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# Creative Process and Co-Research with the Early Years through Flight

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Résumé de l'article

Practice-based research that meaningfully engages with very young children (ages eighteen months to five years) as co-researchers presents wonderful opportunities to co-imagine possibilities together, but it also presents challenges related to communication, a democratic process, and children's agency. In this article, we discuss how The Urban Wildlife Project uses Flight: Alberta's Early Learning and Care Framework to help our creative team have a relationship-centred process. We discuss how Flight's core values of play and playfulness inform our process, how Flight's "Cycle of Co-Inquiry" and emphasis on understanding children's meaning-making honours children as citizens, and how several key concepts—including "co-," a specific conception of children and childhood, play and play-informed meaning-making, and making magic—enable us to include very young children as co-researchers in our co-creation and co-imagination practices. To illuminate how the process works, we offer two examples of how we are using Flight to inform our practice-based research processes with the early years demographic, and to create meaningful immersive theatre experiences for all participants.

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### Creative Process and Co-Research with the Early Years through *Flight*

Robyn Ayles, Heather Fitzsimmons Frey, and Jamie Leach<sup>1</sup>

With their abundance of openness, curiosity, and imagination, children are natural researchers. They ask questions and seek answers. As theatre artists and practice-based researchers, we strive to welcome these young, sometimes preverbal inquisitors, into our research process in meaningful, democratic ways. Our practice-based research centres on questions regarding the relationships between very young children (aged eighteen months to five years), actors, and materials, with a view toward democratically creating theatre as a collective and immersive event. Through workshops, artist residencies, immersive theatre offerings, and a Cycle of Co-inquiry, we develop a loose scaffold of dramatic work that forms the skeleton of a theatrical piece, which in turn becomes an immersive theatre offering for the very young. Our process creates spaces that welcome active participation for children and actors to play, and where exploration is encouraged and planned with purpose and intention. This intention crystallizes into reciprocity and generosity of ideas between the participants. The final creative work includes very young children as co-creators in the experience. Although our current immersive theatre offering explores local urban wildlife, our process could be applied to any topic or theme.

#### **The Urban Wildlife Project, PBR, and Very Young Children**

Our current project-in-development, *The Urban Wildlife Project* (approximately an hour-long interactive experience), invites young children to join actors in co-creating an immersive theatre experience in a democratic process that recognizes children as inventive, creative, full of ideas, and as strong, capable citizens. As we discuss in “Harnessing the Power of *Flight*,” our creative team “aimed to develop democratic and playful relationships with children during the theatrical exploration” that “grounded our theatre creation and dramaturgy in respectful and agentic relationships between actors, theatrical objects, and young children” (Ayles, Fitzsimmons Frey, and Mykietyshyn 2021, 269). Children, actors, and designers develop a democratic relationship with the space and one another so that even the soundscape and lighting designs can respond to and play with participants as they choose how to engage with the production. The piece has a scaffold structure of scenarios and creative ideas that each contain a series of moments actors aim to share, yet each scenario can stretch or shrink to accommodate audience interests and engagement. Our explorations include physical theatre, dance and movement, sound and song, poetry, dramatic play, and a range of object and material business, including puppets and loose parts (i.e., everyday found objects that can be manipulated and used in various ways, such as scarves and pinecones; see Daly and Beloglovsky 2015). Child agency and comfort are both essential elements: the space includes blanket nests where audience members can sit or curl up and get cozy, but rather than be confined to that area, they are welcome to move, stand, and explore as the creative experience is taking place. In this article, we analyze how the practice-based research (PBR) process we use effectively

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challenges our creative team to devise and think beyond the adult artists in a rehearsal hall, and thus centres very young children and their educators as co-researchers.



Participating through observing.

Since 2019, we have been collaborating with very young children at our on-campus early childhood learning centre, Early Learning at MacEwan (ELM), to workshop *Urban Wildlife Project* material. The theme of this current creative work is common local urban animals: chickadees, jackrabbits, magpies, and squirrels. We chose these animals because of their local specificity, and because children in Edmonton are very familiar with them. Like many other urban children, the children of ELM have experience and relationships with urban natural spaces and animals. They visit the river valley, and they observe all four animals downtown in the ELM outdoor play space (attached to MacEwan University). Their curriculum framework highlights “sustainable futures” and envisions children as part of “environmentally and socially responsible communities,” and as children “develop a sense of wonder and appreciation for the natural world,” they are encouraged to see themselves as “a part of nature” (Makovichuk et al. 2014, 113). Educators and children at ELM work toward developing meaningful relationships with the land and the creatures with whom they share space, and as members of a downtown early learning centre, they have also worked with Indigenous Elders to develop intentional and informed connections with the land.

Notably, in our research creation process, we honour and draw attention to these inspiring but ubiquitous wildlife, and through that focus, the actors and children extend their relationships with those animals. For the purposes of our research methodology, however, it is important to note that our project’s relationship to urban wildlife is very different from the democratic relationship we aim for with children. While our processes are committed to respect, reciprocity, care, and relationship with materials and nonhuman animals both in and outside the performance space, in this article we discuss how children connect to our PBR as agentic co-researchers. While our PBR or “how we work together,” as Kimberly Richards and Davis-Fisch put it, contributes to conversations relating

to what they describe as processes that determine “the possibilities for resisting extractivism” (Richards and Davis-Fisch 2020, 8), we do not focus on developing working relationships with the nonhuman animals who inspire *The Urban Wildlife Project*. Instead, as we discuss in this article, we wonder how we can work with very young, sometimes preverbal children, as agentic co-researchers in a meaningful creative process.

