



Promoting Play and Creating Playful Cities: A Profile of the Hummingbird Children's Centre¹

The demand for a rights based approach to play is contained in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 31 as well as in the African Charter of the Rights and Welfare of the Child Article 12. In South Africa, the importance of play is highlighted in the general principles of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 in Chapter 2(6) (e). It is also found in the objectives and strategies of the National Plan of Action for children in South Africa 2012-2017 which particularly suggests that each community has safe and well maintained play areas. However, as was highlighted in the challenges to play identified by South Africa in their submission to the UNCRC concerning General Comment 17 on play, South Africa lacks safe and public play spaces. The report also mentioned the lack of access to natural outdoor environments.

This case study profiles the Hummingbird Children's Centre and looks at how their play programmes address the lack of play spaces for children in South Africa. It looks at their successes and challenges as well as possible policy implications. The Hummingbird Children's Centre is a play and Early Childhood Education (ECE) organisation that promotes [Playwork](#) and advocates for the urgent need to create stimulating environments for children. By bringing together local knowledge, artistic practices and progressive playwork and ECE approaches, it contributes to its vision of more 'Playful Cities', which are vital to children's holistic development and a creative, innovative and resilient society. Working towards this vision, Hummingbird has established the following:

- **Street and outdoor 'Pop – Up + Play' events**

Inspired by the international pop-up playground movement, play sessions have been organised in inner-city Johannesburg parks and at street festivals. Temporary, mobile playscapes, which focus on '[loose parts](#)' play, are created to allow for open-ended and child-directed play.

¹ This case study has been developed by Andrea Royeppen, Research co-ordinator at PAN:Children.

- ***Working toward South Africa's first community-based adventure playground***

Based on the capacity built up in the *Pop-Up + Play* events, and a pilot holiday club run in partnership with Region F Sports and Recreation and Community Development, Hummingbird is in the process of securing a permanent site to house South Africa's first [adventure playground](#). This is envisioned as a space dedicated solely to children's play, where skilled playworkers facilitate the ownership, development and design of the space by the children. Outdoor play activities seldom condoned in other spaces— such as digging or building and demolishing dens – are provided for and encouraged. Once registered, children are able to enjoy free and open access, after school and during the holidays. Operating as an accountable independent voluntary association, with committee members from the community and links to local government and CBOs; the adventure playground not only provides children with creative play opportunities, but also supports working families, after school and during holidays, when children are most at risk in the city.

- ***Improving public play facilities***

Hummingbird has been consulting with Johannesburg City Parks and Zoo (JCPZ) on playground design and provision, advocating for more natural playscapes that support children's need for co-operative play, creativity, problem solving, challenge and risk. Planning for an exciting new playground in central Johannesburg is currently underway, in partnership with [PLAY AFRICA Children's Museum](#).

Successes

- In all its play initiatives, Hummingbird has enjoyed healthy voluntary participation, and received positive feedback that reveals a high demand from children and caregivers for out-of-school play programmes.
- Hummingbird has successfully put play on the agenda of JCPZ who have been receptive to new ideas on play provision and design.
- Artists, musicians and other professionals have been drawn into the sphere of playwork, interacting with children at *Pop-Up + Play* events.
- Opportunities for research into the history and sociology of play in Africa have been identified and pursued in consultation with academics from South African universities.

Challenges

- The *ad hoc* nature of the Pop-Up + Play sessions and the lack of a permanent site has made it difficult to register children, to gather data and to build relationships with caregivers and thus secure greater community ownership of playwork projects. This reiterates the need for formalised public sites of play.
- Some government departments have been slow to recognize the importance of play and have been less supportive of play initiatives compared to others who have been more receptive, such as JCPZ.
- Children that participate are sometimes undernourished and some of the budget for play materials has to go to providing food.
- Caregivers often have negative perceptions of outdoor play and are reticent to allow children to participate in the types of messy and risky play which are vital to children's holistic development.

Lessons Learned

- Communities must take ownership of public spaces and dedicate them to children's play. Although play is free, it requires creativity and effort from adults to create the right kind of enabling environment for children to engage in meaningful play.
- At local government level a more integrated approach to implementing play programmes is crucial
- The empirical outcomes of play initiatives in a public space are harder to measure than the outcomes in schools. Children's play activities are more difficult to document and interpret

Gaps in the policy environment

- There is a lack of public space allocated to resident associations and CBOs for the provision of play. The process of allocation of underutilised spaces needs to be more efficient and user-friendly.
- Urban planning and legislation needs to be more child-centred. E.g., how does the new bylaw on the rubber surfacing of playgrounds benefit children?
- Playwork has a dynamic view of the child and a deep understanding of play: we need a paradigm shift from the current childcare model towards playwork.
- School-based play programmes can change the culture of play supervision in schools and encourage more free play, for example through the distribution of 'loose parts' kits and by training teachers on the playwork principles. This has a proven impact on academic performance.

© PAN: Children

The opinions expressed herein and any statements represented as fact do not necessarily reflect the views and policies of the HSRC or UNICEF nor should they be assumed to do so.

With an identification of PAN: Children as source, the document may, however, be freely reviewed, abstracted, reproduced and translated, in part or in whole, but not for sale nor for use in conjunction with commercial purposes.

Any comments on this case study can be sent to children.pan@hsrc.ac.za

This case study has been subject to review by the Hummingbird Children's Centre

First published: March 2015

For more information on PAN: Children, please visit our website:
<http://children.pan.org.za/>