



Holistic Learning, Emotional Well-Being, and Sustainable Development Action in LESPLAY (Learn, Speak, and Play)

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Abstract This chapter explores the impact of holistic learning experiences on children’s academic and professional outcomes, prioritising emotional well-being and multipotentiality. Through the LESPLAY pilot programme, aligned with the Follow Your Heart (FYH) model, the study advocates for transformative education in response to global challenges. Addressing the paradox of contemporary education systems, which produce future human capital while neglecting children’s rights, the FYH model catalyses transformative approaches. LESPLAY, conceived with a recognition of these limitations, addresses not only their influence on creativity, social well-being, and entrepreneurship but also the economic realities within its context. Informed by research supporting socio-emotional learning, child participation, and co-creation, the study aligns with the citizen action agenda for the Sustainable Development

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G. Panieri et al. (eds.), *Emotional and Ecological Literacy for a More Sustainable Society*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-56772-8_4

Goals (Agenda 2030). Drawing from the encounter between FYH and LESPLAY, it offers a unique perspective on projects inspiring positive change. The chapter discusses methodologies, LESPLAY's origins, its convergence with FYH, and the conceptual underpinnings of children's climate actions, emphasising participation and knowledge co-creation. The research, employing qualitative analysis and participatory action research from 2018 to 2021, highlights LESPLAY's child rights-based, holistic approach. It underscores the potential of a childist approach in climate education, empowering children as active agents in shaping sustainable solutions.

Keywords Children's rights-based approach · Climate education · Emotional intelligence · Participation · Multipotentiality

1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter contributes to the advancement of knowledge by investigating the impact of holistic learning experiences on children's academic and professional outcomes, with a specific emphasis on emotional well-being and multipotentiality. Drawing insights from the pilot programme LESPLAY,¹ which centres on children's active engagement in after-school activities, the chapter explores methodologies and approaches aligned with the Follow Your Heart (FYH)² model and shows how such approaches can serve as a catalyst for challenging conventional educational structures, particularly those that limit the potential for meaningful impact in the lives of young individuals. The chapter also explores how

¹ LESPLAY is the acronym for Learn, Speak, and Play, where the power of play meets the beauty of potential. See the programme website LESPLAY Project page (<https://sodei.org/learn-speak-play-lesplay/>), last access September 20, 2023.

² Follow Your Heart: the school for multipotentialites is a co-created 3-part resource targeting multipotential children, educators, and researchers. Initiated by Valentina Russo (co-author and illustrator) who had the original idea to create a learning space that fosters multiple talents, creativity, and emotional intelligence; coordinated and authored by Margherita Paola Poto (research professor and coordinator of ECO_CARE) and Emily Margaret Murray (global health researcher and team member of ECO_CARE). See Murray, E., Poto, M. P., & Russo, V. (2022). Follow Your Heart. The school for multipotentialites, La Bussola, ISBN 979-12-5474-218-1.

by aligning to child rights-based, inclusive, and knowledge co-creation approaches, LESPLAY empowers children to contribute to sustainability initiatives.

The paradox of contemporary education systems, simultaneously producing future human capital while neglecting the rights of children,³ forms a backdrop for this exploration. Amidst global concerns regarding education access and deficiencies in equipping children for success, this research supports calls for transformative approaches that challenge conventional educational structures.⁴ The FYH model serves as a catalyst, challenging heavily structured and linear approaches that limit the potential of meaningful impact of young individuals.⁵ LESPLAY, conceived with a recognition of these limitations, addresses not only their influence on creativity, social well-being, and entrepreneurship⁶ but also the economic realities within its context.

Evidence from research has shown the benefits of nurturing children's social and emotional learning and indicates a growing shift towards more humanistic, holistic, and socio-emotional approaches to learning.⁷ Informal learning environments, especially those incorporating play and enjoyable activities, have been seen to be instrumental in children's holistic development.⁸ The chapter aligns with the citizen action agenda for advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (Agenda 2030), emphasising multipronged and inclusive approaches to unravel sustainable

³ Biswas, T. (2023).

⁴ 'Education is a human right,' UN Summit Adviser says, urging action to tackle 'crisis of access, learning and relevance'—United Nations Sustainable Development, <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2022/09/education-is-a-human-right-un-summit-advisor-says-urging-action-to-tackle-crisis-of-access-learning-and-relevance/>, last access September 26, 2023.

⁵ Murray, E., Poto, M. P., & Russo, V. (2022). *Follow Your Heart. The school for multipotentialites*, La Bussola, ISBN 979-12-5474-218-1.

⁶ Ibid. (see footnote 4).

⁷ Cefai, C., & Cooper, P. (2009). *Promoting emotional education: Engaging children and young people with social, emotional and behavioral difficulties*. J. Kingsley Publishers.

⁸ Lester, S., & Russell, W. (2010). *Children's right to play: An examination of the importance of play in the lives of children worldwide*. The Hague, Netherlands: Bernard van Leer Foundation; Bourdillon, M. (2011). A challenge for globalized thinking: How does children's work relate to their development? *South African Review of Sociology*, 42(1), 97–115.

solutions for the complex environmental and social challenges faced by young people daily.⁹

Inspired by the encounter between FYH and LESPLAY, two projects applying different yet similar methods with the common goal of inspiring young people to effect positive change, this chapter presents a unique perspective. The author's encounter with FYH during an interdisciplinary workshop on Ocean Interconnectedness underscored the interconnectedness of global challenges. The character Cora's journey in FYH¹⁰ resonated with the engagement of LESPLAY participants in promoting environmental sustainability in Cameroon.