### **What’s the *Flight* Plan? Working with *Flight*, PBR and Very Young Children**

To nurture the co-creating relationships between actors and children, our dramaturgical approach adapts the Cycle of Co-inquiry from *Flight: Alberta’s Early Learning and Care Framework* (Makovichuk et al. 2014; hereafter *Flight*).<sup>2</sup> *Flight* is a provincial early learning and care curriculum framework, not a dramaturgical framework. Yet the theoretical underpinnings support child-centred PBR very well. The philosophical approach to early childhood, learning, and community, and the worldviews embedded in *Flight*, were critically informed by a province-wide advisory committee that represented the diverse and local perspectives of Alberta early childhood communities in urban and rural regions, and by research with early learning educators and child care programs in Alberta. *Flight* also takes into account previous early childhood curriculum work in Canada and around the world (e.g., New Brunswick Curriculum Framework for Early Learning and Child Care, *Te Whāriki* from New Zealand, *The Practice of Relationships* from New South Wales Australia, and the philosophy and pedagogies of the infant-toddler centres and preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy). Ideal for our relationship-focused creative process, *Flight* asks educators, and in our case actors, to prioritize relationships, to be guided by core values that include play and playfulness, and to implement a rights-based, child-centred approach to interpreting how young children make meaning through play.

Our PBR process involves three main touchstones that we will analyze in this article. First, we explore and expand on *Flight*’s core values of play and playfulness. Second, we discuss how we apply *Flight*’s Cycle of Co-inquiry to understand children’s meaning-making and to inform our dramaturgy. Third, several concepts fuel our PBR journey: the ideas of “co-”, a specific conception of children and childhood, play and play-informed meaning-making, and making magic. Embracing these ideas allows us to include very young children as co-researchers in our co-creation and co-imagination practices. Prior to discussing our *Flight*-based PBR, we further illuminate why we chose to work with *Flight* and detail how the Cycle of Co-inquiry guides our reflective praxis. Following that, we will offer some examples from our PBR and the development of *The Urban Wildlife Project* to analyze how the intentions function in practice.



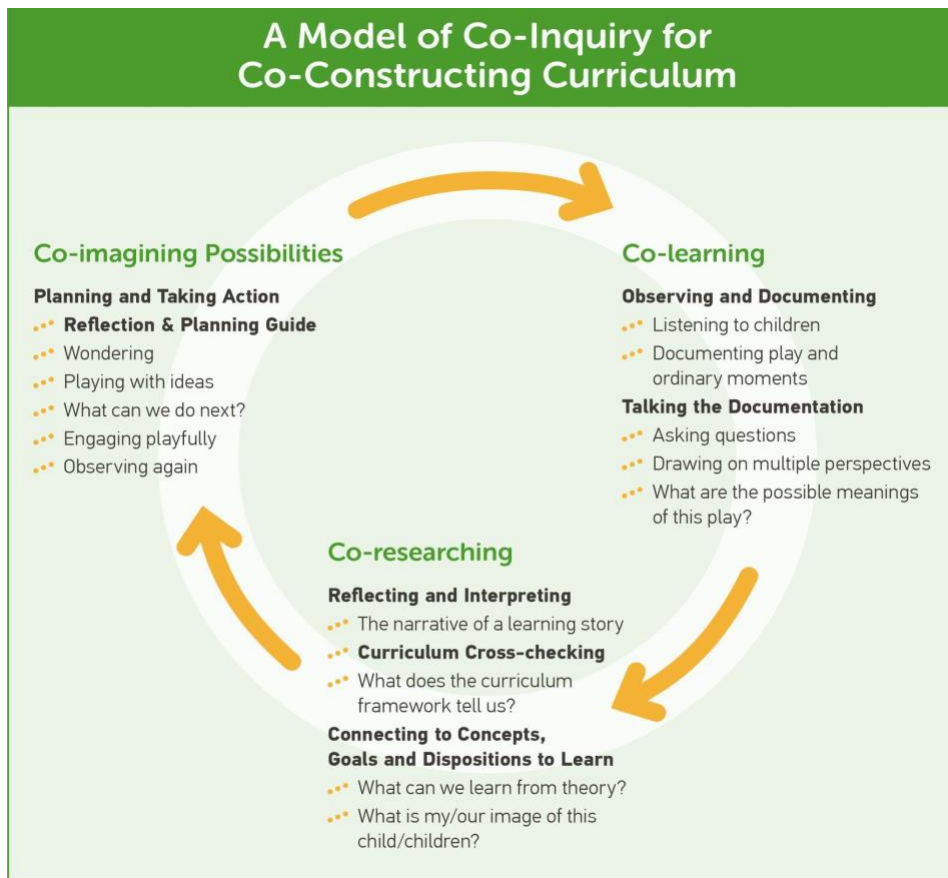
Participating through play. Actor: Aidan Spila.

We chose to adapt *Flight* to our practice-based research because local educators were familiar with it and also because it provides a common language and guides our creative team with an early childhood lens to develop meaningful collaborations with very young children so well. As theatre makers and researchers, we are familiar with a wide range of other theories related to dramaturgies for very young children (e.g., Fletcher-Watson 2013, 2015, 2016, 2018; Fletcher-Watson et. al 2014; Hovik 2015, 2019; Nagel and Hovik 2016; Patel 2020; Patel, Schnädelbach and Koleva 2018; Wartemann 2009), and a range of relevant theories and approaches related to play and playfulness.<sup>3</sup> Given our context in Alberta, however, where early childhood educators use *Flight* to develop their emerging curricula and to understand children’s meaning-making, adapting *Flight* to drive our PBR makes sense. Our collaborating educators were not only familiar with *Flight*’s core values and Cycle of Co-inquiry (which we discuss below), but their expertise in these theories also made them highly influential collaborators as they helped us to understand how to use *Flight* from their early childhood perspectives, and as we adapted it to ours.

