henri alive. Therefore, the destruction that the socially constructed birthday party causes is evident when the social pressures are so heavy that Crystal forgoes a birthday celebration altogether.

I was supposed to have a birthday party for Henri and I just couldn’t do it. I couldn’t find a birthday that like...that I felt was worthy. Because everyone in my group does huge birthdays. And I didn’t have the money to like go...and I didn’t want to spend the money
on that either. Like, oh we’re going to pretend we have the money to spend on this great birthday party and then...eat macaroni for a week? No. It’s stupid. Now everything is like, “oh we did a unicorn theme at the Science Centre and we got cupcakes from blah blah blah” whereas before your mom would have just made a cake.

The standardization and commercialization around birthday parties are damaging. It appears we have lost some of our ability to celebrate the lives of children and their childhoods. The increasing commercialization of birthday parties has been documented in the reviewed literature (Schoonmaker, 2006; Jennings & Brace-Govan, 2013). The rejection of social constructs appears especially helpful in approaching birthday parties. Extravagance itself is not the culprit in taking the fun out of birthday parties. Extravagance, if afforded and desired, can make a gathering feel special and fun. It is the standardization and increasing pressure to plan something that is socially acceptable over something that is simply fun, that is to blame for the new stress that birthday parties bring.

Alice explains,

and at first I was like, “oh I don’t know if I want to do this’’” but I think, it’s one of those things I just let...I’m not going to apologize for having a really good birthday party and you know, it’s a big day it’s special. And we don’t do big splashy things all year right? That’s their one day. And I do like giving them the choice between present or party and I like that they’ve always chosen party.

Alice, who seems to evaluate the social constructs around her and disregard those that she understands don’t serve her and her family well, has examined the competitive nature of birthday
parties and has found a way to enjoy parties that are still unique, child-centred, memory-
constructing, fun, and that celebrate her children. She doesn’t simply reject birthday parties
entirely just because they have been co-opted by capitalism. She says, “I feel like [kids are] only
going to want to celebrate them with us for so long before, you know, it’s like the teen age and
they want nothing to do with you.”

The Privatization of Play. Throughout this study, many participants have asked where
children are. They ask why they don’t see children on the streets or in the parks. Amanda said, “I
mean I know there are children in our area. I see the school bus pick them up and drop them off
and I see their bikes sometimes but I just don’t see them.” The perceived absence of children
playing in the streets, playgrounds, and parks in many areas served as part of my motivation to
undertake this study. It appears that what Patrick Lewis (2017) refers to as “the privatization of
play” is a powerful factor in accessing play. Privatization of play refers to the increasing shift
from play being public to private. The frequent discussions of structured activities as play
throughout this thesis and the frequent questions and references surrounding the absence of
children in parks and on playgrounds is a finding in and of itself; play is being privatized.

Perhaps paradoxically, in the next category, titled Extracurricular Activities and Play,
many participants share the great benefits of structured children’s programs and how they
facilitate play. The reader must keep in mind, however, that although these programs may be
playful and make room for play in and around them and support adult play, they are still private
and are increasingly moving play out of the public and into a private sphere. Participation costs
money and is therefore not accessible to everyone. The increasing frequency of these programs is
therefore a barrier to equal access to play.

Alice says,
I think one of the biggest challenges is money when it comes to play especially in Regina in a big city. It’s not cheap. It’s a priority for us as a family in terms of maintaining you know, sport and health and fitness and there are a lot of learning and life lessons that come with sport. So it is a priority for us and we know and we’ve seen lots of families where money can be an obstacle and so we are fortunate where it’s a challenge for us but it’s not...it’s not something that we can’t overcome I guess. Because we’ve made it a priority so...but you can certainly see a lot of privilege when you look at sport in Regina. Amanda says that for the impoverished families she works with, “even something like Community Soccer which is $30 is too much.”

Besides cost, there are other factors that contribute to the privatization of play that appear to make play more exclusive. Amanda, who works with children to gain them access to sport that they otherwise wouldn’t have, shares that many families face “racism...feeling like the other. And for our new Canadian families it’s just...racism is part of it but such a difference in culture.”

The means by which people have to register for a lot of programming was often mentioned by participants. Amanda says,

this is back to organized play but to me, navigating the system is a barrier. I struggle with it and I literally do it for a job. It’s so difficult. I’m familiar and I don’t know it’s just like...how is it so complicated? And you’re already feeling uncomfortable and then you go to register for something and find out that you have no idea what you’re doing so screw it.

The challenging process of navigating registrations for programs appears to be enhanced for families who have further barriers including lack of access to technology or WiFi, language barriers, and lack the supports that might allow them the organization of registering on time.
Furthermore, these factors may be affected by and affect financial barriers, making play programs that much more elusive to families living in poverty.

Many participants discuss finances as a barrier to play. Finances did not come up as a direct barrier to play, however, but rather as a constant stress and the main reason why parents work as hard as they do. It is their time that they miss and their lack of time that is their greatest barrier to play. It is important to address while considering barriers to play, the social structures that this society is entrenched in at this time and how this system affects play and family attachments. Almost all of the participants at the time of this study had rigid and inflexible work schedules that they maintained to support themselves and their lifestyle. Although often necessary, this structure rigidity keeps families apart more than it allows them to be together. Many participants felt that their workday wasn’t over when they returned home; they still had work to attend to and would receive work notifications throughout the evenings. There is also the domestic labour to attend to once one is home. Nevertheless, with participants spending as much time as they do at work, many of them expressed incredulity at the little money and lack of financial security to show for their hard work.

Where Does the Money Go?

Nolan starts to connect the time spent at work with the financial gain that comes from working but sounds frustrated at how little financial gain there is compared to how hard one may work. The reader may note his repeated use of the phrase “where does the money go?”

We aren’t house poor. We didn’t overspend by buying a brand new house and spending 4-500,000 dollars on a home. But like - where does the - I guess we have an accelerated bi-weekly mortgage payment to help us pay it off faster so I guess that does make us house poor I guess. But where does all the money go because - we are considered upper-
middle-class and I feel nowhere close to that (...) all the YouTube videos show this middle-aged woman putting a car seat into a minivan. It’s got tons of space and no issues. So you’re like “maybe I should buy a minivan.” But I don’t have the money to have a minivan. Where does the money go? Where does the time go? It’s hard. If you’re supposed to be buying fresh fruit and veggies that costs money and all the sudden you’re spending $150 a week on groceries because you’re meal planning and buying fresh produce and you’re like where does it all go? And now you’re paying your credit card off. And we’re very fortunate to have EI and maternity leave but the last couple months of it were rough and all the sudden your credit card debt builds up and if you don’t have a line of credit you just shoot yourself in the foot because 20% interest charges start getting hit (...) and I know people that have multiple kids and they have multiple jobs. Dads work both of the jobs because daycare is insane. Just where does the money go?

The cost to play also includes living within an area that participants felt had safe walkability to playspaces, affording or navigating the perceived increasing capitalism of play through entertainment and ready-made play items for children, and meeting or rejecting financial standards set upon children’s birthday parties. The cost to play at all, and the increasing shift that appears to be happening towards more structured and cost-to-participate play (described in further detail in the following category) is also a symptom of the privatization of play.

**Extracurricular Activities and Play**

Extracurricular activities appear to have a profound effect on play. This factor appears to be entirely multi-dimensional; some participants describe extracurricular activities and sports as financially straining, time-consuming, and consisting of a network and culture that is competitive
and decidedly unplayful. For some families, however, structured activities appear to facilitate play. Participants describe these activities as not only facilitating play in and of themselves but sometimes expanding one’s play network and offering their children more skills and opportunities to play. It is found that parents who participated in structured programs as children feel that it has positively affected their play as adults. These findings are explored in the subcategories: *Keeping [the Kids] up With the Jones[’ Kids]*, and *Structured Activities Facilitating Play*.

Of the three participants of this study who had school-aged children, two of them were heavily involved in structured activities, and it seemed to require a considerable amount of both the children’s and their family’s time and effort. Wade shares that while his two children were in two different activities simultaneously, “[he] went to one place and [his spouse] went to another. He shares,

[My son’s] activities are very minimal. [My daughter’s] are becoming a bit more complex. But still when I hear of other people and what their kids are doing…[my daughter] dances Tuesday and Wednesday for an hour each. And then today [Saturday] she dances for two hours. But like an hour and 15 minutes, and then 45 minutes. But there’s an hour in between that. So technically she has four dance things a week (...) sometimes we will try and get some swimming in there to keep up with that but dance is just what she does (...) and the studio she’s connected to for dance, they’re like, I’m thankful that they’re not what other people are doing. And [my son] does an hour or 50 minutes at Gymnastics Adventure. And that’s kind of where it stops.
Between Wade’s two children at the time of our conversation, he had approximately five hours of structured activities not including preparation for and transportation to and from activities, plus some downtime in between his daughter’s dance on Saturdays. Wade acknowledges that for children of the same age, this is relatively low in terms of time spent outside of school on structured activities. Both of the participants whose children are involved in sport and extracurricular activities also value the activities and report that they feel the activities are benefiting their children.

**Keeping [the Kids] up With the Joneses’ Kids.** As discussed in the aforementioned conversation with Alice, capitalist ideologies seem to have informed a whole culture around the necessity of spending money on play and activities. The social network that develops as a result of meeting families through private sport and activities can competitively value financial success and busyness. Alice referred to this competitive nature above, and researchers have expressed that, “busyness has become a status symbol” (Melman et al., p. 18). Amanda describes the competition associated with the value of spending money and time on children’s activities.

> I don’t know I kind of see sport as like...keeping up with the Joneses. Like, “I’m really busy and my kids are doing this.” “Well I’m really busy and my kids are doing this.” I don’t know if they’re constantly trying to outdo each other but...it seems like that’s what you guys are doing.

While criticizing the increasingly competitive nature of sports and parents’ pressure on their children to succeed in hopes of receiving scholarships she remarks, “it’s affecting play in general. Right across the board... I think we’ve lost the play aspect of sport.”

**Structured Activities Facilitating Play.** Some sports and extracurricular activities, especially those that are relatively inexpensive and low on time commitment, appear to facilitate
play in several ways: there appears to be potential for children and parents to meet new people and expand their play support network, develop skills to scaffold play, facilitate time in and around structured activities that fit the current definition of play, and potentially support adult play once children are older.

There are examples of the play facilitated through structured activities in both participants who enjoy them. I ask Alice, “Do you...do you feel that, sort of heading to the rink, getting chicken fingers and fries, is part of the experience [of going to hockey]?”

Alice: I think so. I would say so. Yeah you know. The kids will stuff their pockets full of quarters and they will all hang out by the candy machine and socialize. I’m sure they’re picking things off the floor. I think that’s part of the experience, yeah. It’s the, you know, there’s fifteen minutes afterwards or you know, it’s part of the outing I think as a family. We continue discussing what exactly is happening with the whole family at hockey, and Alice describes that the child who doesn’t have a hockey game or practice typically finds other “bored” siblings, and they freely play around the rink. If the reader thinks back to Wade’s description of his daughter having a one-hour break in-between dance classes, there is a possibility that that time, as well, becomes a time to snack, socialize, and play with other dancers who belong to the same studio.

To further explore this finding, I solicited responses from the online community around Project Play YQR. I briefly described my definition of play and the desire to further explore the relationship between sport and play for this study. To the question, “if any children in your family or close circle have been in structured activities, do you feel it has supported their play?” 86% of those surveyed answered “yes” and 14% answered “no” out of 112 respondents. I described how the data at that point had suggested that there might be some child-structured play
happening in and around structured activities. 100% of 163 respondents expressed that they perceive that children are playing around their structured activities and that structured activities facilitate play in this way. One parent wrote in that her child carpooled with other children to flag football. She said the carpool time was “silly and fun and playful”, and that the families developed a habit of meeting at a playground after practices and games.

Lastly, being aware of the effect parent play appears to have on children, I was curious to explore the relationship between adults’ structured activities as children and how it might affect their current play. Darryl, who is one of my participants, played hockey moderately as a child. Several times per week in the winter he walks to the rink near our home to play. Sometimes he meets up with friends and other times he simply goes to see if anyone else is around. If no one is there he plays on his own. If he meets friends at the rink, he sometimes invites them to our home for drinks and some food. Although he is a mediocre hockey player and quit playing coached hockey while he was still a child, that programming has increased his ability to play now. His ability to play and enjoy hockey scaffolds gatherings with friends and allows him to strengthen friendships. When his friends come back to our home, it even offers me an opportunity for play and connection, as I often enjoy these visits. Darryl’s experiences as a child in structured programming facilitate his play as an adult.

I discussed Darryl’s experience in structured activities as a child and how it affects his play currently and asked if others felt that their programming (if applicable) as a child affects their play as an adult. 73% of 86 respondents expressed that they believed their structured play as children supports their play as adults. Although these numbers may suggest a correlation between children’s structured activities and adult recreation, they represent individual beliefs and
are not the result of an empirical longitudinal study; more research data is presented on this topic in the discussion of this thesis.

**Quality of Early Learning Environment**

This category explores how the quality of the learning environment affects play. This category is developed through several stories that are titled and each offers the reader a glimpse at how an early learning environment affects play. *An Exercise in Privilege* demonstrates the challenges of navigating a highly inconsistent childcare system. *He’s Not Getting Outside Anyways* offers insight into the frustrations some families may feel if their child’s care does not meet their expectations. *Facilitating Play Outside of the Home* explores the finding that a high-quality early learning environment appears to positively affect play for the whole family.

*An Exercise in Privilege: Discrepancies in the Quality of Early Learning Environment*

Darryl and I have used four childcare facilities between our two children. The childcare centre our children last attended took us three and a half years to get into. Although I thought she was joking at first, I took the advice of a friend and put Jonah on the waiting list while I was pregnant with him. Darryl and I interviewed over a dozen childcare providers before we found one that we thought was appropriate and that had space available for Jonah. We had wanted him to attend a centre, but could not find a single licensed centre in the city that he could get into within an 18-month timeframe.

We visited many licensed and unlicensed childcare homes around the city. We witnessed demeaning and rude behaviour towards children, unsafe environments, and nutritionally-poor diets. At one home, the provider who at the very least did seem quite kind, shared that the kids went outside approximately only twice a week and that the television was kept on throughout the entire day, every day for the children. The television was on during our evening interview. At
another interview where we were looking to place both of our children, a provider told me that she couldn’t legally take both of my kids because the number of children would exceed the legal maximum of children she could have in her care but that, “if it wasn’t a problem to [me], it wasn’t a problem to [her].” This same provider left the children in the basement together with a baby monitor every day while she prepared meals on her main floor.

We eventually found a placement for our first son in a home childcare in one end of the city near my work. The provider was kind while maintaining high expectations of the children, made nutritious meals, and the children spent almost their entire day outside. She had her Early Childhood Education certificate, which is not required for all childcare staff in Saskatchewan. When I was accepted to teach at a new school in the opposite end of the city, we tried to keep our son in this placement because we understood the challenges of finding quality childcare in Regina.

Although she was excellent, having our son in a home childcare with only one provider had its challenges. The provider, rightfully, booked appointments and took sick days. Even though she offered as much notice as possible, it was difficult for Darryl and me whose only family members in the city work full-time jobs. One of us would often have to take the day off ourselves, which in Darryl’s case as a substitute teacher at the time meant a day without pay.

Eventually, Jonah was accepted into a licensed centre near our home. We saved approximately one hour per day on our commute to and from work, and we no longer had to take days off of work or make last-minute arrangements in the event of a provider’s inevitable absence. At this new centre, however, they rarely took the children outside and they offered the children highly processed and high-sugar foods throughout the day. We revisited the handbook that said the children spent time outside every day that it was above -25 degrees Celsius. We
reviewed their printed weekly menus, but they didn’t include the handful of treats the children were given throughout the day to entice or reward good behaviour. The provider who worked directly with our son could be demeaning and sarcastic to the children. We noticed an obvious change in Jonah’s behaviour and food preferences at home.

This process of finding appropriate care started all over again with my second child. I had followed up with the waiting lists I was still on from Jonah’s pregnancy: they were still full, almost three years later. I wondered how anyone gets their infant into a childcare environment they are comfortable with if waiting lists are four years long.

Finally, two centres called me about Jonah being at the top of their list. One of them was in our neighbourhood and the other was in the south end. The centre in our neighbourhood, which we preferred, couldn’t take Baby August for the first six months. He would be accepted when he was 18 months old, which meant separating my children for six months.

For six months, Darryl drove Jonah to and from his childcare, and I drove August to and from his. We were paying almost $2000 per month on childcare between the two centres. When I returned to work from maternity leave and factored in childcare costs, I was taking home less money than I was while on maternity leave. To help with the high childcare costs, I took on full supervision at work. I started school bus/recess supervision from 8:23 am-8:53 am, supervised during 10:30 recess, supervised my students’ lunchroom, and the 2:15 recess. From 8:23 am - 3:52 pm, my one break was from 12:30-12:45. It took me about an hour after the students were gone to catch up on emails and prepare my teaching materials for the next day, then I would pick August up and head home. I typically arrived home at around 5:30 pm.

August didn’t do well being separated from his family. He cried every morning that I dropped him off. I would hear him until I left the building. On one particularly challenging day, I
considered calling the centre to ask how he was doing but was nervous to hear the answer and knew I wouldn't be able to reassure him over the phone. When I picked him up at the end of that day the staff informed me that he had hidden behind a shelf and refused to come out. He wouldn’t eat and he cried for most of the morning. He cried daily when he saw me at the end of each day. He would run to me and cry.