After setting the stage in this section, the chapter proceeds to a discussion on the research methods and sources employed. The subsequent focus on LESPLAY's origins, philosophy, and methodological approaches provides readers with a clear understanding of the programme's conceptual foundations. The narrative then proceeds towards the convergence of LESPLAY and FYH, delving into the significance of social and emotional learning (SEL) and multipotentialities within the context of LESPLAY. The exploration of conceptual underpinnings related to young people's climate and sustainability actions, emphasising participation, co-creation, and childist approaches, enriches the discourse. The chapter concludes by highlighting results stemming from LESPLAY's inclusive and co-created actions, emphasising the collective and multipotential voices of children as crucial in advocacy for sustainability causes.

⁹ Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Department of Economic and Social Affairs (<https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>), last access September 26, 2023.

¹⁰ Cora is an illustrated character in FYH book. Her character sets the stage in the 3-parts resource where her worries about growing up and societal influence, subsequent discovery of what it means to be a 'multipotentialite' and eventual connection with nature are perfectly illustrated to open the discussions on the FYH methodological approaches and teaching philosophy. See Murray, E. M., & Poto, M. P. (2023). Co-creation of educational spaces and curricula to develop an ecology of participation: An example from Follow Your Heart in Lohse, E. J., Poto, M. P., Coproduction of knowledge in Climate Governance, Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2022, ISBN 978-3-8305-5538-4.

2 METHODS

This chapter employs a qualitative analysis based on participatory action research¹¹ for which the author carried out at various intervals from 2018 to 2021.¹² Upon developing the LESPLAY concept whose aim was to provide an alternative learning platform for children to explore multipotentialities, develop skills and talents, and during this period, the author immersed himself into the afterschool activities organised by SODEI in the Southwest region of Cameroon, gaining first-hand insights into how participants fostered emotional well-being and multipotentiality.¹³ He also engaged with participants in activities and observed their active participation in creative learning through peer-to-peer, mentoring, arts and presentations of various kinds. Programme reports for LESPLAY were also analysed for insights on reflections from participant and facilitators. A close review of the FYH book was conducted to gain a deep insight into the methodologies and approaches referenced in this chapter.

The activities that resulted to this paper were conducted with due regard to applicable ethical considerations. Research and related activities with children within the context of armed conflict presupposes specific considerations.¹⁴ The confidentiality and anonymity of all participants was assured and informed consent obtained for all tools applied. Relevant information such as age and gender were collected during this process but only nicknames for the participants are used in this paper.¹⁵ The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) Article 36 is to the effect that children must not be harmed or exploited through taking part in research or related activities. SODEI, the organisation under which the

¹¹ Participatory Action Research (PAR) is concerned with an agenda for social change that involves pooling knowledge to define or resolve a problem (Cathy McDonald, 2012). PAR is viewed as “systematic and orientated around analysis of data whose answers require the gathering and analysis of data and the generation of interpretations directly tested in the field of action” (Greenwood & Levin, 1998, p. 122).

¹² See LESPLAY pilot report, <https://sodei.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/LESPLAY.pdf>, last access October 11, 2023.

¹³ See LESPLAY pilot report (see footnote 12).

¹⁴ Ennew, J., with Abebe, T., Bangyani, R., Karapituck, P., Kjørholt, A. T., & Noonsup, T. (2009) *The right to be properly researched. How to do rights-based scientific research with children*. Black on White Publications, Knowing Children.

¹⁵ Driskell, D. (2002) *Creating better cities with children and youth: A manual for participation*. UNESCO and Earthscan Publications Ltd.

PA research was conducted has in place safeguarding policy and guidelines to which all LESPLAY facilitators adhere.¹⁶

3 UNVEILING LESPLAY

The concept of LESPLAY was born during a field trip to Cameroon in late 2018 when the author was researching about young peoples' participation in decision-making within family and school systems. The research was conducted with children in the English-speaking regions of Cameroon who have been experiencing disruptions in normal functioning of school due to the so-called "Anglophone crisis" which broke out in late 2016.¹⁷ The young participants involved in the research, whose education was disrupted by conflict, all expressed their desire to be in school, to learn and play with their peers. Based on their feedback and subsequent meetings with some of the children involved in the research, the concept of LESPLAY was born. The aim was to provide a platform to empower children and young people by advancing social and emotional learning and recognising and nurturing their innate skills and multipotentials. LESPLAY is more than just a project; it's a holistic learning experience that celebrates individuality, creativity, and personal growth through interactive and enjoyable activities.

The outbreak of violence in the English-speaking regions of Cameroon in September 2016 forced thousands of children of school going age out of school. About 100 schools were destroyed, 90% of primary and 77% secondary schools closed down impacting about 900,000 children during

¹⁶ Safeguarding Policy and Guidelines (As amended 2021) Solidarity and Development Initiative (SODEI), <https://sodei.org/safeguarding-policy/>, last access October 11, 2023.

¹⁷ The so-called Anglophone has a long historical origin rooted in Cameroon's colonial history and heritage. The recent conflict started with a 'sit-in strike' initiated by lawyers on the 11 of October 2016 and later joined by teachers a month later. The action was aimed at protesting against perceived assimilation of the Anglophone education and legal traditions inherited from the British. Wider protests soon broke across the entire region against alleged systemic marginalisation of the English-speaking minority and has since morphed into a complex socio-political conflict. School boycotts has remained one of the main weapons used by the separatist groups to mount pressure on the government and call for international attention. See Human Rights Watch Report (December 15, 2021). Retrieved from Cameroon: Armed Separatists' Attack on Education, Human Rights Watch (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/12/15/cameroon-armed-separatists-attack-education>), last access November 26, 2023.

the peak of the crisis in 2019.¹⁸ The crisis resulted in decreased enrolment and an increase in the number of out-of-school children, and consequently jeopardising the economic and social development. The effects of the crisis only exacerbated the already existing problems of poor classroom conditions, inadequate student to teacher ratio, limited student follow-up, inadequate learning materials, stress-filled learning environments affecting children's learning.¹⁹ LESPLAY emerged as a citizen action to contribute to overcoming these barriers to access to quality education and opportunities for young people, grounded on a child rights-based, holistic approach.