Besides being familiar to the educators with whom we co-research, *Flight* allows us to address several key PBR study-structure challenges. Jonathan Pitches reminds researchers that one of the challenges of being a self-reflexive theatre practitioner is determining *how* to structure reflection. Pitches et. al (2011) describe a tension “central to the doubleness of the lived theatre experience” which demands a balance between “a state of *engagement* in ‘hands-on’ practices, with a state of *separation* from those very same practices . . . more appropriate for reflective thinking and expression” (138). Meanwhile, Lise Hovik, a Norwegian scholar and theatre maker for young children, observes that in their artistic creation processes, there is a “lot of reflection and thinking going on” but “we don’t use a theoretical language. We don’t even talk that much. We play, sing, and dance, we work with objects



and materials” (Hovik 2019, 38). Actors are trained to *be present*, and “in the moment” in their artistic improvisational work, and to be attuned to the space, materials, sounds, and people they share relationships with (Hovik 2019, 44). Pitches et al. (2011) urge practice-based researchers to pay attention to the “overarching design of those reflective moments” (142). To resolve the reflection-structure challenge while keeping children and children’s meaning-making central in our research, we adapted *Flight’s* Cycle of Co-inquiry, which provides a model that structures a consistent approach to a pattern of reflection and action, each phase responding to the previous phase, and each phase demanding something *next* from researchers. We have combined the idea of reflection with structure in the work of Pitches et al., and Hovik’s idea of play and messing about, by using *Flight* to guide our creative research and reflective process.



A model of co-inquiry from *Flight: Alberta’s Early Learning and Care Framework*.

The *Flight* framework provides language and concepts that mobilize how we explore creation-based research questions, especially those that enable us to focus on the audience rather than a creative product as somehow separate from an audience. In our process, we return to these key ideas both to help us interpret ways our very young co-researchers are making meaning with our creative work and to continue to re-guide and re-shape our process in meaning-rich and respectful ways.

### **Flight-Assisted Performance-Based Research**

There are several *Flight* principles that help address the challenges of conducting research in a meaningful and democratic way with very young children, and these principles guide our research

approach: the ideas of “co-”, a particular conception of childhood, and play-informed meaning-making. Language of agency, children’s rights, and in particular, understanding children as mighty learners who are citizens capable of responsible relationships and democratic citizenship are ideas we explore here and will return to throughout this article.

**Co- and Performance-Based Research (Thinking about Co-Pilots)**

The inherent power dynamics between adults and children mean that establishing an equitable, democratic co-researcher relationship between us requires intentionality. The *Flight* concepts that guide our practice-based research are included in the chart below, offering an overview of principles that inform our dramaturgy and our co-researcher relationship with our child collaborators and their educators. Following the chart, we offer a discussion of how the *Flight*-based idea of “co-” (e.g., co-inquiry, co-researchers, and co-imaginers of possibilities) shapes our research.

Co-Inquiry Descriptions			
	Co-Learner	Co-Researcher	Co-Imaginer
How <i>Flight</i> describes Co-Inquiry for educators	<p><b>Plays, Seeks, Participates, Persists, Cares</b>                      Alongside children and families, educators openly seek to learn about children and their families. This learning informs curriculum planning and is foundational for a practice of relationships. Educators use their knowledge and learning to create places of vitality with children and families.</p>	<p><b>Questions, Investigates, Reflects, Interprets, Shares</b>                      Educators actively engage children, families, and colleagues to investigate, make meaning of, and communicate about what children are doing and thinking. They engage with families to learn about how children engage in their world. Interpretations reflect an understanding that learning is socially and culturally constructed.</p>	<p><b>Wonders, Imagines, Creates, Invents, Risks in the Spirit of Learning</b>                      The role of the educator is to value the questions that can lead to possibilities created along with children, families, and colleagues, rather than have all the answers. Possibilities begin with wondering, imagining, and taking risks in the spirit of creating authentically shared places of vitality with children and families.</p>
Adapting <i>Flight</i> as theatre makers	<p>Caring, relationship-centred and play-based learning informs future theatrical offerings and helps us create vibrant and aesthetically interesting performances that captivate and enrich both parties.</p>	<p>We regard children as theatre co-creators. We engage with them, their educators and families to create a meaningful, rich, theatrical experience. We introduce concepts of theatre as a multimodal literacy, which children explore and make meaning through theatre and theatrical play.</p>	<p>We explore questions within theatrical frames and structures. We make offers and accept children's desire to contribute to the narrative. We co-construct authentically shared experiences.</p>

