

Reimagining Practices of Play: Collaborating with Nottingham communities to support children's social and education development through curiosity-driven play

About the Project

Article 31 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child recognises children's right to play. However, in the UK there is increasing concern about the erosion of play opportunities, increased hostility towards children playing and an ineffectual policy landscape (Play England, 2025).

An extensive body of research details the wide-ranging benefits of play, particularly open-ended curiosity-driven play. These include developing social and communication skills (e.g. building healthy relationships); supporting cognitive development, particularly problem solving and critical thinking; building resilience and an ability to adapt, and positive impacts on health and wellbeing (Bradbury, 2025). Furthermore, established community play venues often become support networks for families; signposting or hosting food banks, clothes banks, or training spaces for employment skills (King 2021).

Nottingham has a rich history of community play with several adventure playgrounds. However, local communities note the decline, closure (e.g. The Venture in St Ann's, Nottingham Play Forum) or inaccessibility of these spaces (Skelding, 2025). In addition to limited urban play spaces, top-down educational policy decisions and assessment-driven agendas have reduced the time children have to play in school (Bradbury & Hare, 2025). This also impacts all children across schooling. Continuous play provision has important educational and social advantages, contributing to the disruption of cycles of educational inequality. Teachers admit that their knowledge about play and ability to implement play methodologies is limited. While some external providers offer play programmes, they are unaffordable for many local schools.

Therefore, this project seeks to explore how all children's right to play and learn through curiosity-driven play can be re-established. It contributes towards Nottingham City Council's goal of being a child-friendly city by working with community partner Ignite!. As an organisation, Ignite! takes a curiosity-first approach to support the creative development of young people, enabling them to flourish. This project brings together children, family, caregivers and teachers from a local under-served primary school to be drawn from Ignite!'s network, constituting a 'school community'.

About the Project

Using a Playful Participatory Methodology it will investigate how the rich cultures of play from diverse communities shape inclusive play practice and charts the outcomes of playful encounters to inform community-led models of play provision that can be embedded in schools and policy.

This project has been co-created with and is supported by researchers from Nottingham Trent University, the University of Nottingham, and partners at Ignite!. The successful candidate will be enrolled at the University of Nottingham.

Project Aims

The overall aims of this project are :

- To investigate how children's right to play, as enshrined in Article 31 of the UNCRC, can be meaningfully re-established in primary school and community settings.
- To explore how diverse cultural traditions and community histories of play can inform inclusive and locally relevant curiosity-driven play.
- To document and analyse the outcomes of curiosity-driven playful encounters in terms of educational engagement, social connection and children's development.
- Co-produce a toolkit of resources to support the facilitation of inclusive and culturally responsive curiosity-driven play.

NOTE: The successful candidate for this project will be required to undergo a formal Disclosure and Barring Services check.

Supervisory Team

1. Lead Academic Supervisor: [Dr Kerryn Dixon \(University of Nottingham\)](#)
2. Academic Co-Supervisor(s): [Dr Aaron Bradbury \(Nottingham Trent University\)](#)
3. Academic Co-Supervisor(s): [Dr Jonathan Halls \(University of Nottingham\)](#)
4. Community Supervisor(s): [Megan Shore \(Ignite Futures\)](#)

Key Details

Host University:	University of Nottingham
School / department:	<u>Social Sciences</u>
Start date:	1st April 2026
Financial offer:	Tuition fees covered in full (worth approx. £15k-17 across full PhD programme). Monthly stipend based on £20,780 per annum, pro rata, tax free.
Working hours	Full-time (minimum 37.5 hrs per week)
Working Style:	Primarily in-person at host university. Flexible working supported. Working pattern to be agreed between successful candidate and lead supervisor.