3.1 *LESPLAY: A Child Rights-Based Approach*

LESPLAY like FYH addresses the deficiencies of contemporary education systems by providing an opportunity for SEL and exploration of the multipotentials, to better prepare children and young people for contemporary global challenges. It was originally aimed at children experiencing disruptions in normal functioning of schools due to conflict, providing an alternative platform to engage them in creative informal learning and a safe space for peer interaction and play. A child rights-based approach was applied as a foundation based on the CRC framework of norms, and as an inclusive and participatory process with an outcome to empower young people, provide the opportunity to explore and achieve their full potentials.

Civil society has and continues to play a key role in promoting the CRC and its application in a range of different contexts.²⁰ The application of

¹⁸ UNICEF. (2019, November 5). More than 855,000 children remain out of school in North-West and South-West Cameroon [Press release]. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/more-855000-children-remain-out-school-north-west-and-south-west-cameroon>, last access October 26, 2023.

¹⁹ Akame, G. A., Crockett, J., & Anoma, R. A. B. (2021). Baseline research: Education in crisis in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon. Solidarity and Development Initiative (SODEI). https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Gilbert-Akame/publication/349297440_Baseline_Research_Education_in_Crisis_in_the_Anglophone_Regions_of_Cameroon_Prepared_by/links/60290253299b1cc26c42baa/Baseline-Research-Education-in-Crisis-in-the-Anglophone-Regions-of-Cameroon-Prepared-by.pdf, last access October 26, 2023.

²⁰ Alston, P. & Tobin, J. D. M. (2005). Laying the Foundations for Children's Rights, *Innocenti Insights*, UNICEF. ISBN: 88-89129-19-0. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/556558?ln=en>.

a child rights-based approach to LESPLAY requires a consideration of relevant children's rights under the CRC, with the aim of ensuring their rights wherever applicable and doing no harm. Hence, LESPLAY was modelled according to three important rights from the CRC: the right to education, the right to play, and the right to have a voice.²¹ LESPLAY was also a citizen action towards advancing the SDGs, with a specific focus on SDG 4.

Grounded on the desire to advance children's right to access to quality education, reference is made to CRC Article 28 which recognises the right of every child to education and Article 29 which provides for purposes of education. These purposes include among others: the development of the child's personality, talents, and mental abilities. According to Article 29, the goal of education is to "empower the child by developing his or her skills, learning and other capacities, human dignity, self-esteem and self-confidence".²²

The right to meaningful participation is also a vital element for children's learning and development.²³ LESPLAY emerged in a context whereby children had no say in the school boycott decisions that impacted them.²⁴ This is despite having during my research encounter in 2018, expressed their desire to be in school and play with friends if given the opportunity.²⁵ Hence, it was imperative to consider children's right to participation in designing the programme. The CRC Article 12 provides for the right of the child who can form views to freely express those views

²¹ UN General Assembly, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 20 November 1989, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 1577, p. 3.

²² See CRC Article 29.

²³ Akame, G. A. (2019). Young peoples' participation in educational decision making: The case of social unrest and school boycotts in the English-speaking regions of Cameroon. Norwegian Centre for Child Research.

²⁴ *The Guardian*. (2021). 'They punished me for having books': Schools in Cameroon terrorised by armed groups, Global development, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/dec/16/they-punished-me-for-having-books-schools-in-cameroon-terrorised-by-armed-groups>, last access October 30, 2023. See also International Crisis Group Report. (2022). Cameroon's Anglophone conflict: Children should be able to return to school, Crisis Group, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/cameroon/camerouns-anglophone-conflict-children-should-be-able-return-school#:~:text=Pre%20pressure%20from%20Anglophone%20civil%20society,are%20often%20damaged%20or%20overcrowded>, last access October 30, 2023.

²⁵ Akame, G. A. (see footnote 19).

in all matters affecting him or her and for those views to be given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. Article 12 forms one of the general principles for the interpretation and realisation of all CRC rights.²⁶

LESPLAY is grounded on the understanding of the importance of leisure and play in children's learning and development.²⁷ Article 31 of the CRC sets out children's right to rest, leisure and play, cultural life, and the arts (the "Article 31 rights"),²⁸ widely acknowledged as central to children's health, development, and happiness.²⁹ CRC General Comment No. 17 emphasises the holistic understanding of Article 31 stating that: "Each element of Article 31 is mutually linked and reinforcing, and when realised, serves to enrich the lives of children".³⁰

There is a clear interrelationship between the right to play, to education, and to participation. Play is essential for children's learning and development. Meanwhile, children's ability to form views in line with Article 12 is predicated on their development of such capacities. The UNCRRC recognises this interdependence as well the equal importance of the Convention rights including the rights to play, education, and participation.³¹ While these are all separate rights enacted under the Convention, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child has, for example, grouped the right to education with the right to play within the State Party reporting procedures.

²⁶ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), *General comment No. 12 (2009): The right of the child to be heard*, 20 July 2009, CRC/C/GC/12.

²⁷ Bourdillon, M. (2011). A challenge for globalized thinking: How does children's work relate to their development? *South African Review of Sociology*, 42(1), 97–115.

²⁸ Art. 31 CRC.

²⁹ CRC General Comment No. 17.

³⁰ *Ibid.* (see footnote 29).

³¹ The Committee has underlined the importance of the interdependence and interrelatedness of children rights, like other human rights in multiple general comments and concluding observations. See for example the concluding observations on the combined fifth and sixth periodic reports of Norway (July, 2018).