The prefix “co-” is essential in the ways *Flight* supports how we think about our research relationships. “Co-” intentionally represents the importance of reciprocity between children, families, and educators in creating knowledge through playing, researching, and imagining possibilities, thus reflecting a socio-cultural perspective of learning. Co- is present in the structure of

the reflection process we introduced above. *Flight* adapts the co-inquiry process first introduced by John Dewey (1933, 1938) to encourage reflecting and interpreting educator experiences in the classroom. *Flight's* model of co-inquiry is a collaborative, cyclical process of observing and documenting, reflecting and interpreting, and planning and taking action. It involves joint action and interaction to establish a *shared* understanding while stimulating *alternate* ideas, enabling collaborators to co-construct new knowledge, skills, and perspectives (Abramson 2012). As Pitches recommends in Pitches et al. (2011), a consciously held PBR reflection process is valuable. The child-centred, relationship-focused reflective process ensures that children are named as co-researchers, and that their participation in the process is agentic, meaningful, and influential. Fostering flexible, generative relationships between actors, educators, and children became a key part of our research practice. Just as the co-constructed nature of the *Flight* curriculum recognizes the uniqueness of each child, applying *Flight* to developing an immersive theatre experience offers children the opportunity to contribute on their terms and to co-create. Like early childhood educators, adults in our creative team engage in the co-inquiry process, planning in ways that notice and name what children are doing in their play; reflect and interpret children's action by using the *Flight* holistic goals and children's dispositions to learn; and then co-imagine possibilities with children, families, and colleagues to further the exploration and play (Makovichuk et al. 2014). Co- is also present in the roles we adopt in our practice-based research. Within the *Flight* framework, curriculum content begins with children's experiences and engages educators as co-learners, co-researchers, and co-imaginers of possibilities (Makovichuk et al. 2014). In our case, actors, designers, theatre technicians, and children take on these roles.



Co-imagining possibilities. Actor: Chelo Ledesma.



Some theatrical processes for early years test a fairly complete offering with audiences, or, like those using *Cycles de REPÈRE* (Houle 2023), use other actors in the room as proxy audience members until they are ready to share beyond the rehearsal hall. However, *Flight's* Cycle of Co-inquiry, and the co-roles participants take on, demand that children are central to the creative questioning and development throughout the creation process, so that children's perspectives (rather than exclusively those of the adult artists) are at the foreground of creative inquiry and decision-making. Through our PBR, we have learned to focus on relationships in the moment, which means that children are co-imagining possibilities and co-creating narratives and actions with the performers.

As adult contributors to co-relationships, we have a responsibility to provide a rich environment for actors and children to play in. Our theatrical research environment operates similarly to a *Flight*-inspired classroom. We plan the immersive experience in terms of time, materials, space, and participation through play, and we consider children's meaning-making in order to make changes. Our physical setting tries to follow a Reggio Emilia approach, where the environment is viewed as a place that is welcoming, represents the local culture and communities, is aesthetically beautiful, embraces nature, and is filled with purposeful materials. Children thrive in environments that reflect their needs and interests and the layout of the environment nurtures children's well-being by being responsive to relationship building, communication, collaboration, and exploration through play. Our designers were mindful of these environmental attributes when creating the space and atmosphere for the young audience (e.g., pillows and blankets placed purposely on the floor, natural materials as props, nature soundscapes, etc.).



Cuddling in the nests.

### Constructions of Childhood and Practice-Based Research

An image of the child determines everything adults do with young children: how they establish environments, forge relationships with young children, how they interpret children's actions, and how adults structure their own offerings to children for experiences. In order to work in a democratic way with children as co-researchers, as a team we needed to develop a shared understanding of very young children to guide how we engage and create with them. The idea of "co-" sits well with the way that *Flight* describes an "image of the child" as a mighty learner and citizen, one who is competent and rich in potential, and who constructs knowledge through opportunities of exploration and self-expression including art, drama, dance, music, and drawing (Makovichuk et al. 2014, viii). While "the way young children process interactions through their embodied experience [calls] for a performance where the senses are central to the design" (Patel, Schnädelbach, and Koleva 2018, 376), we do not seek to create performances that suggest obvious, or worse, "correct" interpretations. Fletcher-Watson (2015), along with Hovik (2015), describe this form of participatory theatre as "tyrannic" in that children cannot choose how they want to respond or when.

If we position children as co-researchers, co-imaginors of possibilities, and as mighty learners and citizens, we are not likely to create "tyrannic" work. Children choose how, when, and how much to participate: they may watch, they may sit or stand, they may speak or sing, or they may explore the materiality of objects. Their creative ideas and questions, their physical gestures and behaviours, all influence their experience and the experience the actors create. If children are invited to make discoveries during the production play opportunities (such as how high they can jump, how does gravity work on a scarf, what does a squirrel sound like, or what does the texture of a pinecone feel like), their own interests and passions can influence the entire show. Meanwhile, if the actors throw scarves across their shoulders as wings and swoop and soar like magpies, and in so doing, encourage children to join them, each child can fly if and how they wish. Actors avoid soliciting rote and reductive responses, and instead honour the power of each child's imagination. At the same time, the production is democratic in that there is still a collective of people in the space worthy of respect who agree to engage together safely. Adopting practices like these, and by centralizing a respectful view of very young children, the production is shared in a relationship between the actors and the audience, and it can become an experience a child desires. Each child can be an agent in their own theatrical experience.

### Performance-Based Research, Play and Playfulness, Meaning Making and Magic

When working with very young children as co-researchers in a democratic PBR process, adults need to pay attention to how young children are making meaning. One of the most powerful ways we have found to do that is through play. Play is central in a child's life, and through play, they acquire knowledge, skills, and abilities that become the foundation for lifelong learning and development (Dietze and Kashin 2019). In play, children both express and learn about their social, community, and cultural worlds, and when children play with others, they learn how to communicate and cooperate, thus developing socially, morally, and emotionally. They engage in theory-building and hypothesis-testing by playfully exploring and investigating the properties of objects and experimenting with action and reaction (Makovichuk et al. 2014). But Stuart Lester (2020) points out that play is not only for children. He argues that people must consider it essential to regard play as a "vital force of life (for adults and children alike)" (37), that play must be viewed as "a process rather than a product of life" (36) for both children and adults, and that it is important to consider how adults may "act responsibly and responsively with moments of children's play and playfulness" (36).