Competencies

Collaboratory Core Competencies		
Category	Competency	Assessed: Application (A), Interview (I)
Comprehension and evaluation	Strong understanding of the project and its subject matter.	A / I
	Analytical, researcher mindset with keen attention to detail.	A / I
	Communicate complex concepts with clarity and precision.	A / I
	Able to identify connections, patterns, gaps, and irregularities in information/data.	I
	Able to interpret data/information confidently with logic and empathy to derive meaning.	I
Social and emotional	Demonstrable experience of responding effectively changing contexts, information and demands.	A
	Ability to persevere in the face of challenges/failures and to remain constructive in developing solutions.	A
	Demonstrable passion for learning with clear drive and curiosity to undertake this specific research project.	A / I
	Willingness to immerse oneself in the research subject matter and make a contribute to new knowledge through a PhD.	A / I
	Strong desire to make a positive community impact through the research.	A / I
	Willingness to think deeply about complex concepts and engage with academic ideas and theory.	A / I
Preparedness and potential for success	Experience of working, collaborating and communicating effectively with different stakeholders.	A
	High level of self-motivation and ability to work with minimal guidance.	A / I
	Strong organisational and time-management skills with the ability to balance and prioritise multiple tasks.	A / I
	Ability to identify potential challenges and complexities and thoughtfully consider possible solutions.	A / I
	Able to identify the technical, personal, or professional skills required for a task and take action to develop these.	A / I

Competencies

Collaboratory Core Competencies			
Category		Competency	Assessed: Application (A), Interview (I)
Community Context		Genuine desire to undertake community-engaged research over more traditional approaches to research.	A
		Understand the impact of and need for the inclusion of diverse experiences and points of view in research.	A / I
		Appreciation/understanding of the importance of community insight and experience in the generation of new knowledge.	A / I
		Awareness/understanding of the broader societal context related to the subject matter of the project.	A / I

Project Specific Competencies			
Essential	Assessed: Application (A), Interview (I)	Desirable	Assessed: Application (A), Interview (I)
Experience working with children and/or young people from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds	A / I	Some familiarity with the field of early childhood and the influence of disciplinary traditions informing it	A / I
Understanding of the broader debates and policy positions around play and its associated pedagogies in education	A / I	Developed skills in documenting and interpreting play through a range of qualitative methods or approaches	A / I
Ability to work playfully and creatively, to listen carefully and respectfully, and adapt to community needs	A / I	Experience designing or creating environments that support open-ended, creative play	A / I
A commitment to improving educational experiences for all children	A/I	Experience with co-producing/collaborations to create resources or materials.	A/I

References for Further Reading

- Baker, M., Krechevsky, M., Ertel, K., Ryan, J., Wilson, D., & Mardell, B. (2016). Playful Participatory Research: An emerging methodology for developing a pedagogy of play. Nine Edmonton. <https://pz.harvard.edu/resources/toward-a-pedagogy-of-play>
- Bradbury, A., Hare, M. (2025). Play policy and power: a report reviewing literature - early childhood education in the UK <https://www.early-years-reviews.com/copy-of-publications>
- Children's Alliance. (2023). A plan for play. <https://childrensalliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/A-PLAN-FOR-PLAYFINAL-ILLUSTRATED.pdf>
- Hendry, H., Teszenyi, E., Rodriguez-Leon, L., Maynes, M. L., Dorrian, J., & Edwards, T. (2025). Tensions, assumptions and situated ethics: attuning to the unpredictability of ethics in early childhood research participation. European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 33(3), 483-496. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2024.2387570>
- Jones, P., El Gemayel, S., Salema, Y., & Flewitt, R. (2020). How are the relationships between researching play and children changing? In S. Rees (Ed.), Routledge international handbook of play, therapeutic play and play therapy. Routledge. <https://espace.mmu.ac.uk/626935/>
- Play England. (2024). State of play: An interim report from Raising the Nation Play Commission. <https://www.playengland.org.uk/newsblog/the-play-commissions-interim-report-a-watershed-moment-for-play-policy>
- Play Wales & Learning Through Landscapes. (2022). Older children play too. <https://ltl.org.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2022/05/older-children-play-too-playwales.pdf>
- Ryan, Z. (2024). Playful frameworks of research: Play and its potential in researching learning alongside youth. In Proceedings of the 18th International Conference of the Learning Sciences-ICLS 2024, pp. 809-816. International Society of the Learning Sciences. *ICLS2024_809-816.pdf
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- Thibault, J. (2023). The new sociology of childhood and children's rights. Canadian Journal of Children's Rights Revue Canadienne Des Droits Des Enfants, 10(2). <https://doi.org/10.22215/cjcr.v10i2.4477>