3.2 *Cultivating Emotional Intelligence and Multipotentialities in LESPLAY*

Young people need to cultivate social and emotional intelligence and the multiple inner talents to complement their education.³² Salovey and Mayer define emotional intelligence as “*a set of skills associated with monitoring one’s own and others’ emotions, and the ability to use emotions to guide one’s thinking and actions*”.³³ Emotions have an impact on attention, memory, our ability to build relationships with others, and our mental and physical health.³⁴ Emotional intelligence is a vital component of children’s development as it influences their social and emotional well-being, academic success, and overall life satisfaction. Parents, caregivers, and educators can play a significant role in nurturing and promoting emotional intelligence in children through open communication, and providing opportunities for emotional growth and self-awareness.³⁵

In Chapter 3, E. M. Murray, M., P. Poto, & L. Vita, on expanding the methodological steps involved in the co-creation process of FYH, define SEL as “*the process through which individuals develop essential skills, attitudes, and behaviours that enable them to understand and manage emotions, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and effectively navigate social interactions*”.³⁶ Growing research and development initiatives have established the impact of SEL on children’s learning outcomes, including in developing social competences and overall well-being.³⁷ Ahmed et al., in a quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test design conducted with 270 secondary school students divided into an experimental and control group, found that the group taught through SEL

³² Murray, E., Poto, M. P., & Russo, V. (see footnote 5).

³³ Salovey, P., & Mayer, J. D. (1990). Emotional intelligence. *Imagination, Cognition and Personality*, 9(3), 185–211. <https://doi.org/10.2190/DUGG-P24E-52WK-6CDG>.

³⁴ Ibid. (see footnote 33).

³⁵ Tominey, S. L., O’Byron, E. C., Rivers, S. E., & Shapses, S. (2017). Teaching emotional intelligence in early childhood. *YC Young Children*, 72(1), 6–14.

³⁶ E. Murray, M., P. Poto, & Vita, L., Chapter 3, in this volume.

³⁷ Hromek, R., & Roffey, S. (2009). Promoting social and emotional learning with games. *Simulation & Gaming*, 40(5), 626–644. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1046878109333793>.

demonstrated significant social and emotional competence over the one taught using the traditional teaching approach.³⁸

Despite not expressly articulating SEL in its programming, LESPLAY encompasses all the attributes of SEL. LESPLAY was established based on the need to show compassion and love for children experiencing fear and instability as a result of war and widespread violence. It provided an alternative for them to experience and share compassion for one another, express their feelings, and create healthy relationships in a safe environment. The emphasis on storytelling, self-expression, role-playing, and interactive games provides an opportunity for children taking part in LESPLAY to not only express their emotions but also develop a deeper understanding of their own and others' feelings. Through these activities, participants undergo a transformative journey, transitioning from initial states of shyness, lack of confidence, and sometimes fear to actively engaging and contributing to individual and group endeavours.³⁹

LESPLAY, like FYH, embraces multipotentiality as a driver of innovation and ideas. Multipotentiality as defined by Barbara Kerr is “the ability to select and develop any number of career options because of a variety of interests, aptitudes, and abilities”.⁴⁰ Meanwhile children's lives unfold within cultures that encourage pursuing a single passion and interest at the expense of multipotentiality. The question “*what do you want to be when you grow up?*”, as analysed and illustrated in FYH, often becomes internalised and contributes to defining children's future decisions.⁴¹ Multipotential children possess a diverse range of skills and talents and are often attracted to multiple disciplines, hence the limitations such a question could pose. At LESPLAY, creativity, play, and arts-based learning unite to empower children and young people to reach their full potential. The programme strategically incorporates arts-based approaches, such as drawing, sketching, and storytelling, fostering creativity and allowing children to explore and showcase their multipotentials. LESPLAY adheres to the belief that diversifying after-school activities including subjects such as

³⁸ Ahmed, I., Hamzah, A. B., & Abdullah, M. N. L. Y. B. (2020). Effect of social and emotional learning approach on students' social-emotional competence. *International Journal of Instruction*, 13(4), 663–676. <https://doi.org/10.29333/iji.2020.13441a>.

³⁹ See LESPLAY pilot report (see footnote 12).

⁴⁰ Kerr, B. A., & Gahm, J. (2018). Developing talents in girls and young women. In *APA handbook of giftedness and talent* (pp. 399–415). American Psychological Association.

⁴¹ Ibid. (see footnote 36).

math and IT support, reading, journaling; combined with sewing, baking and complemented with arts, play, and other leisure activities, would add value to children's learning experience and increase their chances of success.⁴² The blend of emotional intelligence activities and the encouragement of multipotentialities in LESPLAY not only contributes to the participants' personal growth but also aligns with the overarching goal of providing a holistic learning experience that celebrates individuality and diverse talents.

4 PARTICIPATION AND CO-CREATION APPROACHES

4.1 *Child Participation and Related Challenges*

LESPLAY pays special attention to child participation and inclusiveness in the expression and enhancement of potentials for children in line with the child rights-based approach. This serves not only as principle but also instrumental in observing the immediate impact on the community and for sustainable development, acknowledging that children have been historically relegated to a position of powerlessness, being isolated and their voices left unheard.⁴³ Also noting the paradigm shift in research and development practice involving children today, whereby they are predominantly viewed as social agents capable of taking active part and contributing to societies in which they live.⁴⁴ Conceptualised as a continuum, children's participation can vary from no or little participation to higher levels where they initiate and share decisions with adults.⁴⁵ Concerning decision-making, many have the perception that children's

⁴² Meece, J. L. and Eccles, J. S. (2010). After-school program participation and children's development. In *Handbook of research on schools, schooling and human development* (pp. 397–415). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203874844-37>.

⁴³ Liebel, M., & Saadi, I. (2012). Cultural variations in constructions of children's participation. In M. Liebel (Ed.), *Children's rights from below* (pp. 162–182). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

⁴⁴ James, A., & Prout, A. (2015). *Constructing and reconstructing childhood: Contemporary issues in the sociological study of childhood*. London: Routledge.