As frustrating as it was to return to work, pick up full supervision, and take home less than what I was earning on maternity leave considering childcare costs; it was a privilege to make those sacrifices. Quality childcare was a priority for me. As high as the costs were, I fully understood the justification of the costs and was aware that the staff were still underpaid for a challenging and important job. I worked hard to get my children into those centres, particularly after seeing what else was available in the city. I also enjoyed my job, and valued my opportunity to go to work.

As fortunate as we were to place our children in these centres, it is concerning how much privilege it takes to navigate the discrepant childcare system in Regina. My children gaining access to a high-quality early environment heavily depended on my education, financial stability, and a great deal of time and effort; all of which are privileges that many families do not have.

My own experience was echoed by the co-constructors of this work. An unexpected finding within this category is the extent to which the time that children spend in childcare has proven to be a key piece of facilitating or hindering play even outside of the early learning environments. The reader may notice how Nolan’s experience is similar to my own. The following perceived factors appear to limit or facilitate play for families, and all are evident within Nolan’s and my own descriptions: cost, staff education, health practices (involving food, rest, and physical activity), outdoor play, location, and availability. The intense discrepancy
between childcare providers in Saskatchewan itself is a barrier; families can spend a great deal of
time navigating the childcare system in Regina.

*He’s Not Getting Outside Anyways*

Nolan: We’ve got a “good enough” daycare because they took him before 18 months but it’s not close to home, it’s not where we want to end up. We’re at [mentions childcare]. They’ve got hit with the plague. It’s just wiped out a bunch of the kids with the flu and it’s...thankfully we’ve survived I think for now. Yeah because they’ve got space for like, 40 toddlers I think like split between different groups so they’ve got 25 each. It’s not five kids where mom’s looking after her kids and five others. And they...we’ve been frustrated because everywhere seems to have written in their handbook that they take the kids outside for minimum 30 minutes per day every day and that’s not the case. My wife has been incredibly frustrated that they don’t get out every day. She regularly asks when we pick him up if they got outside and they don’t get out. It’s been tough because it’s been a fairly mild November so like it’s the time to get out and do it. So...daycare made this commitment saying they’ll do and then they’re not doing it. And by the time we get home from picking him up it’s about 5 pm. And as soon as we pick him up and get outside he’s motioning (...) he is motioning for food and we’ve bought a Costco-sized case of Nutrigrains so we either travel with one or two of those so we can keep him happy in the car so he doesn’t yell at us for 20 minutes. But by the time you get home then you have to feed yourselves and him and it’s dark out at this time of the year and he’s tired. He’s not sleeping for the 1.5-2 hours like he was in a controlled environment. Thankfully he’s sleeping but he’s tired when he gets home. He’s in a different kind of place. He’s painting and interacting with 15 other kids. They’ve got...he’s tired. He’s not
always cooperative when we get home. We took him out yesterday and he screamed the whole time. He didn’t really want to go outside. So he yelled. My wife went out and he just yelled at her the whole time and she comes back in and she’s like, “fine I won’t force you to go out again” so it’s a mental battle too at that point. (...) with going to (this centre), we are paying more than we needed to at other centres. We made the decision to go with the centre. There’s more flexibility, they had certain rules and regulations and training etc. The other reasons you might choose a centre over a home daycare. (...) we wanted the interactions for the play for the regulations for the training...like having some flexibility that if someone is taking a three-week vacation, you don’t have to take a three-week vacation also. Or all the sudden they’re giving themselves 5 weeks holidays and you get three and you’re like, I don’t know what to do. So it was like...it was challenging.

Nolan addresses a lot of typical concerns when it comes to the quality of childcare. One of the more prominent concerns regarding childcare was the lack of time that children appeared to be spending outside:

Nolan: (...) I said to my wife yesterday, do you know each day he’s been out in November? So I was printing out a calendar and it says in their handbook they take them out everyday and we go for the walkthrough and they say, “yeah we take the kids out every day.” So you’re like, “perfect.” And we picked [this childcare] because they’ve got this big outdoor space in the back. It’s a good playspace. There’s some trees, some shrubs there; there’s lots to do. My wife went to the PAC meeting and learned that he’s never going to play in that playspace. It’s for a different group. They’ve got good plans for their space but it’s not going to be ready until mid-summer. So one of the reasons we picked [this childcare] isn’t actually materializing. He’s getting out once or twice a week, and
like, he’s never going to play in a playspace that we thought he would be playing in and like that we wanted him to play in. But he’s not getting out so why do we even care? He’s not getting outside anyways (...) now that he’s in daycare he’s tired and less interested and it’s an adjustment for everyone.

There were many examples shared of how the poor quality of childcares and the inaccessible system were barriers to play. It was found, however, that the quality of an early learning environment, cost, proximity to one’s home, health initiatives, and staff education and awareness of play can become powerful catalysts for play at home. Childcare is not only perceived to have an impact at the centre, but also at home.

_Even Our Own Play Was Affected by This Daycare_

When we finally moved our children to the childcare that our eldest attended, our expenses went down significantly. August shed his separation anxiety entirely in this new environment. Our children were offered a large variety of foods and spent most of their day outside. The children grew used to amusing themselves since the childcare scheduled long stretches of free, child-structured play. The staff were well-educated and experienced in the Montessori method and early childhood development and would not bend to the will or convenience of parents. They took advantage of every type of weather. I once forgot to have a swimsuit in Jonah’s locker. When I picked him up that afternoon I was firmly informed that since it had been raining and the children were taken to play outside in the rain, Jonah had to wear his spare underwear which would need to be laundered. In the late fall it grew cold quickly and one day we hadn’t switched his splash pants out for his ski pants and the children had spent most of their day outside. The director politely, but firmly, told me that Joanh needed warm ski
pants right away since he would continue to go outside, but would be cold in the pants we currently had in his locker. In a lot of childcares, children not having warm enough clothing can easily become a reason to keep them inside. The staff at this facility had an awareness of the necessity of outdoor play for children and actively worked around obstacles that might make it more difficult for children to play. Parents rose to the rigid expectation that their children have appropriate clothing to be outside for most of their time. If this was out of reach for any families, their children were properly outfitted in donated outerwear.

The Montessori method employed by this childcare involves children learning essential skills as early as possible. The children therefore also learned and enjoyed getting dressed and undressed, putting on their own outerwear and shoes, and cleaning up after their own messes. This facilitated play in a myriad of ways. The hassle of getting our children ready and out the door for outdoor play on evenings and weekends was gradually shrinking. Our children were more satisfied with our meals at home. They were in a habit of cleaning up after themselves. Although we had little time together, this childcare helped to make the time that we did have together noticeably more smooth and pleasant.

The childcare was in our neighbourhood, so we could walk to pick the kids up and take them home. Since we saved money on childcare expenses at this centre, I gave away my extra supervision shifts. I made an effort to spend my recesses in the staffroom laughing with colleagues and eating snacks. I kept my lunchroom supervision so I could continue eating lunch and relaxing with my students. With only one stop to make, Darryl and I traded weeks on and off regarding who was dropping off and picking up the children. This offered us both more time and flexibility. On our off-weeks, it was expected that Darryl or I would sometimes join colleagues for a beverage or a snack after work. Even our own play was affected by this childcare.
Mental Health and Play

Mental health has the ability to help or hinder play for both adults and children. An unexpected finding was the extent to which a strong and healthy mental space facilitates play for both adults and children. A second unexpected finding surrounding this category is the strong connection between mental health and the birth of one’s child(ren) for both mothers and fathers in the study. The transition into parenthood is perceived by participants to be a critical time for new parents and can affect their mental health and play moving forward. This category is divided into the following subcategories: Birth Trauma, Community Facilitating Mental Health, and Children’s Mental Health.

As previously stated, it was unexpected how strong the connection is between mental health and play. Alice describes the transition to parenthood as challenging because of some of the new anxieties that she had to overcome when she had her first son. “That was probably my greatest obstacle to play was just that (...) you can definitely over-analyze everything too much and create your own obstacles and your own barriers that don’t actually exist.” Nicole shares that she still, at times, feels anxious and that, “sometimes you just get so wound up and you can’t even...you’re not even on the same planet as your kid that’s standing right in front of you.” Nicole sheds some light on the importance of mental health support and how this facilitates play. She also describes how play itself strengthens her mental health. In Nicole’s experience, mental health and play are cyclical rather than linear. “I’m in a really good place right now like I’ve done a lot of really healing work and I’ve noticed that as my mental health has improved, I’m able to play and connect with the kids more and that in turn makes me feel even better.” Later, she reiterates this point by describing,
sometimes my state of my mental health just like, totally precludes me. I do my best to not show the kids that I’m struggling but there are some days when I just don’t have the energy because of my mental health that day (...) but on good mental health days I’m more capable of playing but the more I play the more good mental health days I have.

Consistently, strong mental well-being appears as a catalyst to play so much that participants’ minds, when free and open, become a play space themselves. When they appear or describe themselves as mentally strong, they seem able to bring a sense of playfulness to even the most mundane of tasks.

Consider this account from Chantel:

You know, “oh you let your 13-month old cook supper with you?” Sure I do! That’s fun for us. I’m going to make it into play. “Well doesn’t he get into all the tupperware and the containers?” You bet he does. “Do you like that?” Not always, nope! But it’s fun and it’s a way I can engage him and so I think for me, out of work, play, and rest, I was able to say that play is my best because I’ve learned to try to create everything into a fun, play-based thing. So if we are driving from here to Costco which is the polar opposite end for me, well what are we going to do? Well we are going to see, what is the craziest car we can find? Or like, and try to make it fun and engaging and that’s for me what play is. Something that's fun and engaging but has responsibility sometimes too. Like, you dumped out all those tupperwares. We have to put them back now. So that’s not fun but we can make it fun. We can make anything fun.

**Birth Trauma.** Although it was not formally on the interview guide (Appendix A), many participants brought up birth as a source of trauma and as something that has affected their mental health and play. It has been interesting to note that throughout our conversations, co-
constructors’ narrations frequently shift from the past tense to the present tense while they describe either their birth trauma or a memory when they are at play. Every participant who brings up birth trauma mentions that their birth experience affected their attachment and time at home with their children for up to the first entire year. Many participants explain that they were unable to understand that their mental health was compromised and they were possibly suffering from a form of postpartum depression or anxiety and did not seek professional help while they were in that state. It appears only after they felt their mental health return to what they would typically experience that they were able to see that not only was their mental health compromised, but it was likely partially triggered by their traumatic birth experience. Due to this, their play with their children was compromised from anywhere from weeks to over one year.

Crystal shares, “I’m like, that’s the thing everybody has labour (...) and they’re all traumatic in some regard but like they can really fuck you up.” Crystal shares her own story, which highlights the trauma parents may have after the birth of their children.

I went to a psychiatrist because they put me on Zoloft after I had [my son] and they were like, ‘cause I read an article that said that postpartum was like PTSD and he was like, “no it’s not like that it’s not like going to war, you’re not having flashbacks.” And I was like, “no it IS like that. That is what I’m going through. I’m having nightmares. It is exactly like that.” And I stopped going to him because I felt like he was so arrogant (...) and I thought like, “you have no fucking idea.”

The severity of people’s birth trauma, when it is described, is extreme. Nolan appeared quite affected by his wife’s labour when he told me their story. He shares, “it’s the most exhausting mental struggle of your life because you’re so helpless (...) holy heck like how do you
talk about it? It’s hard. I don’t think my wife realized the PTSD that came with it until trying to talk about it after and like...because I couldn’t tell you much about the week or two following getting home. It was not a super bad situation and everyone was health...everyone ended up being okay. But it was like...I couldn’t tell you anything about like, at home or ahh he slept well but the actual day of is still pretty fresh and like, I can go recount a bunch of the details and talking to someone didn’t necessarily happen so like...how do you cope with that? Normalize it? Not necessarily normalize it but realize that there are those stories out there are yours isn’t necessarily as bad as someone else’s but like...it’s still in the context bad or in your mind it’s worst-case scenario bad like...I remember my brother’s friend had said that his wife ended up needing an emergency c-section and he said it was the single most stressful day of his life because there’s nothing you can do, there are no answers, you can’t help, there’s nothing you can change.

In a separate conversation, Nicole connects her postpartum anxiety back to the birth of her first daughter. She says,

It was just such a traumatic labour and then they took her away forever and it was just like, nobody...everybody followed her out of my room and I was just stuck in there for fifteen minutes. It felt like a lifetime and I didn’t know if she was alive or not and I feel like that just flipped a switch in me and I was just inconsolable. Like I couldn’t even sleep. I made my ex (...) do shifts with me. Somebody had to always be awake. ‘Cause I was like, somebody has to watch her while she sleeps to make sure she keeps breathing and that was just such a perfect metaphor for how her infancy was because I feel like I never turned that off, like I felt like I was just up to here for the first six months of her life.
The greater community can affect mental health and therefore play in many ways. Amber, who has an emotionally heavy job as a social worker, says work affects her mental state and that she worries her daughter could be affected as well. She says,

I can totally see (...) how she would pick up on my emotions and the way I’m behaving and stuff and I have to be so cognizant of how I’m behaving because I don’t want her to pick up on my work impacting how I am at home.

Amber shares that she does have access to mental health benefits through work. However, there are no mandatory workshops or paid time dedicated to self-care and mental health protection, and she shares that most employees don’t take advantage of their mental health benefits because they are so busy. She says,

social work is all about preaching self-care and then not having the resources to help you achieve it. It’s very much like, you want me to practice self-care so you can be effective in your work, but you need to do it on your own time (...) It’s just very much a buzzword. It’s like, “self care, self care, self care” but no action. There are almost no resources for self care. Like you can’t even have a lunch break, so.

**Community Facilitating Mental Health.** Amber underscores some of the potential drawbacks with the way women are screened for postpartum depression and anxiety following the birth of their children. It appears there is a lack of education around what postpartum depression and anxieties can feel like. Amber says,

I feel like that questionnaire that you fill out in your first appointment about whether you have PPD or not... I know my nurse said, “having any baby blues?” And I’m like, “I don’t know. I’m like... shocked, exhausted, I don’t know... I don’t know what’s what.” It’s just very... it’s a very strange way to screen people. And like, by the way I’m sitting next
to my husband who is looking at me circling the answer and I put that I’m fine on every answer and none of that was true. But I’m not going to like, on this questionnaire, discover that I need help...you know? It’s just such a weird set up.

Education and affordability around mental health support are facilitating factors to parent-child attachments and play. When I ask Amber about what supports her community could provide that she feels would be or would have been helpful in terms of play, she describes:

Another huge one for me would have been low-cost or free if possible mom support groups or sessions. Because what I saw in the community that I would have loved to go to I couldn’t afford (...) I saw there were groups for people who had traumatic births that I wish I could have gone to but I just couldn’t afford or justify the price. Often the programs that are free are not run by people who are qualified to have those discussions. People who are qualified are charging like $100 for the session so that’s a huge thing. And so that really isolated me from getting that support and I never did. And so who knows how that will come up over time, right? These sorts of things show themselves in different ways (...) So I never got support surrounding how traumatic my birth was. My husband never did and probably the next time we will deal with it is with our next pregnancy right? We will have to go through those emotions again.

**Children’s Mental Health.** Although it appeared that participants’ own mental well-being could act as either a catalyst or a barrier to their play, participants described play as being good for their children’s mental health. Nicole describes why she started waking her children up earlier in the morning to play and connect before school and childcare:

We were just having such a hard time because (...) [my daughter] didn’t want to go to school every single morning and she would get there and she would be happy but
mornings would be such a struggle and ever since I just, she actually just asked me one day, she was like, “can I get up early and finish this art project?” And that just went so well and was so peaceful so yeah it just makes getting out the door in the morning so smooth she’s happy and relaxed by the time I drop her off at school. There’s zero separation anxiety and I find even just our evenings go so much better. Even just that play and connection really helps her anxiety. I can see that a lot. The best days that she has are the days that I can make the time to play with her a little bit.

(Re)claiming a Playful Self

There are many systemic barriers to play, which are mostly outlined in the previous categories. It was a welcome surprise, therefore, when patterns began to emerge in the data of people (re)claiming control of their own play and demonstrating commanding agency over play for themselves and their communities. There are several critical factors that, once realized and mastered, offer one greater ability to control the opportunities they have for play. The following subcategories are explored in this section: Informing Play with Personal Experiences, Rejecting Perceived Judgements and Social Constructs, Taking Care of One’s Self, Parental Play, and Creating a Play Network.

Informing Play with Personal Experiences. Participants’ upbringing was mentioned frequently throughout our conversations. 100% of participants expressed that their upbringing has been instrumental in their play. Each participant appeared to actively apply aspects from their childhood to their parenting while reconciling with and rejecting others. These appeared to be active and intentional choices. The current findings demonstrate the control participants have
over the consideration and application of their personal experiences to their children and their play.

Although each participant shared a uniquely compelling illustration of their childhood and how it affects their play, there are only several participant voices included in this section. It became clear that several women’s perceptions of safety were largely based on their own experiences. The examination and evaluation of one’s own upbringing and how it would be best applied to their children is also a catalyst to play, but a barrier if left unexamined. To illustrate this continuum, Nicole has shared:

I was raised in an environment where you had to be very quiet and well-behaved it was very dangerous to be honest. I grew up in an abusive household. And so for me...I just get really triggered by my kids rambunctiously playing. If they start screaming or running around or laughing too hard or whatever, the best version of that is me going, “okay let’s take it down a notch” and the worst version is me snapping and saying like, “quiet!” you know? And I started to notice that pattern and I didn’t really understand (...) but I never made the connection until very recently that I was like “oh” because to me that was unsafe, don’t do it. And that’s when you’re like, going to you know, catch it, or whatever. So yeah ever since I noticed that I try to just encourage more playful play.