As we will demonstrate, prioritizing shared play and playfulness welcomes and invites children as co-researchers in our process.

A key PBR principle enhanced by the way we use *Flight* is the core value of the learning disposition *playing and playful* (i.e., “I/we are playing and playful” by inventing, creating, and imagining; Makovichuk et al. 2014, 60). Dispositions are enduring habits of the mind and action. There is a tendency to respond to experiences in characteristic ways (Carr 2006; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2009), and children express their disposition to play and be playful by being playful with ideas, thoughts, and materials supporting their creative and flexible thinking (Makovichuk et al. 2014). Children’s playful disposition is nurtured and strengthened through active play and exploration with others, and through materials that provoke imagination, curiosity, and diverse and unique narratives.

Adults who remember the joys of playfulness, express their playful disposition with children, and view play as both vital and as a process (Lester 2020) honour children and their playful dispositions. Adults modelling their own playful dispositions communicate that playing and playfulness are valued dispositions in the community (Makovichuk et al. 2014). Being an active co-player with/in children’s play situates the adult in a responsive relationship with children and is necessary for collaborative play between and among actors and children.

Play-based relationships are foundational for our theatrical creation and work with young children. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Stage Actors and Acting* entry for “Play” begins by arguing that “a sense of playfulness lies at the heart of all vibrant acting” (Merlin 2015). Although actor theory on play meanders from Konstantin Stanislavski to Keith Johnstone and beyond, we embrace the idea that actors need to be in a “play-full” state (Ayles, Fitzsimmons Frey, and Mykietyshyn 2020) to build relationships with each other, the space, and with children, and to imbue “the actors with the true freedom of ‘living in the moment’” (Merlin 2015) with children. Korean theatre director and thinker Sun-woong Koh argues that theatre should be full of playfulness, and cautions that “play should be meaningful” for the actors and all the participants in the theatre experience (Hur 2015). In other words, there should be “something” meaningful involved in the “playing.” When we use play as a way to co-research, we seek to create meaningful experiences and also to understand how children are meaning-making through play. In our structured moments of reflection, the Cycle of Co-inquiry illuminates these moments of children’s meaning-making.



Child-led movement. Actor: Jessica Jalbert.

By paying attention to children’s play, as practice-based researchers we can gain insights from multiple modes of children’s expression that go beyond words. Children respond and make meaning in multiple ways and through their multiple languages.<sup>4</sup> Children may make meaning by observing, by exploring using their senses, by co-creating dramatic play, or by interpreting the performance with other children or their adult companions. They may also use multimodal literacies, moving from one form of literacy to another: for example, combining and moving ideas from music to movement. Regardless of how they choose to engage with any creative offering, as Manon van de Water explains, emphasis on children “*experiencing* performance transgresses notions of ‘liking’ or ‘not liking’” (Van de Water 2012, 121): instead of attending to children’s apparent preferences, the process invites children to make meaning from the offering.

Alongside applying *Flight’s* principles of co-inquiry, viewing children as mighty learners and citizens, and valuing play and playfulness, we’ve applied the idea that an immersive theatre experience should create conditions for making “magic” to our PBR. Hovik (2015) explains that “magic” happens when children participate on their own terms, collaborating with artists and resources. Most importantly, magic is “making up something wonderful together, something that was not there before, and will vanish when the play is over” (Hovik 2015, 20). In our process, this means that “magic” is central to all of the “co-” ideas related to relationships and to co-imagining, co-creating, and co-researching discussed above. The idea of “vanishing” also means that the experience is ephemeral, that children’s presence and their temporary relationship with the artists truly matters in the moment, and that while the child can apply the experience to future meaning-making



opportunities, the immersive theatrical experience is intended for each child as they are today rather than who they become in the near or distant future.<sup>5</sup>



Silk snow magic.

“Magic” can be a profound aspect of relationships between actors, arts resources, and children. The magic of those moments is possible, in part, because of relationships, and in our process, one way those relationships are developed is through play. In our PBR, both adults and children need to practise “the joys of playfulness” (Neugebauer 1993, 26). By respectfully sharing space, resources, and stories, actors and children co-create something that was not there before, and could not have happened without all the participants.

### Enjoying the *Flight* and Experiencing Turbulence

Although, as previously stated, *The Urban Wildlife Project* encompasses magpies, chickadees, jackrabbits, and squirrels, this article will refer primarily to examples from the process we followed while exploring squirrels. In particular, we imagined several ways to aestheticize and engage with ideas about squirrel behaviours and movements. Our next section offers insights into how we worked through questions we had about pinecones, which are prime squirrel food. We pay special attention to how we learned through our intentional reflective process: the Cycle of Co-inquiry. Following that, we discuss the questions we had about ribbon sticks as a resource to develop expressions of how squirrels move. We explain how the Cycle of Co-inquiry continues to guide our still-unresolved questions and practice-based research process. This section demonstrates how applying our practice-based research methodology enables us to address challenges related to

conducting meaningful co-research with young children. We emphasize what we are learning from our young co-researchers, especially about material resources, relationships, play, agency, meaningful experiences, and making magic together as co-imaginers of possibilities.