⁴⁵ Hart, R. (1992). *Children's participation: From tokenism to citizenship*. UNICEF; Shier, H. (2001). Pathways to participation: Openings, opportunities and obligations. *Children & Society*, 15(2), 107–117.

participation can be tokenistic.⁴⁶ Children are often seen at local and international stages making speeches, in Children’s Parliaments, yet many question the impact of such involvement.⁴⁷ Demonstrating the paradox of questioning children’s capacity to participate in political life, Clodagh Harris shows examples of institutions and processes in which children actively engage.⁴⁸ Yet, they note that despite such active engagement, the impact of Youth Parliaments on policy transformation which are “ubiquitous” across the EU remains limited. Many researchers contend that for children’s participation to be considered effective, children must be seen as full members of the society capable of being consulted and given consideration in matters concerning them.⁴⁹

The situation becomes more concerning when considering the gaps in child participation between global north and global south contexts. Some countries, especially in the global north, are taking steps to directly include children and young people in deliberations leading to decisions on tackling climate change. In Europe, countries such as France, Ireland, Scotland, and the UK have established citizens assemblies where citizens including children are called upon to deliberate on climate emergency challenges directly with experts and stakeholders.⁵⁰ Despite the observed absence of children’s voices in these assemblies such as in the case of Ireland, mostly due to certain practical arrangements,⁵¹ it can be argued that it is a step in the right direction. Meanwhile, children in some African countries are still confronted with cultures, traditions, and systems

⁴⁶ Sinclair, R. (2004). Participation in practice: Making it meaningful, effective and sustainable. *Children and Society*, 18, 106–118.

⁴⁷ Crowley, A. (2014). Evaluating the impact of children’s participation in public decision-making. In J. Westwood, C. Larkins, D. Moxon, Y. Perry, & N. Thomas (Eds.), *Participation, citizenship and intergenerational relations in children and young people’s lives: Children and adults in conversation*. London: Palgrave Pivot.

⁴⁸ Harris, C. (2021). Looking to the future? Including children, young people and future generations in deliberations on climate action: Ireland’s Citizens’ Assembly 2016–2018. *Innovation*, 34(5), 677–693 (Abingdon, England).

⁴⁹ Montgomery, M., & Burr, R. (2003). Learning outcomes. *Changing Childhoods: Local and Global*, 1(89), 45.

⁵⁰ Ibid. (see footnote 47).

⁵¹ Ibid. (see footnote 47).

that inhibit their participation.⁵² In her research searching for common grounds among local communities in Ghana found that in some communities, Twun-Danso Imoh argues that more emphasis is placed on the duty to and responsibility of children to be obedient, humble and respect adults, and not expected to challenge them.⁵³ These values are reflected in Article 31 of the 1990 African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child which imparts duties and responsibilities on children.⁵⁴ To children in Twum-Danso's community, what constitutes "rights" includes their duty to respect and obey and to contribute to the maintenance of the household. Most of the adults involved in her research did not see the right to participate in decision-making as a right. However, factors such as respect could earn children the right to participate in family decision-making.⁵⁵

With the *status quo*, it therefore becomes obvious that young people in Africa and other parts of the world are forced to improvise new ways to clamour for change and make an impact. Being deeply concerned about the current state of poverty, violence, and climate change, and losing trust in adults and world leaders to make good decisions for them, they seek to be part decisions influencing their destinies.⁵⁶ Many youth initiatives fostering the SDGs have emerged since the dawn of the Agenda 2030. The SDG flagship symbol has taken over activism and can be seen displayed in schools and events promoting the SDGs. Campaigns, such as the SDG Action Campaign in Sri Lanka, mobilise young people to advocate for and work towards SDGs.⁵⁷ Furthermore, young people seem to be taken to leadership in climate action and have been seen

⁵² Imoh, A. T.-D. (2011). Searching for a middle ground in children's rights in Ghana. *Journal of Human Rights*, 10(3), 376–392. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14754835.2011.596067>; Okewumi, E. O., & Akanle, O. (2022). Children's Participation in decision making within the family context of Yoruba culture. *Child Indicators Research*, 15(1), 235–247. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-021-09866-5>.

⁵³ Ibid. (see footnote 52).

⁵⁴ Organization of African Unity (OAU), *African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child*, 11 July 1990, CAB/LEG/24.9/49 (1990).

⁵⁵ Imoh, A. T.-D. (see footnote 52).

⁵⁶ UN Encourages Children to Take Over, Nathalie Risse, SDG Knowledge Hub, <https://sdg.iisd.org/commentary/generation-2030/un-encourages-children-to-take-over/>, last access November 9, 2023.

⁵⁷ <https://sdg.iisd.org/commentary/generation-2030/youth-initiatives-foster-sdg-implementation-peace-and-security/>, last access November 9, 2023.

championing worldwide climate change strikes.⁵⁸ Young climate activists like Greta Thunberg, founder of Fridays for Future Youths Climate Strike Movement⁵⁹ and Xiuhtezcatl Martinez, Earths Guardians Youth Director,⁶⁰ have taken the lead in championing the cause for a sustainable environment.

Greta Thunberg has particularly taken youth activism to elevated heights and has become an inspiration to young people around the world. Her support of climate youth battles became evident when she put schooling on a halt to protest outside the Swedish parliament at the failure of the government to act on climate change,⁶¹ her recent outings when she joined the Sámi youth in Norway protesting the non-implementation of Norway's Supreme court judgement in the Fosen case.⁶² Her climate strike movement coordinated massive protests of young people and adults in 150 countries on 20 September 2019.⁶³ She has since challenged adult's leadership and inspired young people's climate leadership potentials in her famous speeches in various international climate gatherings and events:

⁵⁸ Vox Media (September, 2019), *What the youth climate strike looks like around the world*, <https://www.vox.com/energy-and-environment/2019/9/20/20875523/youth-climate-strike-fridays-future-photos-global>, last access November 9, 2023.

⁵⁹ About FridaysforFuture, <https://www.fridaysforfuture.org/about>, last access November 11, 2023.

⁶⁰ Earth Guardians Xiuhtezcatl Martinez, <https://www.earthguardians.org/xiuhtezcatl>, last access November 11, 2023.