Later she continues, “it’s kind of a thing I’ve had to unlearn and decondition myself because I want my kids to feel safe. Obviously, my kids always feel safe but I want them to feel like, safe in their self-expression, I guess.”

Amber discussed how her lack of play as a child is a barrier to her initiating play with her infant daughter, but how she engages with some community spaces help to bridge this transition.
Most of my childhood was engaging [my younger siblings] in play rather than playing myself, like I don’t have a lot of memories of me doing like, imaginative things or having one-on-one time. I know it happened for a couple years, I just don’t remember it because where my memory starts is essentially when my first brother was born. So I was in such a caregiver, older sibling kind of role so I feel like a lot of the play I did was around them, like engaging them and stuff.

Whitney: Do you think that influences how you play now?

Amber: Absolutely. Because I see...I can see a complete difference between my husband who was the youngest, and is so playful, right? Um, yeah I think it completely does like I think it’s harder for me to come up with ways to be creative with [my daughter] other than, I think that’s why I spend so much time looking for Amazing Adventures or Learning Centres because there’s things there to initiate play. I think it’s really hard for me to come up with on my own and I’ll watch my husband at home and he will play games with toys in a way that I wouldn’t. You know he’s giving toys voices and that kind of thing. That’s just not something that comes naturally to me and I don’t...yeah and I think [my upbringing is] totally it.

Participants frequently attribute their own play experiences to positive qualities they possess as adults, as Amber does of her husband. Crystal says, “I had a lot of individual play. I was bullied as a kid so I spent a lot of time alone. And but...I can amuse myself when I don’t have something to amuse me.” Alice attributes her ability to play unsupervised in risky natural settings to some of her favourite qualities of herself, and actively provides similar experiences to her own children.
I grew up on a farm so when I look back to the play experiences I had, most of it took place outside. We were always outside. And we weren’t supervised a lot. And it was, it tended you know, towards risk-based play which is something that I believe in as a parent so it definitely shaped how I parent my kids. I’m a firm believer in, you know, risk-based play and kids, allowing them to take risks that are safe (...) So whether that be you know, climbing or going at faster speeds or, talking around the fire when we’re camping or you know, learning how to use a knife and how to cut their own meat. Things like that are things that I think up, those are things I grew up with and I think those are independent skills and something I’m trying to instil in my kids is, it’s okay to take risks and it’s okay to be brave and it’s also okay if we don’t make it there, right? (...) I definitely think being, you know brought up in a rural environment...lots of risk and danger around and that sort of helped me shape who I am as a mother.

Chantel is an example of a participant who has considered her personal experiences and has adapted her parenting to provide experiences for her children that she didn’t have: “(...) there’s things like music lessons, so I feel like that’s important like I really want my kids to take music lessons even though I didn’t.” She pauses for a while then adds, “(...) because I didn’t.”

Darryl shares,

Just hearing Wade talk about scheduling and sports, and I think a symptom of me having so much downtime at the farm and fighting boredom, it’s something that I really value. I really value downtime. Like I really, we have our kids in nothing right now and I’m so happy to have our kids in nothing and to me they should have even more downtime than they have as it is and they have so much downtime and I value it a lot. I value what you do and what you discover in your downtime.
There has also been a strong connection (10 participants) between nostalgia, and the play items parents enjoy in their home. Parents appear to enjoy seeing their children playing with toys they enjoyed as a child. Wade, Darryl, Chantel, Etienne, Crystal, Alice, and Nicole described giving their children their old toys or seeking new versions of the toys they enjoyed as a child. It appears that participants will more frequently join their child in play if it involves something from their own childhood. The participants also appear to tolerate play, toys, and mess more if they enjoy the look and feel of the play items. Nicole says,

I’ll try to be really mindful about what toys we have and yeah like, part of it is aesthetic because I don’t mind if they’re strewn about my house when it’s like, my vintage beanie babies or whatever.” She continues, “and I think that’s cute. Or like, I’ll try to make sure it’s a toy that you can get a lot of creativity and utility out of. So like, lego sets and like, with the 4 year old lego is still iffy but like arts and crayons and stuff. I don’t really mind if arts supplies are just left out on the kitchen island and left to hang out there, right? But yeah I find that if it’s a loud toy or something that like is just like kind of cheap and plastic and isn’t doing anything useful.

Many female participants, as is further explored in this chapter, appear aware of risks to their own safety in addition to their children’s safety. Several of the women who participated in this study, it appears, consider their safety everywhere they go. The extra consideration, thought, and effort that these women describe implementing while in public is another example of them taking control of their play and using their past experiences to adapt their behaviours and protect themselves and their children. Maria says,
as a single woman safety is a big thing, right (...) just in any public space for example the time of day you pick to walk can be perceived so differently. Like, “what are you doing so late?” You know, like people look at you and project something because you’re in the public space at a certain time.

Women have unique concerns around their safety for different reasons. Some of the women told stories of how their own experiences affect their play. Crystal says,

I mean I just feel like the world is a ba...I mean we’ve had some bad things happen to us so I’m hyper aware of like, bad things can and will happen to you and like you don’t get to be excluded from that (...) We lived along a highway... a very busy highway...and I used to walk down the gravel roads by myself picking wildflowers for hours (...) And the reason I stopped doing that is I was probably 16 and I went for this bike ride and I had four farmers pull over that day and ask me if I needed a ride. They had never bothered me before in my life. And suddenly...four different farmers. It was just a kind of attention I had never got before. And I was like...I just never did it again. I’m 37 now. It’s weird it stopped me from doing that. So yeah that’s a barrier to play. It’s true and I guess, and some areas in Regina I don’t know as well so I wouldn’t be comfortable to go to them.

When I ask Maria what could be done to make her feel more safe in public spaces she shares, “well as for the gender thing I mean it’s such a systemic issue. Maybe like...teaching men also how to behave. They really don’t know how to behave.”

**Rejecting Perceived Judgement and the Idea of the Other.** The fear and experience of being othered prove to be extremely uncomfortable for participants. Although perceived judgement and feeling othered are barriers to play, the interviews suggest that co-constructors are able to consider and reject judgements from others, and even use perceived judgements to strengthen
their confidence and identities. Maria shares how the chances of being othered may be more frequent for newcomers. She says,

A third [barrier] that may be very common to a newcomer is like, you don’t know the hidden rules. So you don’t know how to behave, you don’t know what’s normal, you don’t know how it’s going to be perceived and you are extra worried about it because you know that people are going to judge you more on whatever you do because they identify you as not being a part of them.

Maria, as mentioned earlier, takes steps not only to learn these hidden rules to feel a greater sense of belonging in her favourite play spaces, but has joined a community through the Newcomer Welcome Centre where she can assist others in having a sense of belonging as well.

Nicole shares that she has been “hesitant to take [her] kids out in public lately” because of a tantrum they both recently had in a grocery store that escalated so quickly that Nicole abandoned her cart and had to physically force both of her kids towards her car. She describes,

“and I just felt like everyone was judging me, like you could hear it through the entire store (...) It was the most embarrassing moment of my life. And then we got to the car and the kids were like, “we’ll be good! Let us back in!” And I was like, “we’re not allowed back in there! We are never going back to this store, we have to get a NEW grocery store!”

Nicole describes that, “Definitely the biggest stressor in that situation was being judged.” Nicole, Crystal, Darryl, Etienne, Alice, Wade, and Amanda in particular expressed similar sentiments that if someone were to judge them for their child(ren)’s behaviour in public, they would disagree with the judgement anyway. Later in the same conversation, Nicole says,
most of the time I’m like I don’t care...like I don’t care. Kids will misbehave like if I saw somebody’s kids behaving like that, I never judge. If somebody is having a tantrum. And it’s like why does the fear of like, a stranger, who I probably wouldn’t really like or agree with anyways if they’re the type of person to judge someone with small kids...why do I care about their opinion? (...) and it’s always more about them than it is about you, you know like...if someone talks like that out loud, that’s their inner monologue towards themselves.

Most (10) of the participants described scenarios where they perceived judgement, and although I closely searched for examples where the participants were themselves being judgemental, I found none. I did, however, find many examples of empathy towards other parents and many examples of how witnessing play inspired them to be playful. It appears that while some parents may perceive judgement when their children are “acting out” in public, this public behaviour is actually met with feelings of empathy, relief, and being offered permission to allow children to behave like children in public. There were sometimes expressions of awe towards other parents. For example, Chantel describes that,

being a single mom has made me really aware, or made me less mom-judgy or mom-shamey because I’m like, “wow good for you, you got up and got to the park” and especially being a mom of two, like, it’s...you are really aware of like, man we brushed our teeth and put clothes on and made it to the park this is so awesome.

Witnessing other parents having a challenging time with their children or seeing other children be loud, messy, and playful helped other parents to relax about their own children’s behaviour. Crystal describes seeing another family she is acquainted with out at a coffee shop and that, “they had their little guy and he was so busy too and it was nice to see because I find
[my son] really frustrating sometimes because I can’t get him to slow down and I’m like, ‘that’s dangerous’ and it’s nice to see other kids acting dangerous too.”

**Rejecting Social Constructs.** Social constructs came up frequently in play conversations while we discussed judgement. The participants appeared to understand that there were socially constructed expectations around them in their various identities: as parents, mothers, fathers, working parents, men, women, etc. The participants also appear to perceive social constructs surrounding play. Social constructs appear to be a barrier to play. I approach this inquiry and this writing with a particular understanding of play: I take a “mode” stance, as stated in Chapter 2. I also, as the reader may continue to discover, fall into a category of people who call for participation in the revitalization of play. Doing so is complicated since play itself is highly contested and approached through different play stances and play ethos (Sutton-Smith, 2001). The subcategory **Rejecting social constructs**, particularly from a constructivist standpoint, is thereby complex as it involves combining a discourse on play involving limitless possibilities of how each individual understands it, with how it is affected by social constructs, being what we perceive to be the invisible cages created by people who believe there to be shared expectations of them. Social constructs are unique to their societies, which are unique depending on the individuals within them. Partially due to these social constructs, play is similar. To explore the effect these topics have on one another is complicated, particularly from a constructivist standpoint. Overall, it appears that social constructs have the potential to limit what human beings are capable of by imposing standards upon human social behaviours. Through these play conversations, there were many examples of how particularly damaging these constructs are. Furthermore, the rejection of these social constructs becomes a facilitator to play. Nicole says,
there’s just all these stories in my head about like, how I should be that you don’t even hear from half the time that just guide the way you feel and now I’m just rejecting so many of them because I’m like, “who said?? I don’t care!!” You know?

In public, some mothers felt nervous whether they were breastfeeding or bottle feeding. Some mothers who were breastfeeding expressed feeling self-conscious that if they weren’t wearing a cover, people might perceive them as wanting sexual attention. If they chose to wear a cover, they worried they might be perceived as prudish or unliberated. Some women who were bottle-feeding expressed feelings of inadequacy that expanded to their ability to be a mother at all. This appeared to be attached to some social constructs around mothers. Alice describes,

The biggest challenge for me postpartum was I really struggled to breastfeed. It was really challenging for me and that was probably like, going out into public and everyone would breastfeed and I would have to warm up a bottle and just like, I felt inadequate. There was a lot of, you know, I didn’t feel like a real mom because I couldn’t do what you’re supposed to be doing, like what your body is supposed to be able to do. And that was probably my biggest obstacle, to this day as a mom. And probably also the biggest thing that taught me about letting go and just letting go of this perception of, “I’m supposed to be this perfect mom.” That was, I was just so wrapped up in this obsession in being this mom. But once I allowed myself to let that go and release some of the guilt I think it really just helped my whole philosophy as a mom.

Alice describes how rejecting the social constructs placed around motherhood has helped her to pursue her own happiness and play. She narrates,
The very beginning for me, you know out in public and just, how did everyone perceive you? Did you think it was by choice? Did they know that I tried? But then I’ve got this beautiful happy baby that doesn’t really know anything different right?

I think it really just allowed, it gave myself permission to not be perfect because that is impossible and because I think like, if I’m happier the kids are happier, right?

There appears to be a growing awareness of the social constructs that limit mothers. Crystal shared, “I really advocate for moms and I feel like moms know what they need...yeah we might have a bad day where we eat the worst food and have pancakes and stuff but I’m not going to carry the weight of that for six months. We’re going to have a bad day and move on (...) I’m a mother. People criticize everything I do. I can’t do anything right.”

As an adult woman who doesn’t have children, Maria describes feeling frustrated that play is socially constructed to revolve around children and their parents. She feels a lack of belonging in public play spaces even that are geared towards both children and adults. She shares, “the rightful user of a play space is something we’ve socially constructed so you know, the rightful user should be the one who wants to play.”

Men are also victims of social constructs. It came up with all of the fathers (4/4) that through being an active and participating father, they were sometimes directly opposing what they understood to be the socially constructed man. Patriarchal systems do not always benefit men. All of these fathers appeared eager to reject these social constructs and considered this rejection a catalyst not just for play but for a more genuine life.

The rejection of social constructs appeared to be empowering. Etienne describes, “if there’s no changepad I’m doing it on the sink side and if somebody isn’t happy about it they should talk to admin about getting a changepad in the [men’s] bathroom.” Etienne, along with
several other participants, appears to be at play in his rejection of the constructs he frees himself from. Participants sometimes demonstrate play as resistance. He continues,

and like, I love to cook. And Michelle doesn’t enjoy cooking. So it was a big change in the house when like, Michelle would be at her computer doing some work and I would be cooking supper and we would have Michelle’s folks over and they would be like, “huh, Etienne you’re in the kitchen.”

Wade says, “I think in a very positive way, those traditional expectations around parenting, they’re out the window now.”

**Taking Care of One’s Self.** The “intensive mothering” (Hays, 1996) culture and intensive parenting practices that come with modern parenting appear to be a barrier to play. Contrastingly, parents who prioritized their whole wellness appeared to facilitate more play for both themselves and their children.

It appears that when parents neglect their own needs and desire for play, it has negative effects on their lives at home and on their overall well-being. This appears specifically damaging when it comes to parental well-being, including physical and mental health. Nolan describes, “[my wife] feels she has no time to exercise or go to the gym. She plays hockey and this year she feels between working, trying to get the dog out (...) she stopped playing hockey this year.” Wade shares a similar experience in a conversation with several fathers:

Well just time is the largest barrier that I (...) I just put myself and some of the things I would like to do later because I kind of triage energies and then yours usually gets pushed to the back and so (...) I would love to be more healthy. Not that I’m not healthy but I would love to be more healthy. So you’d like, sacrifice in order to save your passions (...)
and you just...I always find I sacrifice this way...so that the kids are good and work is
good and [my partner] is good and her work is good and it’s just like…

Etienne: Suddenly it’s 11 pm.

Wade: And I don’t have any energy to go run on the treadmill for nine minutes. Plus if I
don’t warm up for 20 minutes before and 20 minutes after I get fucking injured. So
anyways that’s how I triage my play.

This inspired a conversation about how each father prioritized the following items: work, children, play, and health. Although there were some differences between the individuals’ own personal hierarchies, all of the men put work first, and their own health last. Physical health is closely related to mental health (Mikkelsen, et al., 2017) which was previously demonstrated as having great influence over play. Therefore, parents-- albeit often out of necessity-- placing a low emphasis on their own health is problematic in relation to their ability to play.

Nolan brings up this lack of time as a barrier to exercise, which he describes as a facilitator to feeling mentally well. Therefore, this lack of time becomes a barrier to play through its negative correlation with the ability to exercise and therefore mental well being, which is a facilitating factor to play.

Nolan: Pre-kid you can go to the gym after work, you’re not worrying about having enough time with your partner, or you can just walk the dog later or you can see each other after an hour or two at the gym. So you have the time. Now it’s like, well I don’t want to not see Cole before he goes to bed because between 5:00 pm-7:00 pm, or you know he goes to bed by 7:30 pm, those are the only two hours you get to see him all day. So it’s gone to the wayside.
Alice was a participant who appeared to prioritize her own health and who is aware of the connection between physical and mental health. It is evident that this creates more opportunities for play for her and her family. Alice shares,

I found for my mental health postpartum that it was essential for me to start exercising so I think by the three-month mark I was back exercising for myself because I needed it. I made it work.

**Parental Play.** I ask Alice if she considers herself to be playful and she responds,

Yes, I’m definitely a playful person. So, I still play volleyball, which is just for me. (...) I play in the winter by myself on Tuesdays and that’s just for me. So, I do still find time for play. I do enjoy the social aspect. I still kind of enjoy the challenge, you know yes, I’m getting older but I can still play competitive A volleyball with all these younger kids coming up. But yeah, it’s just something for me. I do still enjoy that. Also, my partner and I both play volleyball in the summer. We don’t put [the kids] in anything in the summer because we are in volleyball in the summer. So we play on Thursday nights and they come and they just play in the sand and they make friends and they, whoever is playing that night brings their kids and they all just sort of form this dirty group of you know, kids full of sand and their favourite day is the day after it rains so there’s puddles.

One can see how Alice’s parenting-first attitude facilitates play for her family and might influence her to also prioritize play for her children. She continues,

My kids are very sport-based or I don’t know, they like to move a lot and I do as well. So I found that was pretty easy in terms of playing in the backyard or playing soccer or
playing football, like I’m pretty athletic myself so I find play as it relates to sport is natural for our family because that’s something that I still do.

