Exploring children’s experiences of play and recreation in local neighbourhoods using walking interviews

Karinda Tolland, Carol Barron and Yvonne Corcoran, Dublin City University

Correspondences to karinda.tolland2@mail.dcu.ie

Introduction

This article draws from a larger ethnographic study that explores the physical activity play and play spaces in which children and young people (aged 8-16 years) growing up in the Republic of Ireland actively engage. The study uses a range of rights-based and child-centred participatory methods, one of which is walking interviews (Percy-Smith, 2002; Cele, 2006). This article reports on the findings from the children’s walking interviews, whereby the child went with the researcher on a child-directed walk around their local neighbourhood. This method encourages children to provide their views and knowledge of the spaces and places in the neighbourhood that are important to them (Clark & Emmel, 2010). During the walk, children were asked about the spaces and places where their physical activity play and recreation occurs. They were given a digital camera to document visual images of the places that were a focus of conversation during the walk. The objective of the walking interview method was to obtain an in-depth and contextual understanding of children’s play and recreation practices in local neighbourhoods and the wider built environment.

The findings from the walking interviews

In total, five child-led walking interviews were conducted (girls = 3; boys = 2). The children were aged between 11 and 13 years old. The walking interviews took place during the spring and summer months between July 2014 and June 2015, in urban and rural neighbourhoods in the Republic of Ireland. The distance walked ranged from 2.54 to 4.35 kilometres, and the duration of the walks varied between 45 to 68 minutes. During the walking interviews children produced a total of 193 photographs (females = 145; males = 48), (spring = 78; summer = 115).
The walking interviews produced data in the form of interview transcripts, photographs, GPS maps, and field notes. Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase guide to thematic analysis was used on most of the data (except for the GPS data which was used to produce a spatial representation of children’s places for play and recreation in urban and rural neighbourhoods). Thematic analysis identified, analysed and reported patterns (themes and sub-themes) within the data.

The interpretation of the data revealed that children’s personal experiences within specific sites are unique, yet there are similarities in how children utilise these places. The two dominant themes to emerge from the analysis of the data are (1) Children’s independent and interdependent spatial mobility (sub-themes: parental permissions and restrictions; and, accompanied mobility: companions and devices), and (2) Children’s encounters and experiences with people and places (sub-themes: playmates and play spaces close to home; looking outward: the built environment and natural spaces; place feelings and emotions). The final thematic map is presented in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Final Thematic Map**
Theme 1: Children’s independent and interdependent spatial mobility

Theme one presents children’s perspectives on their independent and interdependent spatial mobility. Independent mobility is commonly defined as the freedom of children to travel or move about neighbourhoods without adult supervision (Shaw et al., 2013). Travelling independently using active transport, such as walking and cycling, is considered important for children’s physical and mental health, as well their development as autonomous individuals (Carver et al., 2008; Garrard, 2009; Thompson, 2009). The children in this study played an active role in negotiating with parents on issues surrounding their everyday mobility. This dominant theme is therefore considered alongside some of the interdependencies that children’s spatial mobility involves. The sub-themes include parental permissions and restrictions, and accompanied mobility, which involved, for example, the presence of peers and siblings, and children carrying smart/mobile phone devices while away from home. Children had a deep understanding and awareness of the places in their neighbourhood where they were permitted or restricted, and the facilitators that their everyday independent mobility required, as John (11) explains:

When I ride my bike, I go to the top of the road and down to the end of the road numerous times. Sometimes when I’m allowed, I cycle down to the park. If I’m allowed.

Theme 2: Children’s encounters and experiences with people and places

Theme two reports on children’s encounters and experiences with the people and places in their neighbourhood. Studies show that children mostly value places where they can play, meet and spend time with friends (see Blundell, 2016; Hayward, 2012). Therefore, this theme highlights the social aspects of play, which are closely intertwined with children’s place-based experiences. Children’s favourite places to play, on their own or with friends, and prominent peer gathering areas in the neighbourhood are identified. The sub-themes include: (1) playmates and play spaces close to home; (2) looking outward: the built environment and natural spaces; (3) place feelings and emotions. This dominant theme is strongly linked to the data and reveals rich insights from the children, as they walk through, and talk about, the various spaces and places in their neighbourhoods.

Key Messages from the Findings
The findings presented here describe children’s perspectives on individual, social and physical experiences of play and recreation in local neighbourhoods and the wider built environment. Theme one reports on children’s independent and interdependent spatial mobility. The analysis of the data shows that children’s everyday mobility involves parental negotiations that permit or restrict children’s movement. Children had a deep understanding that age, road traffic and other parental concerns such as those surrounding child abduction and strangers, had significant effects on their mobility. For some, mobility was possible only when accompanied by friends or older siblings. Referring to a private field (Figure 2), where children spent time after school, Orla (11) comments:

My friends don’t go there. I don’t think their parents let them or think it’s safe... But I’m allowed because I’m with my [older] sister and her friends, and they like to hang out there.

Figure 2. Private field. “My friends don’t go there”.

Children also used the presence of friends at specific destinations in their negotiations with parents for greater independence. Friends not only provide companionship in mobility but also offer parents some reassurance and a sense of safety. Children also relied on smart/mobile phone devices to develop and support their spatial mobility. This involved sending a text message on arrival at a destination or communicating new arrangements with parents should the opportunity arise. For instance, Susan (13) spoke about going “up the town” with friends after school, instead of going straight home: “I would let me mum know [via text message]. As long as she knows where I am”. The children in this study valued being able to keep in contact with parents and negotiate with them in ways that support their
developing mobility. The key message in theme one is that children frequently seek opportunities for greater independence and are acutely aware of the interdependencies concerning their everyday mobility.