⁶¹ Lehmann, J. (2019). Climate change action—It's a welfare responsibly too. *Children Australia*, 44(3), 99–102. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cha.2019.36>.

⁶² The case where Norway's Supreme court ruled that the erection of wind turbines at Storheia and Roan in the Fosen region of central Norway, considered Europe's largest onshore wind farm, was invalid as it interfered with Sami herders' cultural rights under international conventions. See also Arctic Today (February 27, 2023) Thunberg, Indigenous protesters block Norway energy ministry over wind farms, Thunberg, Indigenous protesters block Norway energy ministry over wind farms—ArcticToday, <https://www.arctictoday.com/thunberg-indigenous-protesters-block-norway-energy-ministry-over-wind-farms/>, last access November 15, 2023.

⁶³ Vox Media (September, 2019), *Greta Thunberg is leading kids and adults from 150 countries in a massive Friday climate strike*, <https://www.vox.com/2019/9/17/20864740/greta-thunberg-youth-climate-strike-fridays-future>, last access November 15, 2023.

I've learned that you are never too small to make a difference and if a few children can get headlines all over the world just by not going to school then imagine what we could all do together if we really wanted to.

We have come here to let them know that change is coming whether they like it or not. The people will rise to the challenge. And since our leaders are behaving like children, we will have to take the responsibility they should have taken long ago.⁶⁴

Research shows that children and young people's climate activism may not only serve to counter the negative sense of hopelessness in them regarding climate change, but also influence the attitudes and behaviours of others, thus expanding their real-world impact.⁶⁵

4.2 *Towards a Childist Approach to Climate Education and Awareness*

In his work "Ethics in the Light of Childhood", Wall advocates for a profound re-evaluation of societal norms in response to the experiences of children.⁶⁶ He introduces the concept of "childism" as the moral agency inherent in children that adults should aspire to emulate. Wall perceives the contemporary wave of children's agency and voice in childhood studies as a "second wave" of childism, criticising the failure to insist on a child-inclusive view of human beings for all.⁶⁷ This paradigm suggests an equalisation of rights and roles between children and adults, challenging the historically hierarchical structures in education and positioning children as active agents in shaping their worldview.

Within the realm of climate education, a childist approach is advocated, recognising children as pivotal stakeholders with unique perspectives, insights, and the potential to instigate change.⁶⁸ The childist lens

⁶⁴ FridaysforFuture, *Greta Thunberg speech to UN secretary general António Guterres in Katowice: "Our leaders behave like children"*—December 3 2018, https://www.fridaysforfuture.org/gretaspeeches#greta_speech_dec3_2018, last access November 16, 2023.

⁶⁵ Trott, C. D. (2021). Youth-led climate change action: Multi-level effects on children, families, and communities. *Sustainability*, 13(22), 12355 (Basel, Switzerland).

⁶⁶ Wall, J. (2010). *Ethics in light of childhood* (1st ed.). Georgetown University Press.

⁶⁷ Ibid. (see footnote 66).

⁶⁸ Sporre, Karin. (2021). Young people—Citizens in times of climate change? A childist approach to human responsibility. *HTS Theological Studies*, 77(3), 1–8.

promotes a departure from didactic models, urging the adoption of participatory methodologies that empower children to contribute meaningfully to climate awareness. Children, with their innate curiosity and openness, are seen as valuable contributors offering a fresh and unfiltered viewpoint to intricate issues like climate change. When their agency is harnessed, it becomes a potent force for positive change.

The 2018 Fridays for Future school strikes exemplify the assertion of young “citizens” assuming socio-political responsibility, recognising the interdependence of their destinies with their capacity to exercise human agency when politicians fall short.⁶⁹ These strikes have sparked a crucial debate about positioning children on an equal footing with adults in the realm of democratic representation. To enable children to act as political agents and ensure their democratic representation based on their unique concerns, it is argued that new thought structures are imperative.⁷⁰

Children, facing diverse circumstances, have raised their voices against injustice, human rights violations, and marginalisation. Instances like the open letter from children advocating for safe schools in the Sahel⁷¹ and protests against abuses in the separatist conflict in Cameroon⁷² exemplify children’s resilience in challenging adversity. Moreover, children have questioned the purpose of attending school in the face of a jeopardised future. When Greta Thunberg launched the climate movement that spiralled to over 1,500 cities, it questioned the very foundation of the global education agenda that confines children to school, especially in the context of worsening climate conditions. Fridays for Futures made the point on their website stating that: *“School children are required to attend school but, with the worsening Climate Destruction, this goal of going to school begins to be pointless. Why study for a future, which may not be there?”*

⁶⁹ Ibid (see footnote 68).

⁷⁰ Wall, J. (2011). Can democracy represent children? Towards a politics of difference. *Childhood*, 19(1), 86–100. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568211406756>.

⁷¹ See Plan International (October, 2021) Open Letter from Children: We need safe schools in the Sahel Now!, Plan International Cameroon (<https://plan-international.org/cameroon/blog/2021/10/25/open-letter-children-safe-schools-sahel/>), last access November 30, 2023.

⁷² See Kindzeka, M. E. (2022). Cameroonian children protest abuses in separatist conflict, <https://www.voanews.com/a/cameroonian-children-protest-abuses-in-separatist-conflict-/6606832.html#:~:text=Several%20hundred%20children%20marched%20through,children%20stemming%20from%20the%20fighting>, last access November 30, 2023.

*Why spend a lot of effort to become educated, when our governments are not listening to the educated?"*⁷³

As children increasingly assume shared human responsibility, particularly in addressing climate change, there is a growing necessity for their concerns to be acknowledged and for them to be granted an equal opportunity at the decision-making table.