### **Pinecones: Lessons in Learning to Share**

In our research process, we learned that even though we had structured our reflection, and prioritized children's meaning-making, and playfulness, truly making "magic"—which requires actors to welcome young co-researchers as co-imaginers—was initially profoundly challenging for our creative team. We determined that treading a balance between an evocative structure that scaffolded a sensory, experiential, loose narrative journey, and relinquishing control by becoming co-imaginers with the young audience required relational skills that the actors had not yet developed. To avoid the "tyranny of participatory theatre" (Fletcher-Watson 2015), we aimed to establish opportunities for ephemeral co-created magic (Hovik 2015), and for democratic relations where children chose how to participate in the theatre experience (e.g., active engagement, participant observer, etc.; Hovik 2019; Makovichuk et al. 2014). Our creative team needed to learn how to nurture relationships with children and create an open, engaging, and responsive environment where exploration and play is purposely planned (Makovichuk et al. 2014). Establishing conditions for reciprocity during both artist residencies and immersive theatre performances is essential for us and our young research collaborators. As we will discuss next, using the Cycle of Co-inquiry to structure our reflective process helped us to understand how our creative practice needed to shift to better incorporate young participants in the work.

Our PBR, animated by children as co-researchers, is particularly well-illuminated through the introduction of one key scenic element: pinecones. Pinecones are a source of wonder, and like other natural materials used in children's play, they are "potent sources of enchantment" (Talbot and Frost 1989, 14) that invite magical thinking. Pinecones are a simple material that children can experience in their everyday lives. They are found objects (e.g., collected underneath trees, pulled off low hanging branches) and classified as "loose parts" in children's play (Daly and Beloglovsky 2014). Loose parts are alluring, beautiful found objects that children can move, manipulate, and control in their play and exploration (Daly and Beloglovsky 2014). Children tend to gravitate toward objects, like pinecones, which they can move, carry, collect, combine, design, and rearrange.



Sharing pinecones.

Just as children in ELM's program do, our creative team took a hike in Edmonton's downtown river valley (the largest urban park in Canada) to gather experiential information. The actors delighted in watching red squirrels (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*) scabble through the forest leaf litter, searching for a delicious snack, and sometimes bounding off carrying pinecones that looked to be as big as they were. In our city, pinecones are ubiquitous. There are long golden sticky ones; small, soft, ovoid ones; and a variety of sizes of hard, roundish ones. Since they contain numerous seeds, each one has multiple parts; they smell like forests; they are light in weight, and most fit easily into a child's hand. Squirrels collect and hoard, guard and steal, and messily munch pinecones, creating scatterings of pinecone debris in great piles of glorious mess. We collected dry, hard, rounded cones to play with in rehearsal.



Red Squirrel (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*).

There is an everydayness to pinecones yet also a newness due to their open-endedness and infinite play possibilities. The actors enthusiastically played at all of the squirrel behaviours they observed, especially taking pleasure in stealing from one another and finding ways to messily “eat” the pinecones, frenetically tossing them aside throughout the rehearsal space. These pinecone play sessions were absolute moments of what Neugebauer (1993) describes as the joys of adult playfulness (26). The pleasure the actors took in embodying squirrel behaviour is also an example of what Stephen Rable argues is essential for successful theatre for the very young: the material must be important to the adults as well as the children (Rable, in Van de Water 2012, 135). We planned to offer pinecones to children in hopes of intriguing them, sparking their interest and curiosity, and pulling them into the theatrical experience as the actors engaged with the pinecones through their active storytelling.



Squirrel play. Actors: Emma Abbott and Ayla Gandall.

While the actors revelled in the joy of playing at squirrels with an abundance of resources, in retrospect (and in a very squirrel-like way), they wanted to maintain control of the pinecones: they were initially reluctant to share the joy and the resources with the children. As a creative team, we needed to learn how to share the space, materials, and narrative with children, and how to build and maintain relationships that nurture shared decision-making and foster the in-the-moment, co-constructed playful experiences that nurture democratic citizenship, where children have opportunities to participate and have their perspectives heard and respected. The adults needed to practice truly democratic relations and expand their playful disposition to include the audience/co-researchers.



To demonstrate how the Cycle of Co-inquiry enabled us to learn from children’s play, meaning-making, and incorporate their ideas as co-researchers, we will examine our experience developing pinecone play. To date, we have explored three iterations of the pinecone play, and through the Cycle of Co-inquiry, we have learned a great deal from our child co-researchers through co-imagining possibilities with them.



Squirrel play quarrel. Actors: Ayla Gandall and Aidan Spila.

Our first lesson with pinecones taught us the importance of “co-” on many levels: co-inquiry, co-imagining possibilities, and creating conditions concerning materials and space that facilitate productive co-research. Alone, in the studio, the actors created an exceptionally dynamic scene in which they performed “as-if” they were squirrels. They developed all kinds of business related to stealing, hoarding, and eating pinecones.

To explore squirrels, we used recordings of squirrel vocalizations that provided a sonic landscape whenever actors performed squirrel movement, and we hoped that this would help young audiences locate the scene in the world of the squirrels. We also explored squirrel sounds in more abstract, aestheticized ways through actor voice work, noisemakers, and percussion instruments. Embodying squirrels was challenging. Human bodies are heavy, and gravity mocked many of our attempts at whole-bodied manifestations of squirrels. Actors practised moving their bodies as squirrels, and by exploring squirrel-like movements they discovered ways to move as if they were going up and down walls ([video of actor embodying squirrel](#)).