Moreover, Amanda shares,

This is something that actually comes up a lot with work is, so we remove barriers for play. For kids. And a lot of work is done with kids and kids and kids. And parents will come and be like, “what’s for us?” And we’re like, “right!” So if you can’t afford to put your kid in something, you don’t have magic amounts of money for yourself. But it’s just as important to have something to go and be involved in.

I acknowledge that this is problematic especially because parents’ play appears to have a greater effect on their children than children’s play has on their parents. Amanda says,

100 percent. I don’t know I just kind of look at like, when we’re looking at a holistic person, okay we don’t want to put any money into adults. Well what is the cost of that? So...mental health, physical ailments, interactions with children, and how that impacts children potentially negatively and the cost of that is...you know just society and just even financially people who want to talk dollars and cents...you know so if your mom and dad aren’t healthy, you’re not growing up in a healthy household,...what does that look like down the road? That preventative thing. So, it’s like yeah, we’ll come after we’ve created a problem and we’ll try to throw money at it and fix it but like...isn’t it cheaper and better for everyone involved if you just try to fix the problem?
Some participants discuss feeling uninspired when it comes to how they take time to play as adults. Many people say to connect with a romantic partner they will typically opt to enjoy dinner in a restaurant or a movie. Etienne rejects these social constructs in regards to adult play:

It’s less about like, partying like you’re 20 something again and more just about getting together and having that glass of wine or not drinking and just playing a game or sitting and catching up with somebody and like, there’s no time frame, there’s no schedule, you just bring a bottle or don’t bring a bottle or whatever and it’s like when we catch up with you guys. We just talk and hours go by and that’s all...we didn’t have to sit at a restaurant for that it’s just taking time to sit and meet someone and interact.

The single mother participants appeared to make excellent play-facilitators which was an unexpected finding since one might assume that a single parent may face more barriers to play. However, the single mother participants appeared exceptionally organized, and frequently employed both “functional play” and “amuse-yourself parenting” as a means to both provide a rich play environment and complete domestic tasks. Chantel, single mother of a toddler and infant was exceptionally playful with her children. She prioritized play and made time for herself. When I asked what she did for play she said,

I’m getting better at realizing that play isn’t just playing on my phone. Or creeping Facebook. If I was going to define play for me it’s anytime I don’t have responsibility. If I get to do a dance class (because I like to dance), that I’m not teaching I’m just taking for fun, that’s play. If I get to go to Starbucks or Tim Hortons or whatever and have no end goal...I can just sit around with my friends and my kids or their kids that’s how I play. I
play when I don’t have to have deadlines or responsibilities and no end product. But my favourite play for sure is with my kids.

One antidote to the loss of play appears to be amuse-yourselves parenting, well facilitated through a healthy parenting-first attitude. Amanda shared that the parenting style she was raised on was, “amuse yourselves, I’m busy.”

I said,

I like the “amuse-yourselves” parenting. I think it’s the most fun I think I have is when I can get together with other people and our kids get along and they play and they’ll go down in the basement and when they hear crying one person goes down and other than that they’re having a good time and we’re having a good time and it’s just so peaceful.

Amanda: That’s how I remember being raised. My mom would go and drink coffee with her friends and we would all be in the basement and someone would come down when somebody was in tears. Then we would reconvene. I think sometimes when I read articles that mention “free range parenting”…isn’t that just parenting?

Alice describes almost the exact same scenario:

I think just being able to be in kind of a safe environment where you could bring in and invite people over, like friends that you had that had kids um, it was more comfortable I think our parenting styles aligned a lot so we, you know we could send our kids downstairs or into a play area or backyard and play and know that the way we parent our kids and the way that we have rules and expectations about behaviour is similar. You know if there was an issue, one parent could go out and they could deal with all the situations happening at once and trust that I’m fine with how they handled that situation.
Besides being relaxed and playful, the above descriptions have three commonalities: the parents are gathering for their own self-interest (with their own friends), in a comfortable environment, in a semi-separate space from their children with a support network that they trust enough that adults appear to be able to take turns handling the children’s disputes. The children are able to play relatively unsupervised, and are left to problem-solve all but their most challenging scenarios. Everyone is playing. In this way, parents’ parental play and self care appear to at times necessitate amuse-yourself parenting and therefore play.

**Creating a Play Network.** Participants’ play network is the group of people, organizations, and places around them that helps them to play. Participants appear to have varying play networks that might include family, friends, co-workers, or acquaintances. Participants in the current study demonstrate that one can evaluate their support network and redesign or expand it to produce their own play network. Etienne describes how play networks may be different in various types of communities.

Where if we lived in a community where my kid ran across to your place and that was peace of mind and you helped me out where I’m like, “hey I’ve got a lot on my plate today.” Darryl wants to work on his album, we are going to the park. Even Darryl just asking me to take Jonah and August is a lot of work. He has to pack them up, he has to bring them to my house, then he has to come and get them...it’s a lot more work than if we are in a smaller area or a small town. So that’s a reality too where...for those of us who are lucky enough to have parents involved in that, grandparents I mean, that’s a huge help and they have their own lives too so we’re parenting on our own these days.
Having a strong support network proves to be valuable for parents to gain access to their own play and freedom from their children on occasion. Wade says,

[The other night] was the first time in nine years, essentially since [my daughter] was born that the kids went to [my wife’s parents’] place for the evening (...) her mom was not comfortable taking the kids. So when her dad and stepmom go to Arizona every year for six months and my parents live in Saskatoon we’re like well shit for the next...just these next six months here we’re really going to be riding this out. And it affects us.

There are excellent benefits and it is a privilege to be in a relationship with someone who is a true co-parent. Etienne says,

so if you’re lucky to be in, like Wade was saying if you have a good partner and you do it as a team then to me that’s the lottery and like how many parents do we know who are like single parents or who struggle with like, getting their partner involved with what they need parenting-wise and I’m like man, what a like...even just like how lucky it is to be able to do it well as a team.

A romantic partner is a part of one’s play network and can help or hinder play. Wade says, “I don’t worry. But [my spouse] worries a lot (...) so that has been interesting too, to navigate your partner’s expectations around parameters and safety stuff with the kids.” Another participant had extreme challenges with her partner, whose mental health was poor and affected their whole family. She often felt isolated in her parenting. Her partner made it difficult for her to have people over which affected her ability to nurture the development of a play network through having people come to her home.
Some participants appear to struggle with support networks that don’t offer them the support they need. Crystal recalls being overwhelmed with toys that were given to her son when he was first diagnosed with cancer:

And I’m like, “what are we supposed to do with these? I need to sell these.”

People have been so generous with us. But like we have that stuff but then we have debts because, you know, we were struggling.

One’s direct network can also be unsupportive depending on whether or not their parenting styles or behaviour towards a parent’s children is appreciated. Alice describes,

you know, there’s family members that do not align with our parenting styles and so then when you all go over together for family functions, they’re not aligned and it causes a little bit of friction sometimes. But I think just being able to control who is in your space and who is around you and your kids is super helpful.

A play network can also help facilitate play through activities and potentially the sense of belonging that people feel in activities. Alice says,

we see a lot of single-parent families who try and facilitate their kids through sport and that’s also a challenge is, having someone actually be able to take the child to a sport. We are lucky where we both don’t have to work on weekends and we are a two-person household so we often all go together but I know we’ve seen some families too where it’s a struggle to have support people. We were lucky we’ve got grandparents and lots of family and friends in the city that our support network is quite large but I think if your support network is limited I think that’s also a barrier as well to some families.
Again, a play network appears to also consist of friends and spaces, businesses, or organizations that facilitate play. Chantel describes how her play network includes her dance studio and the Regina Early Years Family Centre.

There appear to be several important initiatives happening to facilitate fostering relationships in Regina that can help one to expand their play network. Several participants have demonstrated the agency one has over creating or strengthening their own play network. Maria, Amber, Alice, Nolan, Wade, Amanda, and Chantel all made comments to suggest that they had joined activities or started initiatives that expanded their own play networks and even facilitated play for others. Maria says,

I don’t know if you read about it but there is the Regina Newcomer Club? It’s a newcomer club for women that are new to Regina and you don’t have to be foreign-born but you can just be new to the city and I’ve done lots of activities with them and it really helped to like, tame those weird situations where you don’t really know (...) When I am with my friends from all over the world the gap is less. So I feel like mixing people really helps feeling less awkward.

Amber shares,

I would love to see more places in the city that are set up for families to come do like, normal, for adults to come do normal adult things with their kids. So one example would be Malty National. That is a place where you can have a coffee, have a beer, sit in a place that sort of resembles an adult restaurant and have your children (...) so you can actually sit and have an adult conversation while your kids play (...) I feel like that’s just a way for moms to feel normal with their kids. Not a mom’s group. Not these things where you
have to talk...but attracting a whole other group of people who just wants to do something that feels normal with their kids.

Since Amber saw a gap in this type of play network, she started her own open, informal parent’s group who used to meet at Malty National on Fridays.

The current study confirms the usefulness of a support network, typically consisting of family and close friends, in supporting play. The current findings also clarify that not all networks are supportive or support play. Furthermore, the findings highlight how much agency one has in creating their play network. It has become clear that playful communities do not simply exist, nor are they static. A playful community is the result of individuals working to foster its playfulness.

**Education and Prioritization of Play**

The education and prioritization of play appears to be one of the greatest catalysts to play. Co-constructors both from this study and from the online community discuss awareness of play as a facilitator. There is frequent mention of being “reminded” to play. These reminders appear to serve as interruptions to the messaging parents receive that appears anti-play; there appears to have been a movement away from play and towards safe, private, structured play. Within this category, *Education and Prioritization of Play*, I will also explore the findings in the following subcategories: *Weather, Gear, Home Environment*, and *Screens*.

In contrast to the awareness of play being a facilitator, some participants discuss the lack of awareness around play. Alice says,

I’m a firm believer in, you know, risk-based play and kids, allowing them to take risks that are safe. There’s a misconception like, it’s risk-based play vs. unsafe. It’s not unsafe, but we are allowing them to take risks. And to build self-esteem and build confidence.
The prioritization of play can facilitate play on an individual, family, and community level. Alice and her family prioritize play particularly in the summer. She shares:

Our summers are nothing. We do a lot of camping, we might have friends that say, “hey let’s go to the beach” or, “let’s go to the pool” or, “let’s go to the park”...[and we can say], “yeah, sure let’s go!” And I value and I almost have to protect that time. I think sometimes too it’s just easy to kind of put the play aside and go upstairs and do adult things or clean up or do whatever you used to do but sometimes to just go back down and go into their imaginary world and see what they’re playing...yeah. It’s cute.

Alice’s descriptions of carving time and space for play reveal the active participation involved in (re)claiming children’s play:

And for me [not overscheduling my children] is not financial it’s more protecting the family time and the free time. And even the kids will come home and say, “do we have anything today? I just want a nothing day.” Or a “free day” they’ll call it where we, you know. Do nothing. Play. That’s important to them too where they don’t have to perform and we aren’t always going going going and they have to do their best, be the best, like “I just want to be home by myself. I just want to listen to music. I want to draw.” And so we give them those days. And we play.

Getting over injunctions to be serious, as Maria describes, was also a strong pattern that emerged as a facilitator to play. Maria shares,

another barrier would be um, sometimes you forget to do it. You forget as an adult, you get so caught up in the “oh I’m serious I have stuff to do I have responsibilities” and you forget that it’s okay to like, just play with the snow. You know, it’s okay.
At a later point in our conversation, I ask Maria if she has overcome any obstacles to play and she responds,

My own injunction to be serious. I think that was a big thing. And just say, “it’s okay to play”, It’s okay to have a night where we just play and do nothing else, you know? So that was a big thing and um kind of like gathering people to play...so do more parties and more game nights and more walking around, just trying to be more fun with each other.

**Weather.** Weather was frequently addressed by each participant as having an effect on play. When I ask, “if you were to think of what prevents your kids from playing at home, including going outside to the backyard, what comes to mind,” Alice responds, “well I think you know, living in Saskatchewan I think weather plays a factor. You know whether it’s extreme cold or extreme heat, right we get really polarized weather here so often weather can be a big issue.” Wade demonstrates the multidimensionality of weather as both a barrier and a catalyst when he says, “weather is massive as well. For wanting to be active, like when it was freezing two weeks ago you’re like oh man I just want to stay in but when it gets nice it’s so much easier to be chasing that part of it.”

Alice, Wade, Etienne, and Darryl all express that they enjoy taking advantage of different types of weather. Cold weather or rain isn’t necessarily a barrier but rather a different type of experience of play. I asked the Play YQR community what factors into one’s ability to take advantage of weather. I wondered if taking advantage of weather is a factor of financial privilege or prioritization of outdoor play. 80% of 116 respondents who answered the poll indicated that they considered it to be more of an issue of prioritizing getting outside. Several people sent messages to the account such as, “I would rather spend money on second-hand good gear for outdoor play that will last many hours than on indoor toys that will provide us with less hours of
play.” One person did write, “Weather is cost. I think about it as a season issue as well. Winter is expensive.” One participant submitted, “The prioritization at least comes first. The financial barrier can only exist if the prioritization is in place, right?”

**Gear.** As these participants reference, the gear that families are equipped with affects play, and helps counter the extreme weather climate of Saskatchewan. Nolan says,

(...)investing in good clothing so that there’s no hesitation around... ahh it’s kind of crappy out today. We don’t want to go out. We don’t really have the right clothing for it.”

So we’ve been keeping an eye on it. Making sure we have the right clothing.

Many of the online participants express that they purchase good outerwear and gear second hand.

The quality of outerwear and gear appears to affect participants’ play. Valuable gear for families appears to include good quality, versatile strollers; summer camping supplies; winter sport accessories such as skates and toboggans; and baby carriers. Several families spoke about how their baby carriers and knowledge on how to use them facilitated play for their families, in particular if they had multiple children. Nolan and Crystal both shared stories of gear malfunctioning or breaking down, and this seems to be discouraging and to have a lasting effect on families’ willingness to continue taking risks outdoors with children. Etienne speaks to the preparation involved in getting outside with children in the winter. He says,

I think with young kids too it’s like the preparation to get them dressed and get them ready and get them outside for a five-minute playtime before it’s cold you know and you’re back inside it’s like... I get it, it’s nice to get out there even for that ten minutes and when we do commit to doing it, it’s nice even if it’s short but sometimes it’s just that first commitment of getting out the door and knowing that it’s going to be for such a short amount of time that it’s easy to choose otherwise.
Home Environment. The home environment can be a great barrier or facilitator to play. It appears that creating a home environment that is playful can be facilitated through minimizing objects in a space, and focusing on creating less friction around play and more friction around activities that parents want to discourage, such as screen time. The home environment as a factor in play accessibility, like weather, appears to lie at an intersection of financial privilege and prioritizing play. To further explore this factor, I asked the Project Play YQR Instagram community what type of factor they considered creating a playful home environment was, and to consider whether it appears to specifically be more of a financial or educational factor. 81% of 96 respondents expressed that having an environment that makes opportunities for play is a factor of education and awareness surrounding play. One participant responded, “So interesting! The more I think about it, the more I think it’s not necessarily about $$ but about education. So if we’re educated & aware of how to set up a play space, and it is easy, we can do it.”

Some participants enjoy having the privilege of a separate space for their children. This has been noted not only as a nice safe space for kids to play freely, but as a way for parents to have time to themselves or with their spouse even though their children are at home. Alice says, When we first moved our basement wasn’t developed so having a space that’s theirs. We are fortunate enough that our basement is developed so we call it the kid-zone and it’s...everything down there is free game and we are okay with dents on the wall. They are allowed to be in their space. They’re allowed to play down there. There’s nothing precious, there’s nothing that um, you know we don’t encourage them to break things or anything like that but they are allowed to be themselves. I think before, you know, we didn’t have a space that was theirs and so we were kind of limited to playing on the floor
on the carpet in the living room and that’s okay but you’re sort of on top of each other and things need to be picked up and so I think now that they actually have a space in the house that is theirs that they can kind of play with is really good.

Nolan describes some of the challenges that come with having an excess of things, another apparent barrier to play in home environments:

All the sudden there’s a laundry basket in every room and then it snowballs and all the sudden you’ve got three loads of laundry and nothing and the house feels unorganized and cluttered and that feels like a struggle and so much of it has been a mental health and making/Managing time and putting away your laundry is not high on the priority list. And [my spouse] has commented recently and it’s especially bad with Christmas coming up. She doesn’t want to drop money on herself yet dropping $50 on your toddler, on your new kid is easy. You need new bath toys? No problem I’ll spend 20 bucks. Next thing you know it’s so easy to spend money and you have all this stuff but you neglect yourself. And now you have to pick up the stuff.

Having play items accessible to children facilitates play. Nicole says, “I made it so easy so they can access everything and it just like...that in itself facilitates a bunch of play because they are just like, in everything as soon as they get home.”

**Screens.** Television and iPads came up as a factor to play in each conversation. It appears that minimizing, placing limits on, or eliminating screens facilitates play by removing an alluring and sometimes time-consuming form of entertainment that can take precedence over play.

Crystal describes,

I just want him to play. Just go play with your cars and trucks but the big thing is TV. We fight with him a lot because he would watch hours of Paw Patrol and be really happy
with himself and be like, “Paw Patrol! Paw Patrol! Remote! Remote!’ and it’s like, “No! Go do something!”