4.3 Knowledge Co-creation for Climate Education

Knowledge co-creation as a facet of methodology for educational programmes and research with children and other disadvantaged groups has been deemed ground-breaking for its focus on collaboration, participation, and respect for all involved.⁷⁴ In their approach to co-creation in educational spaces, Murray and Poto refer to Alfred North Whitehead's approach which focuses on reconceptualising the relationship between subjects and objects in learning exchanges, promoting reciprocal relations and interconnectedness. The focus is on nurturing relationships between humans and nature within educational spaces.⁷⁵ Their approach challenges traditional classroom dynamics and emphasises inclusive spaces. They argue that this inclusive space not only situates learners and teachers within a broader social context but also provides a sense of belonging.⁷⁶ The co-creation of knowledge approach in researching with children changes research focus from "...one that is inherently informed by traditional modes of scientific research to one that is informed by a collective and collaborative approach".⁷⁷ Drawing parallels with community-based participatory research (CBPR), Murray and Poto contend that participatory learning offers autonomy, empowerment, and ownership, fostering a greater sense of accountability among students. This approach, rooted

⁷³ From <https://fridaysforfuture.org/>, last access November 16, 2023.

⁷⁴ Murray, E. M., & Poto, M. P. (2023) Co-creation of educational spaces and curricula to develop an ecology of participation: an example from Follow Your Heart in Lohse, E. J., Poto, M. P., Coproduction of knowledge in Climate Governance, Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2022, ISBN 978-3-8305-5538-4.

⁷⁵ Ibid. (see footnote 74).

⁷⁶ Ibid. (see footnote 74).

⁷⁷ Ibid. (see footnote 74).

in inquiry through open dialogue and active listening, promotes critical, creative, and caring thinking.⁷⁸

Knowledge co-creation has emerged as a transformative approach suitable for tackling the complexities and uncertainties relating to climate questions as it advances equity for all parties involved.⁷⁹ Initiatives such as the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (The Ocean Decade) through its Ocean Decade Action Framework, advances inclusiveness and representativeness in its approach to oceans science.⁸⁰ In responding to calls for inclusiveness and equity in scientific knowledge production and sharing, real-world laboratories, such as LivingLabs,⁸¹ have been conceived.⁸² These are well structured and robust approaches to attend to complex societal challenges, providing highly participatory and experimental methods for real-world interventions. In conceiving the real-world laboratories approach, Franke et al. highlight the importance of greater openness in participation, and the need to listen to opinions, knowledge, and ideas that may not always align to dominant views and desires.⁸³

Drawing from Franke et al.'s insights, it is important to highlight the transformative yet challenging nature of such initiatives. Real-world laboratories encompass co-design, co-production, and co-evaluation phases, demanding scalability, transferability of results, and inclusivity. This aligns in part with the overarching aim of this chapter, emphasising the importance of considering diverse perspectives, particularly those of young people, in collaborative projects related to climate education. The LESPLAY initiative is a pertinent example within the discourse of knowledge co-creation. The programme, designed to address a learning gap identified through consultation with the children it serves, prioritises their perspectives on climate change and environmental protection.

⁷⁸ Ibid. (see footnote 74).

⁷⁹ Ibid. (see footnote 74).

⁸⁰ Franke et al. (2022). Making the UN ocean decade work? The potential for, and challenges of, transdisciplinary research and real-world laboratories for building towards ocean solutions. *People and Nature*. <https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/6sfe8>.

⁸¹ Leal Filho, W., Ozuyar, P. G., Dinis, M. A. P., et al. (2023). Living labs in the context of the UN sustainable development goals: State of the art. *Sustainability Science*, 18, 1163–1179.

⁸² Ibid. (see footnote 80).

⁸³ Ibid. (see footnote 80).

LESPLAY exemplifies a co-creative learning approach centred on listening and understanding the unique viewpoints of participants. By incorporating children’s worldviews into the production of knowledge, LESPLAY (like FYH) is an educational model for fostering collaboration and co-production that aligns with the principles of inclusivity and equity in climate education.

5 COMBINING KNOWLEDGE CO-CREATION AND PARTICIPATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT ACTION: RESULTS FROM LESPLAY

From its inception, LESPLAY has prioritised the active participation of children for which the programme was destined. A student-centred approach whereby beneficiaries of LESPLAY are themselves involved in the planning, choice of topics and lead discussions during sessions. LESPLAY is “a project for children by children”. The idea of LESPLAY came about during the authors research with children in Cameroon and specifically, during his stay and engagement with children in two schools whose education was heavily disrupted by conflict. Children who participated in his research all expressed their desire to be in school, to learn and play with their peers⁸⁴; some of them in the process of creating LESPLAY.

LESPLAY has also prioritised children’s perspectives and worldviews in the production of knowledge. Our learning approach has focused predominantly on listening and carefully understanding their perspectives on various subjects impacting their lives, including climate change, environmental protection, child rights, etc. Knowledge generated from the activities have been published in our reports of activities.⁸⁵ Using arts, storytelling, and role-play, LESPLAY participants communicate their knowledge and understanding of issues affecting them. Sometimes, their perceptions of things are not in line with the predominant adult views. For example, during sessions on children’s rights, participants stated their understanding of rights that included those not covered by the CRC. When asked what they understand by children’s rights, some responded: “the right to cross the road”, “the right to sleep”, “the right to eat”, and so on. When asked about their right to participation in family settings,

⁸⁴ Akame, G. A. (see footnote 19).

⁸⁵ See LESPLAY Pilot Report (see footnote 12).

some stated that their understanding of participation was limited to helping their parents with house chores and not in decision-making. In this regard, Hanson and Nieuwenhuys⁸⁶ remark about children's "living" rights in that children make their own meanings of rights which is often different from those enacted for them or imposed by other people's interpretations. Hence why it is crucial to take children's perspectives into consideration in knowledge construction processes affecting their lives.