Theme two describes children’s encounters and experiences with the people and places in their neighbourhood. The findings indicate that the presence of a neighbourhood playmate may be more important than the actual physical play space, with children choosing to stay indoors if a friend was not available for outdoor activities. The type of play activities children engage in are also strongly influenced by the presence of friends. Although John (10) acknowledges that he is “not that good at soccer”, he regularly participates in soccer on the cul-de-sac street where he lives because, “my friends, that live on the same street as me, always want to play”. Children shared their reasons for valuing specific play sites, and for regarding some as favourite places. Eoin (11) values the housing estate communal green where he lives because it was “a lot of fun” to be with a large number of neighbourhood playmates of mixed-age and gender. This facilitates competitive games of soccer, and traditional games like Rounders, British Bulldog and Tip the Can, as well as water fights in the summer. Orla (11) “loved” a secluded tree area on her friends property because it was “top secret” and valued for pretend play activities in an unsupervised place.

Theme two also reports on children’s encounters and experiences as they look outward – beyond the play spaces situated close to home. The findings from this study indicate that public playgrounds are valuable places for pre-adolescents however this is dependent on numerous factors such as the availability of age-appropriate equipment, the provision of multi-purpose play areas, and the size of the play space. Local recreation parks are also considered a favoured place because of the social, physical and psychological benefits associated with such spaces. Children especially valued clustered seating structures within the park because this is where they could gather and spend time with each other away from immediate adult surveillance. Children frequently referred to the natural environment as they walked through local neighbourhoods. River systems and the natural spaces situated alongside riverbanks were of particular importance for seeking refuge and solace from busy
lives, and for swimming (occasionally), catching fish and spotting a variety of wildlife. Lorna (13), referring to a nature-rich and semi-hidden area in the local park (Figure 3), remarks:

We like it here because it’s quiet and it feels like you’re away from everyone. This is our place to come, because here we can just be ourselves.

In the wider built environment, Main Street was a popular neighbourhood destination with coffee houses and fast food eateries identified as prominent youth spaces. A shopping centre complex was also identified as an appropriate place for specific recreational activities (e.g. hanging out, shopping or browsing, going to the cinema). This was especially valued for its convenience and for evading bad weather.

**Figure 3. Nature space. “This is our place to come”**.

The spaces and places in children’s neighbourhoods were mostly associated with positive emotions (e.g. feeling happy, having fun), however some also expressed mixed and negative feelings. This included dissatisfaction with the insufficient play space available or apprehension regarding the volume of cars and the traffic speed in immediate neighbourhoods. Although John (11) raised concerns regarding a “local gang of teenagers”, children generally felt safe to participate in physical activity play and recreational activities in their neighbourhoods, with the presence and familiarity of other children contributing toward this feeling of safety. Children also identified unauthorised places in their local community, which invoked feelings of intrigue and danger (e.g. “haunted” and dilapidated buildings). Such places were enticing, not only for hanging out but also for the risky play opportunities they present.
Conclusion

This study explored children’s experiences of play and recreation in local neighbourhoods and the wider built environment using child-directed walking interviews. The findings revealed how children are active in negotiating with parents on issues surrounding their everyday mobility. The presence of peers and siblings, and carrying mobile phones while away from home, are used to develop and support children’s independent mobility. The research shows that the social aspects of play are closely intertwined with children’s place-based experiences. Children’s favourite places are those where they can play, meet, and spend time with friends, often away from immediate adult surveillance. This research demonstrates the value of the giving voice to children’s perspectives. The walking interviews drew attention to children’s personal experiences and offered privileged insights into their lives and culture. There is a complex interplay of factors shaping children’s physical activity play and recreational activities. It is crucial to understand where and how children play in local neighbourhoods and the wider built environment to inform national policy in this area, and on the needs and rights of children and young people.

References


Authors

- Karinda Tolland is currently completing a PhD with Dublin City University, Ireland. The title of her research: *An ethnographic investigation of physical activity play and the play spaces in which children and young people (8 – 16 years) growing up in the Republic of Ireland actively engage*. Key themes in her work include children’s play, children’s rights, spaces and places for play and recreation, and children as active agents in the research process.

- Dr Carol Barron has over two decades of experience researching children’s play, physical activity and mobility internationally. Dr Barron has published in the field of children’s play and participatory research methodologies with children. Dr Barron is a co-proposer of the current COST Action TD1309 - Play for Children with Disabilities (LUDI) and is currently conducting consultations with children (3-18 years) on their play and recreational needs to inform a county wide (Kildare & Mayo) play policy.
Dr Yvonne Corcoran is an assistant Professor (Children’s Nursing) in the School of Nursing, Psychotherapy and Community Health in Dublin City University (DCU). Yvonne is a Registered Children’s Nurse, General Nurse and Registered Midwife, who worked for many years in the area of paediatric critical care and nurse education. She completed an MSc in Education in 2004 in DCU and completed her PhD at the University of Ulster in April 2017. Her PhD study was a hermeneutic phenomenological study exploring the lived experiences of parents caring for their child who is technology dependent with complex healthcare needs at home. Her current research interests lie broadly in the area of child health, children with complex continuing healthcare needs and research with vulnerable groups in society using qualitative/mixed-method approaches.