The actors were relatively inexperienced in building relationships, sharing space and materials, and co-creating narratives with young children. Based on experiences that they had earlier with the ribbons (discussed next), their exuberant play felt dangerous to them when they had the opportunity to share the space with children. Suddenly, the actors worried that the children may get in the way, interrupt the flow of the theatrical business they had planned, and get hurt.



Squirrel play with children. Actors: Emma Abbott and Ayla Gandall.

One actor was worried that there would be collisions and accidents during the performance, which might physically injure the actors and the children. They did not trust the scene they had created in rehearsal to keep the children riveted as witness-participants and they were not yet willing to accept the children as co-creating active-participants. In the moment of sharing, they actually truncated the scene, leaving out some of the dynamic business that the actors enjoyed most.

Using the Cycle of Co-inquiry, we reflected and wondered “what happened?” The Cycle invites us to think about children’s meaning-making, and in our work, we also needed to rethink how we improvised and shared the play space and play resources with children. To “Talk the Documentation,” we watched videos and examined images from the offerings and discussed the possible meanings of the children’s playful contributions and provided space for the actors to reflect on their experiences, particularly as co-creators with the children. We learned that our actors needed to understand more clearly how the children who chose to actively participate, rather than witness, were co-creating narratives in a way that was improvisational and contributing meaning to the whole experience. As trained actors know, improv offers opportunities to utilize imagination, collaborate, and spontaneously express oneself (DeBettignies and Goldstein 2019), directly challenging scripts and “ought to” adherence. Improvisation is deeply relational, requiring each person to offer and receive, resulting in a co-constructed experience (Pelo and Carter 2018). As something new is co-created, new learnings, insights, deeper self-awareness, or new questions arise. Improvisational players join attention and take flight on a new shared journey, creating the map as they go (Pelo and Carter 2018).

In spite of their improv training, our actors saw the devised research process in discrete steps that did not *really* involve co-creating with children: (a) improvise in the rehearsal hall; (b) present an offering to the children; (c) analyze the experience through the Cycle of Co-inquiry; and then (d) respond by improvising better in the rehearsal hall before sharing with a child audience again. If the actors were to adopt Hovik's (2015) encouragement to make magic as "something wonderful together" and "something that was not there before," they needed to arrive prepared but open to serendipity and ready to play with children. Instead of improvising better in the rehearsal hall, the actors needed to be ready to accept the children's offers as co-imaginers, or fellow improvisers, in the moment, allowing the immersive theatre experience to be an opportunity to co-create narratives together.



Talking the documentation. Left to right: Heather Fitzsimmons Frey, Courtney Dewar, Emma Abbott, Ayla Gandall, and Aidan Spila.

After talking the documentation (watching videos, analyzing photographs, discussing what we observed), in February of 2020, prior to the implementation of COVID-19 restrictions, we visited the ELM classroom for a mini artist residency to purposefully explore items and ideas that had left us unsatisfied as theatre makers (e.g., the work with pinecones and also the work with the ribbons, which we discuss next). The pinecones seemed to spark curiosity as the children found the stash of pinecones well before we were ready to offer them, but this time, the actors were ready to be led by the children. Children also found our squirrel puppets, and an elaborate game emerged of feeding the squirrel, who the children insisted was to be animated by one of the actors. Initially, children fed



the squirrel pinecones. Soon, inspired by the idea of feeding the actor as a squirrel, they reimagined what squirrel food might be, and they operated a pizza parlour. Before long, the only kind of pizza the actor as squirrel could order was highly poisonous scorpion pizza! Children laughed at the danger, at their own power, and at the shared silliness of play. Meanwhile, the actor allowed himself to be guided by the children's narrative: not only did he follow the improv theatre adage of "yes, let's" and "yes, and," he also became invested in the absurdity of the co-created vignette, engaging as a co-imaginer of possibilities. Neugebauer (1993) notes that the process of play exists "in a context of timelessness," that "the process is valued beyond the outcome," and that it "finds its own end, just as it found its own beginning" (26). The actor played the game as long as it interested the children, migrating to another part of the classroom only when it seemed like everyone was satisfied. We learned some valuable lessons about pinecone play: pinecones as objects are fascinating to children and adults; pinecones are highly evocative of squirrels, but also have the potential to evolve into something else; and pinecone play is most fun when it is truly shared among interested participants.



Scorpion Pizza. Actor: Aidan Spila.

The Cycle of Co-inquiry continues to circle. As we interpret how young people are making meaning with our creative offering, we must respond with more action. Our most recent exploration of pinecone play incorporated what we learned from talking the documentation of the first two interactions: we needed to share the pinecones, which means we needed an abundance of resources (Talbot and Frost 1989); we needed to be sure that the structure invited children to play *with* the actors; we needed to be sure that the actors could feel safe; and we needed to provide space for the children to be able to influence the narrative and the action.