Crystal’s experience is relatable to many participants who share that their children, if offered no limits, would rather enjoy screens than play. Alice says,

I think [screens are] definitely an obstacle to play in my own home…. if I’m not….like, “k that’s enough” they will just wake up in the morning, they will go get the ipad they will go downstairs and they’ll play nintendo and have the ipad on simultaneously taking turns and they will do that all morning until they get hungry or they have to pee or I am like, “K enough is enough and time is up” but if there isn’t a hard and fast limit, um, they would be on that all day long.

Alice is one of many of the participants who acts on her desire for her children to spend less time with screens. She says, “we had to change the password to the ipad.”

Alice also demonstrates how limits or complete boundaries from screens facilitate play. Marie shares, “I grew up in a household with no TV so um, it made a huge difference you know we were playing because we had no other option, right?” Nicole says, “I just usually keep screens to a minimum and they will usually just pull something else out. They will really just move from thing to thing and sort of like, roam around the house and I don’t really have to facilitate it very much.”

Screens came up as a barrier to adults’ play, too. Several (5) adults shared that their own play often consists of going on their phones to check social media. Etienne says,

sometimes [my son] will watch me on my phone and it’s like, if I’m doing housework or something it’s fine but I try to be mindful of like, that’s not how I want them to look at
me like, “oh yeah that’s just a normal state Dad is in like, head down, hand on the phone.” But I think it is normal to kids. I even saw it when we were at that fundraiser the other day where it’s just parents everywhere on their phones while their kids are running away just...yeah it’s interesting.

This study being partially an autoethnographic, lived inquiry, I have closely examined my own relationship with screens and the tension between screens and play that I experience. For what my spouse and I figured would be a temporary decision, we moved our television from our living room and rearranged the space to encourage more play and conversation. After quickly seeing how this has affected the play inside my home, this has become a permanent change. That being said, I enjoy movies. I sometimes resent anti-screen messaging aimed at parents. The current findings certainly suggest that screens are a barrier to play and they were certainly a barrier to play in my own home. Yet, there are many children’s programs that I believe to be thoughtful and beautiful and that have brought me closer to an awareness of play. For example, *The Little Prince* addresses many of the categories that have emerged in this thesis. It explores schoolification and the preciousness of childhood. Another, *Christopher Robin* is an empowering portrait of a human being who realizes the loss of his playfulness. He reclaims play while affecting the social structures and systemic barriers to play for others. The movie explores the importance of parental play. As well, *Here We Are* explores not just the preciousness of human life, but also of our planet. I have begun to use these movies as tools for revitalizing play for myself and my family. This was an unexpected finding. I place songs from their soundtracks in playlists to listen to at home and in the car to remind myself of the important messages within these films. It works. The movie *Here We Are* has also sparked an interest in our four-year-old to
learn about space, go on the bike path with his bicycle, learn to make boats out of paper, and want to revisit the museum. He looks at his Here We Are book and compares it to the movie. Quite unexpectedly, screens have been somewhat of a facilitator to play in our home.

**Summary**

Overall, prioritizing play seems to be a challenging endeavour in what appears to feel at times like a decidedly unplayful society. The Cost of Play, and Quality of Early Learning Environment have highlighted some of the systemic barriers to play. Extracurricular Activities and Play outline how play and structured activities appear to facilitate but also minimize equal access to opportunities for free play. Mental Health and Play shines light on what appears to be a strong connection between mental well-being and play. The final categories, (Re)claiming a Playful Self and Education and Prioritization of Play demonstrate the individual agency over play and playful communities. Within these finding categories were two vignettes: The Swinging Bridge, and The Screen Door, both of which amongst other things may have offered the reader an understanding of the significant role play has had on my own life and relationships and how I process them. Awareness of the Preciousness of Life, a final subcategory to Education and Prioritization of Play, is offered as a final coda to this thesis.
Chapter Five: Discussion

While many factors that have emerged from the co-constructors’ descriptions resonate with previous studies and their findings, there were also many that were unexpected and of interest which may prove to be fruitful avenues of further exploration as they add to what has come to be understood about play. The factors to play that have emerged from the co-constructors’ descriptions provide a clear contribution to existing research. I believe I owe the unexpected findings of this study to both the research methodology employed and the feminist framework that supported the data collection, analysis, and existing findings.

In the category *The Cost of Play*, participants appeared discouraged by how much time they spent working while still sometimes struggling financially. Two of the participants rented homes and the remaining participants were homeowners. One homeowner-participant wondered aloud several times, “where does the money go?” It appears that the current real estate climate necessitates that a family’s income be disproportionately spent on shelter. For example, a 2016 report from Statistics Canada states, “from 1999 to 2016, mortgage debt represented two-thirds of the overall increase in debt for Canadian families, while consumer debt made up the remainder. In recent years (2012 to 2016), mortgage debt was responsible for 100% of the increase in total debt.” The same report elaborates,

In recent years, a great deal of research has focused on the levels of debt that families carry and the increase in debt. Most of the increase in total debt is from mortgage debt, and the increase in mortgage debt can be attributed to two factors. The first is the rapid increase in housing prices. According to the monthly Home Price Index published by the Canadian Real Estate Association (CREA), housing prices rose by 109% (in nominal terms) from January 2005 to December 2016 (...)The second factor is mortgage interest
rates, which have been at historically low levels for most of the last decade, making borrowing costs low and acting as an incentive for families to take on new or bigger mortgages (Uppal, 2019).

The Statistics Canada report affirms the experiences of the co-constructors who share a frustration around the work-play tension and cost of play. Homeowners are encouraged to take on increasingly large mortgage debt for homes that have increased over 100% in price in a single decade. Employees are working long hours, with the means and expectation to continue working even once they are home from the office. Neoliberalism is defined by Abendroth and Portfilio (2015) as an “anti-democratic force that gives the corporate elite of global capitalism power of nation states” (p. xii). Neoliberalism results in a concentration of wealth and power for the top 1% who use that system to maintain power (Chomsky, 2016). While their power and wealth grow, Sims (2017) writes, “wages for the majority have remained low, workloads have increased and artificial bubbles of paper wealth are created which disappear quickly, leaving many people in much worse financial positions while those who created these bubbles (...) maintain their wealth and status” (p. 2). Lincoln (2018) elaborates that, “distaste for collective action” and, “a tendency to blame individuals for their own poverty, unemployment, and ill health” (p. 4) are properties of neoliberalism. Some of the systemic barriers to play that emerged and are addressed in the Cost of Play category appear to be symptoms of neoliberalism. The nostalgia for the time and play affordances one’s parents experienced in previous generations appears to offer a harsh juxtaposition compared with today’s reality for parents in the current workforce and housing market.

Of the 10 participants who shared their typical weekday routine, the mean average amount of time spent away from their children was 9 hours. The recommended time that children
of this demographic (0-9 years old) spend sleeping in the evenings is between 9-14 hours per night (Canadian Society for Exercise and Physiology, 2017). Within a 24-hour time period, this leaves families with between 3 to 6 waking hours together. Within these hours families are forced to fit getting ready in the morning; eating breakfast (unless it is served at childcare); commuting to and from childcare or school; preparing, eating, and cleaning up after dinner; and the activities that a family’s bedtime routine may consist of. These 3-6 hours exclude time for the additional jobs or hobbies that many parents have at the sacrifice of more time away from their children. They also do not account for social engagements, class for those participants who are also part-time students, and evening work obligations. Any of these engagements mean even less time for parents and their children to be together.

The current study found that the amount of agency one has over their time at work appears to be a factor to play. Long, inflexible workdays coupled with never-ending to-do lists, expectations to work outside the office, and the technological means to do so negatively affects play because there is little time or mental capacity left to devote to it. However, there appears to be a way for employers to facilitate play for their employees. For example, the paid parental leave available to some parents in Canada has emerged as a tremendous facilitator to play. At the time of this study, the federal government offers a paid parental leave to parents who have accumulated at least 600 insured hours of work in the 52 weeks before the start of their claim or since the start of their last claim, whichever is shorter (Government of Canada, 2020). This means that parents who are self-employed, work part-time, suffered job loss, or who work in uninsured industries may not be eligible for the program, and thereby, not all parents benefit from paid parental leave.
The reader may recall similarities between how Chantel and Amber spent a typical day on their maternity leave: both mothers actively prioritized getting out of the house, particularly in the winter, and spent either their morning or afternoon out and the other part of their day at home. Both women took advantage of public play environments and gathered with friends and their children’s friends. Both mothers made an effort to get outside in nature and expressed the ways that the seasons affect their play. Both mothers involved their children in their day-to-day household tasks which, although Amber self-deprecatingly joked about, may be highly beneficial to children. There appears to be little research done to confirm or confute the benefits to young children of being exposed to and involved in household domestic tasks. For instance, a search of databases ERIC and Education Database using the search terms, *outcomes, chores, early years, infant, toddler, children, involvement, exposure*, and *household* turns up studies mainly surrounding gender (in)equity amongst household tasks, or household decision making amongst adults in a household. Nonetheless, such a thing was promoted by the highly influential Maria Montessori who advocated for children learning to garden, wash their own dishes, set the table, learn to care for their hygiene, and learn to do everything within their large capabilities as soon as possible (Montessori, 1964, 1965). The Montessori method has proven to be long-standing and effective and has gained an increasing amount of scholarly attention over the past several decades (Lillard, 2019). In her book, *The Montessori Toddler*, Simone Davies (2019) includes a section called, “include the child in daily life” (p. 90).

There is also research on the advantages of infants and young children having the ability to attach to, and develop strong relationships with, their parents (e.g., Bachmann et al., 2019; Borelli et al., 2019; Cooper et al., 1998; Wiles et al., 2019), as well as research outlining the consequences of attachment deprivation (e.g. Boldt, et al., 2017; DeKlyen & Greenberg, 2008;
Fearon & Belsky, 2011; Kobak et al., 2006; Sroufe et al., 1999). Attachment theory, founded by John Bowlby and carefully refined by Mary Ainsworth (Van Rosmalen et al., 2016; Wallace & Lewis, 2020) is a theory that,

human infants need a consistent nurturing relationship with one or more sensitive caregivers to develop into healthy individuals. Parental unavailability or unresponsiveness may contribute to aberrant behaviour or, depending on other risk factors, to psychopathology. Attachment theory is considered a major theory in developmental psychology and developmental psychopathology, and over the years its theoretical framework has inspired researchers across the world to conduct thousands of studies (Van Rosmalen et al., 2016, p. 22).

It is widely recognized that parents and their children attach partially through spending significant amounts of time together during the early years of a child’s life. Wallace and Lewis (2020) write, “the brain is a social organ that develops and grows in attachment relationships (...) stable, caring relationships help shape brain development” (p. 78). Repeated physiological studies have found that infants to preschool-aged children in a childcare setting show an increase in levels of the stress hormone cortisol throughout the day whereas at home their cortisol levels follow the expected circadian decrease from morning to afternoon for most children regardless of age (Dettling et al., 1999; Dettling et al., 2000; Watamura et al., 2003; Watamura et al., 2009). These increases in cortisol are correlated with behaviour differences in children including shyness, poor self-control, and aggression (Dettling, et al., 1999).

Recall how the current study found that the existing typical work and childcare schedule makes it difficult for families to play together. Conversely, supports such as paid parental leave and flexible work schedules are a facilitator to play and healthy child-caregiver(s) attachments.
Current findings highlight that parents are sometimes working more than one job to support their families financially, often at the cost of time with their families and opportunities to play. Participants highlighted in the category *The Cost to Play* that systemic barriers often associated with neoliberalism, such as working long hours with seemingly little reward, are limiting play on a societal level. Play brings us closer to our humanness and contributes to the development of human beings (Brown, 2014; Lewis, 2017;). Therefore, it could be argued that these systemic barriers are anti-play and thereby anti-human.

At the opposite end of the rigid structural systemic barrier to play, however, is the opportunity for the community to facilitate play through accessible paid parental leave (Heymann et al., 2017) perhaps a universal basic income (Lehmann et al., 2018; Mulvale, 2019), and more flexible work schedules (Dizaho et al., 2017). These practices are not yet fully realized in Saskatchewan, but are supported by research (Heymann et al., 2017; Mulvale, 2019; Ongaki, 2019;). Several studies demonstrate that working parents with workplace flexibility adjust their schedule to spend more time with their children, often in enriching activities such as reading and play (Davis et al., 2015; Estes, 2005; Kurowska, 2018; Powell & Craig, 2015). Heymann et al., (2017) found that paid parental leave was associated with lower infant mortality rates and higher rates of immunizations, an increase in exclusive breastfeeding, and potential improvement in women’s economic outcomes. There were further positive correlations between duration of leave, wage replacement rate, and whether a leave is available to both parents, with further positive outcomes for the whole family. Besides being beneficial for families and social development, one study indicated that 83% of the employers that had implemented flexible work scheduling policies reported an increase in productivity and creativity in their employees (Hunter, 2018).
The current study, under the category *Cost to Play* found that participants perceived that being within walking distance of parks and playspaces was a factor to play, and they expressed that they perceived this to be an economic factor. Studies have previously found that park visitation facilitates play (Chiesura, 2004; Cohen et al., 2016; Pitas et al., 2017) as does exposure to nature (Dowdell et al., 2011). One study by Powers et al. (2020) suggests that the perception of “walking distance” depends on each individual and their experiences. Powers and her colleagues found that one of the greatest predictors of whether or not an individual will perceive a park to be within walking distance was membership within marginalized groups based on culture, race, and sex. Therefore, “walking distance,” especially from a constructivist perspective, is fluid depending on context and each individual human being and their constructed realities. These realities appear to be influenced by structurally imposed systems of racism, sexism, and classism that marginalize group members. The steps that a parent might take (including not walking to a playspace if it is perceived to be unsafe) are learned, adaptive behaviours and are a demonstration of resilience and strength. The current findings are indicative of a need to explore how to make communities feel safer and offer a more equal sense of belonging for individuals from a variety of marginalized groups.

The current study suggests that the quality of childcare has an effect on the home environment. This key finding explored in the category *Quality of Early Learning Environment*, is supported by growing evidence that the home environment has a greater effect than childcare quality for children’s lifelong behaviour outcomes. For example, Eisenstadt (2012) found, “what happens in the home between young children and their primary caregivers has a much bigger impact on child outcomes than what happens in childcare” (p. 609). This study’s findings
suggest childcare is perceived to have an impact at the centre, but also at home and that these impacts affect the whole family.

Recall how Nolan and I in the category *Quality of Early Learning* discussed frustrations regarding the discrepancies in the quality of childcare we have experienced in navigating the childcare system for our respective children. In the most recent UNICEF report card, Canada ranked 30th out of 38 nations on a measurement of the state of children and youth under 18 years of age in wealthy countries (UNICEF Canada, 2020). UNICEF Canada (2020) states that their report demonstrates, “before the pandemic, Canada was among the countries with the best economic, environmental and social conditions for growing up, but the poorest outcomes for children and youth” (para. 3). David Morley, President and CEO of UNICEF Canada writes, “Canada’s children are worlds apart from the happiest, healthiest children in rich countries and worlds apart from each other due to wide inequalities”(UNICEF Canada, para. 4). Indeed; the Early Childhood Education and Canada 2019 report by Friendly and her colleagues (2020) provides a clear picture of discrepancies across the provinces, for example, and how Saskatchewan performs poorly even compared to other provinces and territories in Canada’s overall bottom-tier nation. Saskatchewan allows the highest number of children at one time in an unlicensed care centre, allows the highest numbers of hours a nursery program can run that is exempt from licensing, and has the highest adult: child ratio and group size allowances in the country for out-of-school programs. Saskatchewan has the least amount of space available in regulated part or full-time childcare by a wide margin: there is space in a regulated facility for only 16.6 percent of children 0 – 5 years and 9.5 percent of children aged 0-12 years old. Saskatchewan is one of only two provinces with no outdoor play requirements in regulated childcare centres (Friendly et al., 2020).
The Government of Saskatchewan allows for both licensed and unlicensed childcare centres to operate legally. On the Government of Saskatchewan website (n.d.), licensed childcare centres are centres that, “meet and maintain standards set by the Government of Saskatchewan, are monitored by Early Learning and Child Care Consultants, and have their license reviewed every year.” Unlicensed caregivers on the other hand, “are not monitored by the Government of Saskatchewan and are not subject to many legal requirements” (para. 1). The Government of Saskatchewan encourages parents to ask questions when they are looking for a new childcare provider. To offer the reader a sense of the quality of some childcare providers in Saskatchewan, the questions the Government of Saskatchewan suggests parents ask include, “is the environment healthy and safe,” “do caregivers interact with the children,” and “are childcare providers educated about child development” (Government of Saskatchewan, n.d., para. 2).

The province of Saskatchewan’s current childcare system emphasizes the individual over the community by allowing both licensed and unlicensed providers to exist, set their own fees, and exercise autonomy past a minimal standard of education and professional development (Government of Saskatchewan, 2015). An article by Faulkner and Coates (2013), outlines the history of changes in childcare in England and also illustrates that the individualized approach to childcare parallel to our own is frustrating, ineffective, and expensive. Faulkner and Coates write that, “there is now persuasive evidence that investment in state-maintained early education is highly cost-effective, particularly for disadvantaged children” (p. 244).

The finding presented in the category Extracurricular Activities and Play that extracurricular activities appear to benefit children and their families is consistent with other studies that have found that moderate levels of participation appear more beneficial than either low or high levels of participation in extracurricular activities (Fitch, 1991; Marsh, 1992). That
being said, the more time that children spend in extracurricular activities, the higher their self-reported and diagnosed rates of anxiety become (Melman et al., 2007). The literature reviewed on extracurricular sport and outcomes for children has mixed findings. In a longitudinal study, it was found that participation in coached sports was associated with poorer developmental outcomes for children. Children who spent more time in coached sports received lower academic grades than children who spent less time in sports, even after controlling for gender, family structure, and prior academic achievement (Posner, & Vandell, 1999, p. 15). In the same study, there were positive associations with children’s developmental and academic outcomes and their involvement in arts-related activities and after-school programs that closely resembled free, albeit supervised, play.