As an integral part of our research project, the LESPLAY workshops played a pivotal role in fostering holistic learning, emotional well-being, and sustainability action among participants aged 10 to 18. Organised weekly on Saturdays and led by dedicated programme volunteers, these sessions delved into themes suggested by SODEI volunteers, carefully selected to address critical issues affecting the community.

Themes such as environmental preservation, gender equality, gender-based violence, body image, bullying in schools, violence against women and children's rights were at the forefront. Each theme unfolded across two sessions, with the initial phase involving dynamic discussions between participants and facilitators. The subsequent session witnessed participants expressing their understanding and ideas through various art forms, providing a unique and engaging medium for their voices to be heard.

The focus on environmental preservation spanned five sessions, addressing topics ranging from an introduction to the environment to the significance of plant and animal life, the impacts of human interference, and methods of protection, preservation, and conservation. Participants gained insights into the protection of fauna and flora, alongside the importance of recycling.

In collaboration with CAMHELP, empowerment seminars expanded the scope of learning beyond LESPLAY's regular themes. Workshops on "ankara" designs, bead making, and cookery empowered participants with practical skills. The positive feedback received from participants highlighted their deepened understanding of the subject matter, the acquisition of new knowledge, and the significant impact of these sessions on their personal development.

⁸⁶ Hanson, K. & Nieuwenhuys, O. (2013). Introduction: Living rights, social justice and translations. In K. Hanson & O. Nieuwenhuys (Eds.), *Reconceptualizing children's rights in international development: Living rights, social justice and translations* (pp. 3-27). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

This multifaceted approach aligns seamlessly with the research project's emphasis on holistic learning experiences, emotional well-being, and sustainability action. The combination of thematic exploration, artistic expression, and practical skill development fosters a comprehensive educational environment, empowering participants to not only understand but actively contribute to positive change in their communities and beyond.

LESPLAY participants work both individually and as a team to develop and present solutions to community problems. This girl participants of LESPLAY played an active role in the development of SODEI's gender-based violence (GBV) guidelines by brainstorming on the causes, consequences, and actions to stop GBV. Gideon (LESPLAY participant) who believes that littering can be controlled through recycling and reward, developed a plan for a community recycling plant. Jesse and Harmony (LESPLAY participants) illustrated the importance of conservation and protection of plant and animal species for sustainability. Jesse stated during a LESPLAY session that "when trees are in an environment, harmful effects like soil erosion will be limited". Ako, another beneficiary of LESPLAY, is a fan of community engagement. He stated: "*When communities come together through initiatives such as clean-up campaigns, it helps to maintain a clean and sustainable environment...*"⁸⁷

5.1 *The Story of ATRAA*

The story of a little girl named ATRAA⁸⁸ deprived of school as a result of the conflict, and later introduced to our LESPLAY, resonates with the illustrative character Cora from *The Story of Cora* in the first part of the FYH book. This story, based on the realities of children and youth involved in LESPLAY programming, shares an inspiring narrative of how involvement with SODEI has empowered and improved the lives of children in conflict areas of Cameroon.

Disheartened by the turn of events, she decided to assist her parents with household chores. However, her fate would change when a team from the NGO SODEI visited her family and spoke to her parents about their after-school programme LESPLAY, suggesting that ATRAA attend.

⁸⁷ See LESPLAY Pilot Report (see footnote 12).

⁸⁸ ATRAA, like other names used in this chapter are nicknames to substitute the real names of the LESPLAY participants involved.

ATRAA became captivated by the idea that she could be more than just a student; she could be a change-maker. In the following couple of months, she attended weekly Saturday LESPLAY sessions, bonding and interacting with her newfound friends, enjoying her time in the safety of friends and learning about children's rights, climate change, and other important social issues she enjoyed. With a deep passion for nature, ATRAA decided to use her newfound knowledge and passion to champion the cause of environmental protection. Along with her LESPLAY friends, she began organising small clean-up and awareness campaigns in her community, teaching their peers as well as adults about the importance of preserving the environment. Slowly, more and more children joined her and friends in this mission.

6 CONCLUSION AND WAYS FORWARD

In conclusion, this chapter illuminates the profound impact of holistic learning experiences on children's academic and professional outcomes, with a particular emphasis on emotional well-being and multipotentiality within the LESPLAY programme. Joining forces with the transformative Follow Your Heart philosophy, LESPLAY challenges conventional educational structures and addresses the paradox of contemporary systems that often neglect children's rights. The chapter aligns with a citizen action agenda for the Sustainable Development Goals, advocating for inclusive and sustainable solutions to complex environmental and social challenges. Through qualitative analysis and participatory action research, the research sheds light on the success of LESPLAY in empowering conflict-affected children, providing an alternative learning platform that celebrates creativity, social well-being, and entrepreneurship. By emphasising children's rights, emotional intelligence, and multipotentiality, LESPLAY not only enriches participants' learning experiences but also nurtures their capacity to effect positive change. The convergence of LESPLAY and FYH serves as a beacon for transformative education, encouraging collective voices and efforts to champion sustainability causes. This research underscores the importance of innovative, child-centric approaches in shaping a brighter and more sustainable future.

ATRAA's transformative journey within the LESPLAY programme serves as a compelling narrative illustrating the impact of holistic learning experiences on young individuals. Her story epitomises the intersection of emotional intelligence, multipotentiality, and the empowerment

of children within unconventional educational frameworks. ATRAA's commitment to environmental protection, sparked by her LESPLAY experience, not only showcases the programme's success in nurturing diverse skills but also emphasises its potential to instil a sense of responsibility and activism in young minds. The stories of ATRAA, Cora, and their friends demonstrate how initiatives like LESPLAY, grounded in children's rights and participatory learning, contribute to the development of conscientious and empowered youth.

Moving forward LESPLAY plans to collaborate with FYH to promote joint initiatives to inspire young minds with the stories of ATRAA and Cora and accompany them in their mission to change the world. Such a collaboration would emphasise the interconnectedness of individual stories in the pursuit of sustainable change.

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