As with the emerging co-constructed findings presented in Extracurricular Activities and Play that suggest single mothers enable many play opportunities for their children; recall how Nicole appeared to prioritize both play and mental health and actively create play opportunities for her children to support their well-being, and Chantel created play opportunities out of otherwise mundane tasks for her and her children. These results are consistent with reports that single parents might facilitate more unstructured play for their children than parents in co-parenting relationships do (Fuligni & Stevenson, 1995). One suspected reason for this in the literature is that single parents more frequently lack the resources to facilitate their children’s engagement in structured extracurricular activities (Posner & Vandell, 1999; Valentine & McKendrick, 1997). Even though structured activities, in moderation, can facilitate play, the loss of opportunity for children to participate in structured activities appears to facilitate more play for the children of single parents possibly because children have more time to play (Posner &
Vandell, 1999). Children of single parents appear to also have a greater geographical radius in which to play and explore. Valentine and McKendrick (1997) found that single parents at that time appeared dissatisfied that they had fewer resources to offer their children “private” play experiences, and yet the public sphere offered the children what the researchers considered to be, “a richer environmental experience (in terms of their opportunity to explore the environment, develop their own local knowledge, appropriate space for themselves and create their own imaginative play independently of adults)” (p. 231).

There is growing research that what children choose to do with their time outside of sports and curricular activities, matters. For children and youth who have time to freely play in place of structured activities, they generally both self-report (Melman et al., 2007) and are reported by teachers and parents as being happy and well-adjusted (Lee et al., 2020). Many children, however, appear to be watching television in place of extracurricular activities and free play (Domoff et al., 2019; Maitland et al., 2013), which consistently has negative outcomes across the literature. The arena for free play appears to be growing narrower, in constant competition with extracurricular activities, homework, and television/screen time. As with the findings in this study presented in Extracurricular Activities and Play and Education and Prioritization of Play, it appears that humans are disengaging from free play, and are worse off for it.

The finding in Extracurricular Activities and Play where online participants expressed that extracurricular activities seem to facilitate unstructured or child-structured play, appears unexplored in the extant literature as evidenced by searches in databases ERIC and Education Database with the search terms structured play, activities, sports, facilitate, support, promote, unstructured play, child-led play, carpool, and friends. The current findings posit that rather than
evaluate the benefits of play versus sport, one could examine the relationship between the two and how play and sport support one another.

The finding that participants felt their attachment with their children was jeopardized by their birth trauma for the first entire year, presented in *Mental Health and Play*, is consistent with the literature reviewed (Molloy et al., 2020). This current study sheds more light on how birth trauma specifically appears to affect one’s play or ability to feel playful, and how this in turn can affect family relationships. The findings of the current study were consistent with findings that many women experience traumatic births, and about 30% are consistently documented in the literature as such (Mollard, 2014). The current findings were also consistent with what some women face when they express their needs to professionals and are sometimes dismissed (Molloy et al., 2020). The reader may recall how, in the category, *Mental Health and Play* Nicole shared that her daughter was taken away from her immediately after her birth, and how this appears to have had a long-lasting effect on her relationship with her daughter and ability to be playful. In a qualitative study exploring how women’s birth affected their parenting relationship, similar to what Nicole stated, it was found that “due to the need for maternal surgery, or neonatal care, (some mothers) immediately lost contact with their newborn, and were unsure if their child had even survived the birth, where they were, or who they were with,” and that this scenario appears to have long-term impacts on maternal mental health and play (Molloy et al., 2020).

That co-constructors had experienced but not reported symptoms of postpartum perinatal mood disorders, as reported in the category *Mental Health and Play* and discussed by participants Nicole and Amber is consistent with the reviewed literature on mental health that suggests most women are not reporting their symptoms of postpartum anxiety and depression.
(Goodman, 2009; Woolhouse et al., 2009). As previously reviewed in Chapter 2, fear of stigma and embarrassment are commonly reported reasons for avoiding treatment amongst women experiencing postpartum depression (Dennis and Chung-Lee, 2006; Goodman, 2009; Woolhouse et al., 2009). The current study’s findings that some women do not know what postpartum mood disorders feel like and are unsure whether or not what they are experiencing is normal or not as discussed by Amber in the category *Mental Health and Play* is consistent with research by Molloy et al. (2020), who found that mothers often second-guessed themselves and submitted to family members or professionals who attempted to assure them that their experiences or feelings were normal. Another significant barrier for some women seeking help for postpartum mental illness that was also brought forward by participants in this study in *Mental Health and Play* is the belief that symptoms will pass on their own. This finding is consistent with studies by Woolhouse et al. (2009) who examined women seeking help for anxiety and depression after childbirth and found that women are less likely to seek treatment if they believe their symptoms are temporary and with a study by Goodman (2009) who examined women’s perceived barriers to treatment for perinatal mood disorders and found that women are less likely to seek treatment if they feel that they can manage on their own. The reader may recall a finding described in *Mental Health and Play* where Alice describes feelings of shame and failure around breastfeeding. This finding is consistent with reports in the literature that for many women, “an unsuccessful breastfeeding relationship added to their sense of inability to soothe and nurse their baby, which was intertwined with their ability to successfully mother” (Molloy et al., 2020).

The current findings presented in the category *Mental Health and Play*, suggest that play may have a positive effect on the mental and emotional well being of children and that the lack of play may poorly affect children’s mental and emotional state. There is a growing research
field on children’s mental health as the diagnoses of mental health disorders in children are steadily rising (Gray, 2011; Whitebread, 2017) Wallace and Lewis (2020) write, “without play [in early childhood] there are far-reaching detrimental impacts on development and learning, mental health and socialization” (p. 20). One study that examined correlations between time commitments and mental health reported that there is a direct correlation between increased time spent in after-school activities and self-reports of anxiety (Melman et al., 2007). Researchers are also becoming familiar with the correlations between the lack of play opportunities and poor mental health in children. A 2016 report from Public Health England estimated that over 10% of children aged 5-16 years had a clinically significant mental health illness. Reported conditions included, “anxiety, depression, conduct disorders, self-harm, and suicidal feelings” (Whitebread, 2017, p. 167). Whitebread points to a correlation between the steady rise in mental health diagnoses in children and the decline in play, which he largely attributes to the privatization of play. He connects the increase in mental health diagnoses and self-reports in children with the shrinking physical areas for free play. Wallace and Lewis (2020) state that, “as summarized by [Panskepp and Biven (2012)], children deprived of play are at far greater risk of being diagnosed with ADHD and of growing into adulthood with a significantly higher probability of becoming a potential danger to society” (p. 21). They continue, “setting aside the ethical consideration about medicating young children in order to achieve compliance, perhaps what we really need to focus on is the possible cause that these authors and others suggest, which is the absence of play or limited play in many children's lives” (p. 21).

Many factors affect mental health and thereby play. What has become known as “intensive mothering” (Hays, 1996) places enormous and gendered responsibility on mothers and “judges mothers for the way their children turn out” (Layne, 2015, p. 1154). One could argue
that this is an age entirely of intensive mothering, initially described by Hays (1996) as, “child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour-intensive, and financially expensive” (p. 8). For those who enter motherhood, the new challenges that abruptly appear are difficult to imagine before they arrive. Layne’s (2015) participant who she refers to as “Carmen,” says of new motherhood and mental health, “I was always just able to manage emotionally as an independent entity. Now I am dependent on their health, their success” (p. 1159). This was closely mirrored in the current study where Amber shared that she had begun to consider her daughter’s mental health in relation to her own career, and Crystal also said that the experience of raising a child with significant health issues since birth was unexpectedly isolating and mentally challenging in the Mental Health and Play category. Taken together, one can see the mental challenges that arise since children’s health and success are often viewed as being dependent on their parents. So, the cycle begins.

Some researchers who aimed to explore the influence of different forms of early childcare on children’s emotional and behavioural development at school entry were surprised to find that maternal mental health was one of the most significant factors on children’s development, and appeared to make more of an impact on children than the quality of their childcare (Stein et al., 2012). In concurrence, the current study did find that parental mental health affects play and parenting and would therefore impact children’s development. The study also found, however, that there is a potential link between quality of childcare and government childcare policies and parental well-being; recall how Nolan and I both described the effects our respective children’s childcare had on our home lives, and how Crystal and I both ultimately felt that we had found a childcare placement for our respective children that we felt comfortable with, thus alleviating some emotional/mental stress presented under the category Quality of
Early Learning Environment. Maternal mental health is also, “associated with a 5-fold increased risk of mental health illness for the child,” which speaks to the importance of increasing awareness and supports surrounding maternal mental health (Public Health England, 2016). In other words, maternal mental health matters a lot, as was the case with participants Crystal, Nicole, and Alice who shared that their mental health could be both a barrier and a facilitator to play and what they perceived to be positive interactions with their children in the category Mental Health and Play. The current findings possibly indicate that part of the strength of the effect maternal mental health has on children is because it is a critical component to play.

The current study found that adult play is perceived to be of great importance. In the category (Re)claiming a Playful Self, recall that Chantel, Alice, and Crystal all described themselves as playful people who attributed some of their favourite qualities of themselves to their experiences with play as children and adults. Nolan and Amber both described their spouses as playful and expressed that their spouse’s playfulness was a catalyst for family play. Nicole expressed that she uses play as a tool for strengthening her emotional well-being in the category Mental Health and Play. Amanda described how parents of the children her employer facilitates play for, often ask what opportunities there were for their own play in the category Extracurricular Activities and Play. The finding that adult play is important is concurrent with Brown’s (2014) description that,

the consequences of adult play deprivation are: lack of vital life engagement, diminished optimism; stuck-in-a-rut feeling about life with little curiosity or exploratory imagination to alter their situation; predilection to escapist temporary fixes...alcohol, excessive exercise, (or other compulsions); [and] a personal sense of being life’s victim rather than life’s conqueror (p. 5).
Authors Liapi and Ackermann (2016) wrote a piece called Microgravity Playscapes: Play in Long-Term Space Missions where they describe the consequences of play deprivation for astronauts on space missions. The authors explore play in space and the importance of playscapes and playful aesthetics in space for supporting the astronauts’ physical, emotional, and mental well-being through play. The current findings surrounding the necessity of adult play support both Brown (2014), and Liapi and Ackerman’s (2016) calls for greater attention to the importance of play for people of all ages.

Participants in the current study also reported feeling unplayful if their mental or emotional health appeared to be suffering in Mental Health and Play. The findings suggest that the consequences of adult play deprivation also include lowered opportunities and desire to facilitate play for one’s children, if applicable. This finding appears to be consistent with findings in the extant literature. For example, it has been consistently reported that mothers who sacrifice their own needs and desires disproportionately for those of their children, regardless of their age, increase stress and reduce autonomy, which thereby diminishes emotional well-being and affects mental health (Gunderson & Barrett, 2017). One study found that parental stress and child behavioural problems are bi-transactional and that, “reducing parenting stress has the potential to reduce behaviour problems [in their children]” (Neece et al., 2012). The reviewed literature and current study also found that reducing parental stress positively affects play and parent-child interactions as shared by Nicole in Mental Health and Play and Amanda in Extracurricular Activities and Play. This is indicative of a need for more opportunities for adult play that are accessible for parents through the availability of childminding or other supports that allow family members to bring their children along if necessary. The findings reported in (Re)Claiming a Playful Self also address a potential gap in the existing literature on the role of
parents’ play for their children. It would appear that the best policy and practices should focus on the well-being and play opportunities for parents, which will in turn affect play for children and affect the quality of home environments. Certainly, the participants Nicole, Alice, and Amanda reported similarly in *Mental Heath and Play, (Re)claiming a Playful Self, and Extracurricular Activities and Play,* respectively.

The emerging co-constructed findings suggest that one’s personal play experiences contribute to their identities and feelings about their identities; many co-constructors felt that their play histories attributed to strength and resilience as adults. For example, Crystal said that she is happy to be able to amuse herself easily and enjoys being alone because of her childhood play experiences, and Darryl said that he values what one discovers in their downtime in category *(Re)Claiming a Playful Self.* These results are consistent with Dr. Stuart Brown’s examination of play histories and the effects one’s play histories have on their adult lives (2014).

The concern that women participants expressed for their own safety over the concern they showed for their children’s safety greatly contrasts with the literature on parents’ safety concerns and play (Valentine & McKendrick, 1997; Lee et al., 2015). For example, recall how Crystal shared her experience of being approached by several men offering her a ride when she was a child, which led her to stop picking wildflowers by the road. She shared that this still affects where she goes and how comfortable she feels both alone and with her baby boy. Chantel and Maria also described feeling unsafe in public at times for fear of gendered crime. With this in mind, perhaps there is a potential misunderstanding in the literature of what exactly parents’ fears are surrounding, or a lack of consideration for how their personal experiences have shaped how they perceive risks to their children. For example, McFarland and Gull Laird (2017) explored adult perceptions of children’s risky play and found factors such as children’s age,
concerns of physical injury in play, and fear of litigation as barriers to children’s play. Kimbro and Schachter (2011) examined “associations with neighbourhood social characteristics, city-level crime rates, maternal mental health, and social support” (p. 461) and allowing children to play in the neighbourhood, but did not examine mother’s personal experiences as potential survivors of crime. This clarification (if it is, indeed, a clarification), could be attributed to the candid and exploratory nature of the conversations that contributed to this thesis. Potentially, participants felt a degree of trust and safety in revealing their past traumas and gendered fears for their own safety while they were speaking to someone who, because of the prevalence of gendered incidents, they might assume most likely experiences the same fear.

One co-constructor, Maria, spoke of how her personal experiences with gendered violence have affected her play. One may recall that she recommended someone, “teach men how to behave. They don’t really know how to behave.” Further to this point, it is worth noting that during that very conversation, a man interrupted our discussion to talk. He turned out to be kind and harmless. Nevertheless, he had the opportunity to take his kindness and harmlessness for granted. He knew with greater certainty that our interaction would be safe and dignified. We had to wait and find out. I don’t necessarily want to live in a world where strangers no longer interact with one another, but depending on one’s constructed reality, it appears important that people be sensitized to the gendered violence that has permeated some women’s lives and how this affects their experience in the public realm. It has clearly affected how participants Crystal, Chantel, and Maria are able to enjoy being in and playing with their children in public spaces.

The amount that concern for female participants’ own safety emerged as a barrier to play in (Re)claiming a Playful Self and The Cost to Play appears to be a new finding in relation to the literature on play since no play-specific studies were returned when performing a search in
databases ERIC, Proquest, or Education Database using search terms *adverse childhood experiences, fear of gendered crime, parent/mother,* and *play.* There was one recent study that examined and found a correlation between parenting practices/parenting styles and parent adverse childhood experiences (Lange et al., 2019). The current study findings appear to be a seam in blending the literature on adverse childhood experiences and parenting with the literature on parental safety concerns as a factor to play. The current findings also appear to be consistent with many studies that illustrate that generally, women exhibit a much higher fear of crime than men do, mainly because of the high frequency of (unreported) gendered crime towards women (Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020). As was previously discussed surrounding the findings in the *Cost of Play* category, members of marginalized groups demonstrate more safety concerns than non-marginalized groups (Powers et al., 2020), and marginalized women experience crime at an alarmingly high rate. In Canada, “researchers have reported that Indigenous women and girls are 12 times more likely to be murdered or missing than other women in Canada, and 16 times more likely than Caucasian women” (Native Women’s Association of Canada, 2020). Again, though not connected to play, there is extensive literature available on sexual harassment of women and how some women alter their behaviour to avoid unwanted attention or harassment in public. Vera-Gray and Kelly (2020) make a convincing argument for the immense amount of invisible labour women do to protect their own safety in public, which they refer to as “safety work,” and which limits some women’s movement and freedom in the public sphere. This greatly limits some women’s ability to play, since they are constantly at work to ensure their own safety. One can certainly draw parallels to the emergent findings in this current study such as that Crystal, Maria, and Chantel expressed that their fear of
gendered crime appears to shrink their available play space and time as presented in *(Re)Claiming a Playful Self* and *The Cost of Play*.

With regard to screens, recall how Alice and Etienne shared that screens are a barrier to both child and parent play in *Education and Prioritization of Play*. This is in concert with a study by Maitland et al. (2013) who found that television and video game availability in the home was correlated with less time spent playing. The same authors also state that parental attitudes and habits surrounding watching television had effects on their children’s habits.

The current findings captured in category *(Re)Claiming a Playful Self* that spoke to the importance of a strong support system for parent and child well-being are consistent with research by Molloy et al. (2020) on women’s experiences in the first year after giving birth that found, “some women who were away from family, or had poor relationships with family that were geographically close, described feeling that they had no-one to turn to for support” (p. 6). There is also an apparent alarming need for greater awareness, prioritization of, and education surrounding play; for example, when Maria said she feels there needs to be a greater awareness of the importance of play in the category *Education and Prioritization of Play* in the current study, researchers such as Liapi and Ackermann (2016) also found play to be a key yet undervalued factor even to astronauts’ well-being on space missions. They write, “whether on earth or in space, an environment that facilitates play greatly enhances habitability and well-being. In an extreme environment where every mistake can be detrimental, if not fatal, the importance of play--spontaneous or organized--has been underrated in the past” (p. 174). While some researchers (Brown, 2014) appear to have lost some hope in the revitalization of play, others speak of the momentum towards playfulness almost as if it is the inevitable return home. One such example can be found in Lewis (2017), he writes,
Even though the erosion of play seems to inexorably roll on, I think there is hope, a resistance movement, if you wish. It is not early childhood educators or parents or an international body such as the UN or UNESCO with the Convention on the Rights of the Child - it is children themselves. Children have an inherent compulsion to play, humans both young and old are possessed with a play impulse or drive; it would seem that it is a necessary part of being human” (p. 20).

*Grounded Theory*

As previously mentioned, all of the categories discussed are interconnected. Following is a figure, *(Re)Claiming Play*, that illustrates one way that the categories are codependent on one another.
(Re)claiming Play

- Awareness and prioritization of play
- (Re)claiming a playful self
- (Re)claiming children’s play opportunities in early learning and school settings
- (Re)claiming community opportunities for free play
- (Re)claiming community opportunities for whole wellness
The data has overwhelmingly demonstrated that human beings have agency over their play even considering the existing systemic barriers to play. There appears to be no hierarchy between categories of play with the exception of awareness of play. An awareness and prioritization of play affect each category, which this theory highlights. There will, at every moment, be both systemic and personal barriers to play that people and communities will always be in tension with. The co-constructors of this theory have demonstrated the possibility of great agency over their own playfulness and opportunities for play in their communities. They have proven that one does not simply land in a playful community, they foster one. Playful communities, therefore, depend on individuals to participate in their playfulness. One’s sense of belonging in their community appears to rest somewhat on their participation in it. As previously discussed, the revitalization of play is not so much a creation, but a homecoming. Play, and playful communities appear to rightfully belong to a community’s citizens, though they must be active agents participating in claiming them as such. Therefore, one does not necessarily create play but rather, reclains it.

The theory, therefore, is that the awareness and prioritization of play affect how we claim a playful self, community opportunities for free play, opportunities for whole wellness, and play in children’s early learning and school settings. These factors to play, both systemic and individual, affect one another and the overall state of play both on an individual and community level. The data that emerged into the categories of this thesis fits into this grounded theory in the following way: *The Cost of Play* is a component of (re)claiming community opportunities for free play. *Work and Play* and *Work (in)Flexibility and Play* affect both adult and child opportunities for individual and family play. Living within *Walking Distance* and ensuring there are adequate free play spaces and a sense of safety and belonging for all members of a
community is a vital factor in (re)claiming community opportunities for free play. The participation in understanding and rejecting the *Commercialization of Play* and *Privatization of Play*, partially through how these systemic barriers have co-opted the celebration of children’s *Birthday Parties* is also an important component to revitalizing free play on a societal level.

The data described in the category *Extracurricular Activities and Play* offers further awareness of (re)claiming opportunities for free play. There is a finding, demonstrated in *Structured Activities Facilitating Play* that extracurricular activities, in moderation, appear to foster opportunities for play. However, the increasing standardization of having children in several time-consuming structured activities at once appears to minimize play opportunities for children, as is evident in *Keeping [the Kids] up With the Joneses[‘ Kids]*. These findings offered in the category *Extracurricular Activities and Play*, beg for an examination of how communities can (re)claim free opportunities for children’s play.

(Re)claiming children’s play in early learning and school settings appears to be a vital component of (re)claiming play not only because children spend so much time in these settings but because they appear to have an effect on families during their time outside of these environments. The findings surrounding the powerful and lasting effects of the *Quality of Early Learning Environment* on family, adult, and child play outside of early learning environments are described in that category of Chapter 4.

The findings explored in *Mental Health and Play* are evidence of the need for participation in (re)claiming community opportunities for whole wellness. The poor effects of *Birth Trauma* on parent-child play, combined with the potential positive effects of *Community Facilitating Mental Health* suggest that there is much work to do in furthering the holistic public health offerings available to reclaim play, health, and happiness in community. *Children’s*
Mental Health appears to partially rely on strong community leaders and members who dedicate their time and energy towards (re)claiming community opportunities for whole wellness and play.

The work of (Re)claiming a Playful Self, both a component of the grounded theory and a category of the findings, is an essential, though potentially undervalued piece of (re)claiming play. Findings surrounding how participants appear to actively use their personal experiences to inform their play are outlined in the subcategory Informing Play with Personal Experiences. The perceived helpfulness of Rejecting Perceived Judgement and the Idea of the Other and Rejecting Social Constructs towards reclaiming play is described as vital not only for (re)claiming a playful self but for fostering play for others. Taking Care of One’s Self is another key factor to adults feeling playful and taking opportunities for Parental Play, and to claiming opportunities to play for the children in their lives. Part of the benefits of self-care and play for adults appear to be the increased opportunity for Creating a Play Network, being a network of people and places that support one’s play.

The Education and Prioritization of Play offers a reframing Weather as an ephemeral experience to take advantage of with the appropriate Gear, arranging a Home Environment as a place for play, and understanding the role of Screens in limiting and supporting play. The Education and Prioritization of Play and the abovementioned subcategories are an important piece of each component of reclaiming play. Finally, as is explored in the final coda of this thesis, the Awareness of the Preciousness of Life appears to offer a fleeting catalyst to play as one comes closer to the understanding that life is short and play fills it with meaning.

As previously reviewed in Chapter 2, play is a critical tool for human happiness (e.g., Brockman et al., 2011; Closter & Cleeve, 2008) and brings us closer to the human condition
Therefore, the total reclamation of play and overall movement towards individual and/or community playfulness is a radical act of self and community care that is necessary for the happiness and one could argue, spiritual survival of human beings. The reclamation of play and movement towards playfulness is thereby a vital act of social justice.

**Research in Action**

There is little research such as this study that has explored how caregivers can be empowered to play with and seek more play opportunities for their children, particularly with an action component. This work has applications through what appears to be a unique method of examination through a lived inquiry, autoethnographic memoing in grounded theory, documentation of online engagement with the project, and action research. The action components of the co-construction of this work have facilitated practical applications of the emergent theory.

In an attempt to alleviate some of the barriers and expedite some of the facilitating factors to play, I began documenting and promoting playspaces in Regina and discussing the benefits and fun of play on social media. Project Play YQR initially began as an Instagram account where I photographed and uploaded playspaces. I solicited constant feedback from the followers surrounding how they wanted information displayed, how often they wanted to receive information, and what information mattered to them. Guided by the community, I shaped the Instagram account and designed a website. There are now over 100 playspaces documented on the website and Instagram. Most of the spaces include a map link that once clicked, opens Google Maps with directions to the playspace from the user’s exact location. The project has attracted several volunteers. One volunteer cross-references all of our playspaces each month with their respective websites (if applicable) and helps to ensure each caption is up to date. Each
Instagram post caption has information regarding the location, price (if applicable), schedule, whether families can bring their own food, whether spaces are wheelchair (and stroller) accessible, and more. The Instagram stories feature is typically filled with play research and reposts of spaces to play for free in Regina. There are polls and surveys relating to the research, and critical participatory discussions surrounding play. As the thesis theory began to emerge, Play YQR evolved. All of the findings have informed Project Play YQR and the work that we do.

Due to the findings surrounding the apparent link between physical health and mental health and the difficulty of finding facilities that promote parent play and wellness, I added family-friendly fitness studios that had parent and baby classes or childminding available to the Project Play YQR resources. Eventually, I added a Community Play Calendar to keep track of some of the free play-related events and programming happening around the city. One can subscribe to the calendar on their Google account so they aren’t required to view it directly on our website. A map is linked on the calendar as well, so one has access to directions to an event from their personal location in one click. Several volunteers and representatives from other organizations have editing rights to the Community Play Calendar and can upload their own events or other events in the city that fit the calendar’s criteria. I eventually created Google Calendars for each branch of the Regina Public Library and each of the Early Years Family Centre locations. This way one can choose to subscribe to their closest Early Years Family Centre and closest Regina Public Library branch and have one personal calendar with all the programming in one place on their phone. Although Google protects subscribers’ information and it’s unclear exactly how many users are subscribed to the calendars, the Instagram community has indicated that hundreds of people are subscribed to the Play YQR calendars.
Using the knowledge from the emerging theory and constant feedback from followers, I have tried to foster a community where there is as little friction around play as possible.

Some of the solicited online responses regarding caregivers of children with speech delays led me to meet with the owner of a speech therapy clinic. I shared the findings of the current study with her surrounding some of the barriers it appeared families face to seeking support. I also shared some of the facilitating factors of an environment in encouraging parental involvement in play, which the owner expressed she and the staff wanted to encourage during their therapy sessions. Because of the emerging patterns around caregivers of children with speech challenges and other exceptionalities, their clinic offered a free, public event where families could visit, meet the staff, become familiar with the clinic, and ask questions of the various professionals to see whether the clinic was a good fit and inquire about costs, insurance, and direct billing. The owner reported back to me that the event was well-attended and families were enrolling in speech and other forms of therapy. They started offering these events monthly and expanded their location. Because of the findings around supporting a playful environment, the owner expressed that she had found a plush rug that didn’t shed for families to get on the floor and play together, and had removed some of the adult furniture from the child rooms so that parents were engaging in play at eye level with their children during sessions.

Under the advice of a representative from the City of Regina, I incorporated Project Play YQR as a non-profit organization in June of 2019. I hand-selected a board of directors; made flashcards of Robert’s Rules in order to chair board meetings with minimal fumbling; attended workshops at the Regina Public Library on understanding financial statements for nonprofits; and borrowed books on writing grant applications, grant reports, and financial statements. I began to apply for programming grants in hopes that I could begin applying some of the findings
in the community more effectively. Although Project Play YQR has to be incorporated for at least one full year before being eligible for many major grants, we have secured 100% of the minor grants that Project Play YQR has applied for.

When we received a Healthy Start (healthy food) grant, we partnered with the Shirley Schneider Support Centre and met at their centre to play and cook food together. The Shirley Schneider Support Centre supports high school students who are expecting or caring for children. Two volunteers and I facilitated the sessions together; I brought my children and encouraged the other volunteers to do the same if they felt comfortable. Our children’s shyness, tantrums, food-throwing and other normal child behaviours helped to position us as fellow parents also striving to play with and cook healthy food for our children, and not as parenting or nutrition experts. The older children helped us cook and we all talked and ate together, then played with the kids all together on the floor. In our first session, one infant rolled over for the first time and everyone cheered. Our attendance grew at each session. The program leader began to bring her young daughter with her for our sessions together. When we gathered feedback one mother said, “this was so fun” and when I asked her which parts were the most fun, she said, “the playing!” Another mother expressed that many professionals visited the centre to teach them things, especially about breastfeeding and early literacy. She said no one had ever played with them or made it seem like playing with their kids was important.

In part because of findings from this thesis in the Mental Health category surrounding the connection between mental health, labour trauma, and play, the Regina Early Years Family Centre has established the Regina Perinatal Health Network. This is a free, non-clinical support service for new parents facing mental health changes and looking for professional support. They facilitate community awareness surrounding perinatal mood disorders, offer a weekly drop-in
support group, and offer one-on-one support to new and expecting parents with mental health concerns. They also act as a hub, connecting new parents to other relevant services in the city. Their services are 100% free.

One photograph of some play-related textbooks on Project Play YQR’s Instagram attracted inquiries about the books and many people expressed that they wanted to learn and read more about play. As another means to act on the findings surrounding the importance of prioritization and awareness surrounding play, the Project Play YQR Community Book Club was born. Our book club promotes the awareness of play while also offering adults (some of whom are parents) an opportunity to connect with other adults in a neutral environment. It is a form of accessible play and leisure for adults in and of itself. Our meetings have been in free, public spaces and members have been able to bring their children (if applicable). We have used volunteer childminders who play with and occupy the children in the same room during meetings to minimize distractions to parents discussing the books. We have read and discussed thirteen play-related books. In the past, we received federal funding for the book club and were able to purchase 12 of each book to distribute to members and to purchase food for our meetings. Eventually, a staff member from the Regina Public Library contacted me and asked if they could support this initiative. They offered us free meeting rooms, snacks and beverages, promotion in their program guide, and a children’s programmer to do playful programming with children in attendance and review some of the resources that the library offers to families. Several of our members were not frequent library users before our partnership with the Regina Public Library, and now use their services and access their programming.

In another attempt to further the awareness of play and promote outdoor play, I secured a grant from the Cathedral Area Community Association to pay a designer to do some logo and
branding work for our organization. As part of the agreement with the community association, I made fall and winter outdoor play posters of the Cathedral Village Neighbourhood with photographs of neighbourhood outdoor spaces and research that suggests benefits to outdoor play. The Cathedral Area Community Association and Project Play YQR collaborated on developing an annual Les Sherman Park Snow Sculpture Event where residents are encouraged to build snow-sculptures in Les Sherman Park.

Because of the current study, I was asked to advise as a parent-liaison to the Regina Early Years Family Resource Centre and Project Play YQR was invited to join the group of organizations that form RAECN, (The Regina and Area Early Childhood Network). The co-constructors’ stories and emergent theory inform how I approach my role within these networks. I also use the current findings and collective narrative to inform my work as a long-standing board member of SCEP, another early childhood organization that works with pre-school aged children in the community.

Once the COVID-19 pandemic hit, The Play YQR Instagram account posted playful bingo cards for families to try to complete and shared relaxed family homeschooling schedules that appeared more realistic and playful than a lot of what was circulating on the internet. We started a playful window challenge. We created fun playlists to listen to at home. We shared some information about play stamina and play affordances with toys. Eventually, we received funding to put together eight baskets of play items to donate to families in Regina. We have some families we are connected to, and we accepted nominations (including self-nominations) from our online community to receive free play baskets. Since we were creating baskets for donation, we advertised that we would allow 12 baskets to be purchased by families in Regina and allowed people to purchase more baskets to donate to families in need. The play items in the
baskets were purchased from locally-owned shops in Regina. Project Play YQR did not earn a profit or use the baskets as a fundraiser; we sold the baskets at cost and delivered them for free. The baskets that we sold were sold out within twenty minutes online, and several families purchased additional baskets for us to donate. For families who didn’t have the opportunity to purchase baskets, I created videos showing the items I purchased, where I purchased them from, and their play affordances. I also discussed the play affordances of non-typical play items that one might find in their homes. Many parents started directing questions towards the Play YQR Instagram account surrounding school options for the fall. In a poll I created, 79% of respondents expressed that they did not know the options they had for enrolling their child(ren) in school for the fall, regarding the pandemic or otherwise. I was surprised that there appeared to be no breakdown of the public, alternative, distance, and home-based education options in Regina. Project Play YQR now has a webpage breaking these options down for families (Blaisdell, 2020b). Project Play YQR’s Instagram account has never received more messages of appreciation and support than it did during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our latest project, Capture the Magic of Winter, is a free photography workshop and community photo exhibit to demonstrate the beauty of Regina in the winter and the playfulness and resilience of its residents. The City of Regina funded this program, and we are beginning to receive photo submissions that frame Regina as a vibrant, playful city from its residents’ perspective.

Project Play YQR and the Regina Early Years Family Resource Centre secured funding together to hire me as a student researcher to examine how to support play during the pandemic. Outside of the funding for that study, 100% of Project Play YQR’s funding and donations have gone towards the purchase of books, food for programming and events, our ad-free website domain and software, and play items. We have been an entirely volunteer-driven organization.
The Regina Early Years Family Resource Centre has paid close attention to the emerging categories and the findings of the Play at Home study have informed their virtual programming and supports. As a direct result of the findings of the study, they put together and delivered play kits with play items and books for families, increased their Positive Parenting supports, continued their Music with Tyne music therapy virtual programming, and started outdoor in-person programming. I created two separate, public, free webinars surrounding the findings: one to support parents to be more playful in and around the home, which I delivered twice, and one to inform community-based organizations on how to support their clients’, students, or family play during the pandemic, which I also delivered twice. I created a podcast episode surrounding the study (Blaisdell, 2020c) and several posters summarizing the findings from the study (Blaisdell, 2020a). The Regina Early Years Family Resource Centre staff member I was in constant consultation with throughout the process of the study has expressed gratitude and that she feels their organization was supported by the research findings and byproducts. They have invited me to apply for more funding to undergo a second study. Project Play YQR is in the process of forming a partnership with CAYC (The Canadian Association for Young Children) to address discrepancies in play-related education across early childhood educators in Regina and Saskatchewan.

This current study and its action offshoots have also been featured in several media stories including CBC (Eneas, 2019; CBC News 2020) University of Regina (University Advancement and Communications, 2020), Global News (Sawatzky, 2020), Education News (Editor Ed News, 2020) the Cathedral Village Voice (Mills, 2020) and the LeaderPost (Melynchuk, 2020). The public awareness that these news stories have facilitated around this
study not only appears to increase the following around the Project Play YQR organization and the study resources, but potentially increases the awareness and prioritization of play in general.

Lastly, this project has proven to have personal applications. It has affected how I spend time with my children, how I perceive and attempt to remove what I consider to be and have learned are my own barriers to play and exploration, how I have set up my home environment, how I perceive and perform my role as an educator, and how I participate in my community. As mentioned earlier, this work proved to have greater implications than I could have anticipated. For the opportunity to do this work, engage in this community, and learn about myself, I am ever grateful.

**Next Steps for Community Action**

The findings of the current study indicate several areas in policy, research, and practice that might be improved upon. In Chapter 4 category *Quality of Early Learning Environment*, the effect of the quality of early learning environment on the home environment was explored, and the expensive and complicated provincial childcare landscape proved problematic. Therefore, this study strongly recommends that childcare quality continue to be carefully examined and held to a high standard considering not only that children spend a significant portion of time in their childcare facilities, but that they appear to have a great effect on play and home environments.

Findings in Chapter 4 revealed that some women who participated in the study face an added barrier to play in public spaces through the fear of gendered violence, based on their experiences. It appears critical that the play literature adopts the perspectives of women who are sharing how the inappropriate behaviour of some men has and continues to affect their own and their children’s play. I want to stress that especially from a feminist framework, the protective measures that women might take as a result of their constructed realities is not itself a barrier to
play. These are learned, adaptive behaviours that are symptoms of strength and resilience. Parents protecting themselves and their children is not a barrier, but rather a facilitator to play; the patriarchy is a barrier to play. A second recommendation is therefore to further examine and implement means of sensitizing people to how one’s experience can affect their experience of the public realm. It would also be helpful to gain a better understanding and address potential parental fears of the child welfare system as was mentioned in Chapter 1.

Based on the current study findings available in Chapter 4 category (Re)claiming a Playful Self that parental play greatly encourages family and child play, a third recommendation is to develop more avenues for adult play that are accessible for parents who may not have access to family support or childcare and therefore may need to bring children with them if they want to socialize outside of their homes. Parent-and-child programs or spaces, childminding availability, and even general child-friendliness appear to be appreciated methods of offering parents a much-needed pathway to play and interact with other adults in a child-friendly but not child-centred environment.

Limitations

Both feminist and constructivist ideologies place awareness of self as both a strength but ultimately a limitation to one’s study. As co-constructed by me and the participants, this entire theory rests on our (sometimes) shared constructed realities. Although data triangulation was achieved and the online community provided hundreds of individual submissions, it must be understood that these submissions were filtered through and transitioned into the theory by me, again resting on my own constructed reality.

Furthermore, my research was centred around participants particularly from Regina and the surrounding area, and many of the reviewed resources include place-specific policies and
practices. Therefore, I leave it to readers to determine what if any findings may inform their own unique context and location. The recruitment method used also gathered participants solely from a pool of people following a play-promoting Instagram for months. The ease of recruitment and desire participants demonstrated to share their thoughts on this topic was much appreciated by me. However, it would be worthwhile in the future to intentionally attract participants who possess a diversity of views on play.

**Conclusion**

This study was an approach to further understanding the factors to play and actively participating in its restoration as I came to witness its decline. The emergent theory is unexpectedly hopeful, but requires action: the (re)claiming of play requires participation, and communities rich in play opportunities require consistent and intentional play revitalization. The act of reclaiming play appears to have four different parts, each with different factors: (re)claiming a playful self, (re)claiming community opportunities for free play, (re)claiming community opportunities for whole wellness, and (re)claiming children’s play opportunities in early learning and school settings. Despite one’s position in what is perhaps a decidedly unplayful society with many systemic barriers to play in place, the collective narrative co-constructed by participants appears to be a movement towards a realization of the loss and desire for the restoration of play. Witnessing play appears to spark playfulness. Play is contagious. The education and prioritization of play appears to affect each part of (re)claiming play. The awareness of the preciousness of life also appears to be a great catalyst for play. It appears that events that bring human beings closer to the awareness of mortality and the ephemeral nature of life, perhaps briefly inspire one to seek meaning, love, and joy. There are few things more
holistically meaningful, lovely, and joyful than play. Thereby, the human condition brings one closer to play, and play brings one closer to the human condition.

Individuals have agency over play for themselves, their families, and their communities. Through exercising that agency, they take part in the radical act of self and community love that is reclaiming play. Overall, this study has demonstrated the human drive for and resilience of play.
Coda

Vignette no. 3: A Final Story. Learning that I was pregnant the first time was not a pleasant discovery. The weeks that followed were challenging. I grappled with insecurity in whether I could be a capable mother. My own mother moved to another continent from me when I was still an infant. I felt immature and unprepared. My plans for continuing to learn French and to start graduate school seemed out of reach. I prided myself on being responsible and felt that becoming pregnant was the direct result of my own irresponsibility. Darryl, with my encouragement, had just resigned from his permanent teaching position with the Regina Catholic School Division. I was excited for him to have more time to pursue his passion and eventually work with a school board that more closely aligned with his beliefs. Days before I found out I was pregnant, I turned down an offer from my principal who wanted to advocate for me gaining a continuing contract. My response to him had been that I wanted something temporary and less permanent. I wanted more freedom.

Alongside some self-scrutiny and emotional challenges came navigating close relationships. I was nervous of telling my parents in case they would be disappointed. I was nervous of telling Darryl’s parents in case their inevitable excitement would painfully contrast with my own disappointment. I resented that baby. As ashamed as I was to feel all the ugly feelings I had, I still felt them.

When I was 12 weeks pregnant, Darryl and I went to a prenatal appointment to hear the heartbeat for the first time. Within a matter of weeks, we had transitioned from being disappointed to enchanted. The world sparkled. Somehow it seemed even more delightful that this was a surprise. I felt a deep sense of gratitude for everything that I had: a large, dependable family here in Regina; a new continuing contract with benefits, including maternity leave, after a
revisit to my principal’s office; a loving partner; and our own home. I was grateful that Darryl and I had the opportunity to speak openly about possibly terminating the pregnancy. I could have had a safe, legal, free abortion should I have chosen to. Having that choice affected how I may have transitioned into motherhood with that child. Although I initially resented that pregnancy, the option to terminate it offered me a sense of control that was otherwise absent.

We found out at this 12-week appointment that I had miscarried. Actually, not only did I miss the carrying but I missed the miscarrying. I had what is called a “missed miscarriage,” meaning there were no symptoms of anything having gone wrong during the pregnancy. I carefully watched my doctor’s face as he tried, for an eternity, but ultimately failed to find a heartbeat. He recommended immediate surgery since I was at risk for infection and possible future fertility challenges. I cancelled a flight to Paris that was leaving the next morning and had surgery three days later.

I was strangely elated. We were told we could try again for another pregnancy within two months, which we planned to do. On a run, I considered all the things that had happened over the past few months. I contemplated how nice it would feel to have a sense of prediction and control over a pregnancy from start to finish and to have some more time to prepare. Two days later I was back in the hospital with increasing pain and fever; the surgeon had unknowingly punctured a hole through my uterus and had left too much tissue inside. With a perforation and infection, we were told future fertility had been compromised and that future miscarriage in the event of pregnancy was also a greater possibility. I waited two more days for surgery to repair the perforation and repeat the failed initial surgery. I cancelled my seat on a rescheduled flight to Paris that was leaving the next morning. I was relieved that at least I had not discovered these complications alone in a foreign country with little travel insurance.
Returning home, I was miserable. It was summer and, thankfully, neither Darryl nor I were working. The days stretched longer than I thought possible and I grew further ashamed of my initial feelings towards the pregnancy. At one point I had said out loud to Darryl that I hoped I would miscarry; this would terminate the pregnancy without me having to have an abortion. I became aware that by the time I had grown excited about the pregnancy, the embryo had already stopped developing. I was amazed at my growing obsession with what might happen to a human life when it dies, and again at the guilt of having carelessly created and destroyed it within my own body. I saw how well Darryl’s devout Christianity turned resolved atheism served him in this circumstance, and was frustrated with my own agnosticism and the confusion it brought. I tried and failed to be unsentimental; I felt that I had lost the chance to have something that I didn’t deserve.

My aunt asked Darryl and me to care for her two small dogs at this time and we agreed. I only now realize that this proved to be quite so healing because of the puppies’ obvious need to turn us into playmates for several days. Our responsibility to walk them, groom them, feed them, clean up after them, and play with them was a much needed comic relief. The dogs were hilarious in their uselessness and a pleasure to have around.

Darryl and I somehow fell further in love. Although he was upset the night I told him of the pregnancy, he was remarkably kind and loving, as is his character. We had grown excited together about the baby. Although my family had known and enjoyed Darryl’s company throughout the six or so years that we had been together, his actions and care surrounding my pregnancy and surgeries affirmed their admiration and respect. We became a family.

I had been saving money since the fall to spend my summer in the south of France taking some courses. Due to my health and time delays, I had to cancel my participation in the
program. Being a double-income, no-kids couple with roommates at the time, Darryl and I both had some disposable income. Darryl suggested that instead of flying to France on my own after these complications, we could go together for a holiday. One of Darryl’s favourite cousins was living in Switzerland with his spouse and they were happy to take us hiking for a few days. A close friend insisted that we contact some of his family in Aix-en-Provence and they were eager to have us stay for a couple of days.

We spent the last few weeks of summer in Europe staying in each city or town for long stretches of time. We wandered around, got to know some family and friends, drank wine, and played cards. It was play: that is to say, time spent with no other intention than to waste it well. As romantic and lovely as this trip was, I was amazed at how frequently, though briefly, I would become overwhelmed by sadness for our small loss and my fear of struggling to have another pregnancy. I watched how people interacted with their children and how parenting appeared so different from what I had been exposed to. I people-watched and I closely observed the people we had the pleasure of spending time in close quarters with. Parents seemed undefined by parenthood. Small children in Switzerland passed by us on treacherous hikes with no support while we clutched onto the side of the mountain.

People spoke of work infrequently; work was clearly not a source of pride. People valued play. I noticed how different and refreshing this was. People sat to eat their food and drink their coffee. Our favourite cafe did not have to-go cups. Adults appeared constantly at play.

This story is longer than I intended for it to be, and I resisted writing it at all. Even though I am confident and happy in these identities, it goes against an active effort I’ve made in some spaces to limit attention to my womanhood and new motherhood in order to be offered the respect that is given without question to some people who lack these identities.
Because my first prenatal appointment was on the last working day of the school year for teachers, Darryl and I were both off of work for the summer. We had the opportunity to connect and heal during this time. I leaned on what I discovered was a strong, extensive network through family and friends. My community supported me; I was able to choose to either terminate or continue with my pregnancy. I received mostly excellent health care with no out-of-pocket costs. My race, spoken language, post-secondary education, and ability to have my partner with me offered me a sense of belonging even in doctor’s offices and in the hospital. While travelling I was exposed to childcare systems and a respect for play that differs widely from what one generally observes in Canada. My mental health was intact, and I had benefits should I have sought out professional support.

Awareness of the Preciousness of Life

At the pinnacle of this story is an awareness that these experiences offered me that seems to set people apart from one another in terms of play: the awareness of the preciousness of human life. The data appeared to categorize people into being in touch with this awareness or not at the time of our conversations (for it appears not necessarily consistent, but rather fluid depending on a number of factors) and there seemed to be a clear correlation between people who have this awareness and their abilities as play facilitators.

At first, I was limited by my own experiences and was seeing that parents who brought up either fertility challenges or miscarriages were generally facilitating more family play than those who had not had these same challenging transitions towards parenthood. Although this appears to still be somewhat true, it’s quite limited by my confirmation bias. While I had initially only made a connection between “miscarriage/ fertility challenges” and facilitating play, I eventually realized my mistake in not seeing the larger picture.
The people who had or whose partners had experienced miscarriages and fertility challenges had a strong sense of the precious nature of human life that was potentially in part born out of their difficult and particularly intentional pathways to parenthood. Chantel, for example, is someone whose playfulness I greatly admired. She shared, “I love to play but prior to having kids I was terrible at taking time to play. I wanted kids for so long so I think that’s maybe part of it.” But of course, awareness of the precious and precarious nature of human life can be born in many ways. People appear to gain a closer sense of the precious nature of human life through the death of a loved one, attending a funeral or wedding, holding a newborn, losing a pet, or having a near-death experience, amongst many other things. Good art can bring us closer to this realization. As strange yet beautiful as it is, play can bring us closer to the sense that our lives should be well spent. In this sense, play inspires play. Play brings us closer to our humanness. Chantel recalls how she was inspired by a mother she saw playing in a park with her children:

“I’ll never forget and I really wish I would have stopped this mother she was playing the most intense game of tag on this play structure with her kid and then like half an hour later she’s still playing and there’s ten kids now engaged and I wish I would have been like, “hey you’re awesome” and in my mind I remember committing to [my son] that day like, “I will be that mom. I will be the mom who is running around and playing a crazy game of tag with you and not sitting in my car on my phone while you go and play in the park.” And I am that mom now. I have been since I saw her. So, I really wish I would have said something to her. She changed everything.

Play is born from play. Play is contagious.
As mentioned, I’ve begun to view each individual as being at a set point on their own continuum of awareness of the preciousness of human life. The point each being is at constantly changes depending on their circumstances and experiences. It is constructed by their experiences and circumstance and helps construct their reality. Being at the low end of this scale would be a barrier to play, where one would take life for granted. It might be dangerous: perhaps my Aunt Pauline was here. Many things can put one on the lower end of this scale: even, as I feel we see frequently, busyness. It appears that if we are consumed by work, it is easy to lose sight of the passing of time. The commercialization of human time corrupts our ability to take advantage of the slippery nature of time. At the very high end of the scale where one is extremely aware of the preciousness of human life, I sense that there is a high level of anxiety. If I were to be able to select exactly where I would want to be, it would be in the top third section of this continuum.

Completing this thesis, listening to and analysing people’s playfulness has certainly raised my position on this continuum. This awareness has not only been a catalyst for play but has informed some decisions I’ve made that will affect the trajectory of my life. I have, at least for the time being, decided to commit myself to play: to understanding it and how to facilitate it on an individual, family, and community level.

Nicole appears to be in a process of reconciling with what she describes as an abusive upbringing and how this has stolen part of her childhood. It appears that Nicole has a deep awareness of the precious nature of human life and childhood that leads to a prioritization of play as she continues to realize the loss of her childhood through a lack of play. She shares,

A big part of that is healing for me too because I didn’t really get a playful childhood and I just want to impart that to my kids because I feel like it really inhibited my creativity and even my self-confidence as an adult. These are things I’m letting myself do now and
I feel like it’s helping. The more I play with my kids the more creative I am the more self-regulated as a parent I can be and I just see all these different benefits. And…I want my kids to have that from the beginning.
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Appendix A

Interviewing Guide

● Tell me about your typical day that you might spend with your children.
● What facilitates play for you and your family? What helps you play?
● Tell me about how you played growing up.
   ○ Do you think this has informed how your children play?
● Are there any spaces that you visit often, or favourite spaces? Tell me about what brings your family back to this space.
● If you were to think of what, if anything, stops you from going out to public spaces to play, what comes to mind?
● What would help you overcome this obstacle, if anything?
● What barriers do you face to play?
● If you were to think of what prevents your kids from playing at home (including in a backyard, if applicable), what comes to mind?
● What would help you overcome this barrier, if anything?
● Are there any obstacles to play you feel you have already overcome? Tell me about them.
● Tell me about your favourite elements of spaces you have visited as a family.
● Tell me how you travel to playspaces.
● Tell me what you bring with you to a playspace.
● If you’ve had a negative experience in a playspace, raising kids, or being in public, I wonder what stands out about it. If you’re willing to share anything, I’d be interested to hear.
Imagine the perfect scene for you and your children. Tell me about it--where are you?

Who is there? What is everyone doing? What stands out?

- Could you create this scene in real life? Why or why not?
Appendix B
Participant Profile Co-Construction Sample Email

Hi (Participant Name),

Thanks for donating some of your time towards my research. I appreciate it and have gained a lot from our conversation.

I am currently writing the first draft of the thesis. In several weeks I will have a preview for you. I was hoping that over the next few days you could provide some information for me to use in my "participant profile" section of my thesis so that I can provide context around each individual who participates.

If you could reply and answer each of the following questions when you have time, that would be great! (You can add anything else that you feel may affect how you play/ how your upbringing may have affected play.) I know some of these questions may seem irrelevant, but they're all pieces that have shown patterns in how someone and their family (if applicable) plays. If you would prefer not to answer a particular question, feel free to leave it blank. I've answered these questions myself to give you an example of what an answer may be (and it only feels fair since I'm asking quite personal questions.)* You can copy and paste this into a reply to me and delete my answers. Note: I tend to over-write. Your answers don't need to be as long as mine, nor do they need to be as personal. Whatever you're comfortable sharing would be great.

Where were you born?

Where (geographically) did you spend most of your childhood?

How long have you lived in Regina?

What was your family structure growing up? What was your general socio-economic status? Any other information that may be relevant?

What do you do for work (if applicable)?

Who, if anyone, lives in your current home with you and what do they do for work/school at the time of our interview (I don't need names but you are welcome to include them.)

What is the physical nature of your home?
Is there anything exceptional about anyone that you live with that might affect play in and around your home?

Is there anything else you can think of that may help others understand your unique experiences and worldview towards play?

Thanks, (Participant name). Let me know if you have any questions about anything!

*Note: My own responses were removed from the appendix*
The University of Regina Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above-named research project. The proposal was found to be acceptable on ethical grounds. The principal investigator has the responsibility for any other administrative or regulatory approvals that may pertain to this research project, and for ensuring that the authorized research is carried out according to the conditions outlined in the original protocol submitted for ethics review. This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above time period provided there is no change in experimental protocol, or related documents.

Any significant changes to your proposed method, procedures or related documents should be reported to the Chair for Research Ethics Board consideration in advance of its implementation.

ONGOING REVIEW REQUIREMENTS
In order to receive annual renewal, a status report must be submitted to the REB Chair for Board consideration within one month of the current expiry date each year the study remains open, and upon study completion. Please refer to the following website for the renewal and closure forms:
https://www.uregina.ca/research/for-faculty-staff/ethics-compliance/human/ethicsforms.html

Chris Street PhD
REB Chair
University of Regina