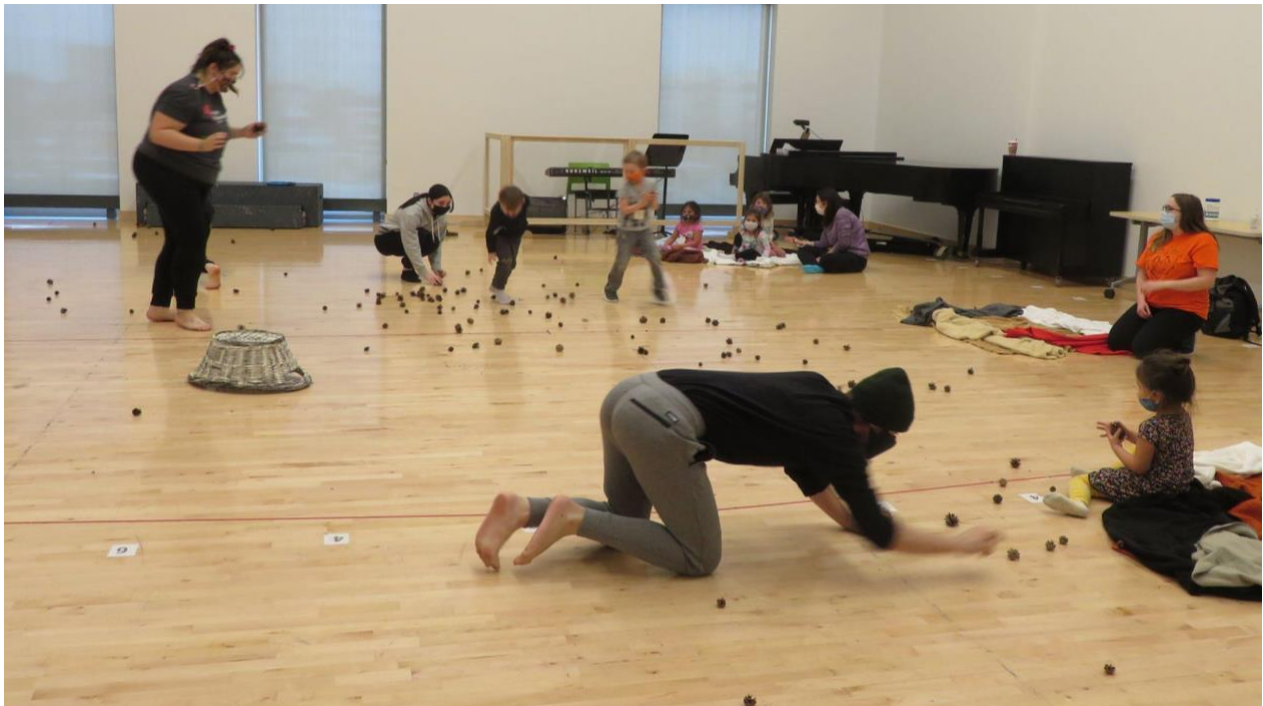
After hours of playing with our young co-researchers, then reflecting on their meaning-making and our exploration through the Cycle of Co-inquiry, our creative team felt ready to try some things that would have seemed risky earlier on in our process but now felt like opportunities to co-imagine possibilities with the children.





Squirrel and pinecone play with two- and three-year-olds. Actors: Grace Mann and Jamie Leach.

One of the most dramatic changes was to have a basket of approximately one hundred pinecones ready to offer during the theatrical experience. When we brought the pinecones into the performance area, the first thing we did was reveal the contents of the basket to the children. For some children, that was an invitation to engage with the material and with the actors, and for others, it was an opportunity to see above the edge of a basket that they were not tall enough to see over. The actors planned a variety of squirrel business involving the pinecones: collecting and hoarding them, hiding them under blankets, stealing them from each other, chasing one another, and ultimately spilling the entire basket of pinecones so that they scattered throughout the space ([video of pinecone spill for two- and three-year-olds](#)).



Pinecone dump with four- and five-year-olds. Actors, left to right: Emily Smith, Grace Mann, Aidan Spila.

We imagined that children would want to observe the action between the actors, or that they would want to co-create the narrative—and they did! Some observed, some engaged with pinecones, some engaged with actors, and some involved the educators. We presented this vignette three times, to three different age groups of children. Each time, the story was different, but the scaffold was the same. In the case of a group of four- and five-year-olds, most of the children watched the actors perform for nearly five minutes before participating. In the case of the two- and three-year-olds, as soon as the basket was shown, some children came forward and considered taking pinecones from the basket and began to follow the actors through their story. The youngest group of one- and two-year-olds included a number of children who watched the action at first, but also some who physically engaged immediately, either taking pinecones or trying to take the entire basket.



Stealing the basket.

In all three age groups, children began engaging with actors, helping them hide or steal pinecones from each other; others chose to offer pinecones for actors to eat and chose to pretend to eat pinecones as well. Educators and children also began to play at hiding and eating pinecones. One member of the team began a game of hiding pinecones one at a time, while a child watched intently. When the last pinecone had been hidden, the child chose to run off and explore elsewhere.



Feeding pinecones to Heather.

Older children eagerly initiated narratives that encouraged actors to chase them, and even called out to the actors, taunting, “look at these acorns! I’ve got some acorns!” (In this case the children were mislabeling pinecones as acorns, something we noticed some of their educators did too).



Storing pinecones for winter. Actor: Aidan Spila.



One child tried to feed an actor so many pinecones that he told the child he could not eat all of them and they would need to store some for winter, opening up a game of hiding the pinecones. Another child invented a bowling-pinecones game with one of the educators ([bowling pinecones video](#)). When the pinecones were scattered, the youngest children enjoyed kicking through them (perhaps experiencing the sounds and textures of the cones on the floor), while the oldest children rapidly hid as many as they could until the entire room was empty.



Hiding pinecones. Actor: Aidan Spila.

Unlike during the first sharing, the actors were confident that they could play with the children safely and could co-create narratives and co-imagine possibilities with them. The general shape of the immersive theatre experience could accommodate children's initiatives while still ensuring that key moments could happen for the benefit of children and adults who preferred to be witnesses rather than active narrative influencers: if children wished, the actors could share the space and narrative in ways that enabled them to participate and construct their story in ways that interested them. The environment was designed for young children's play regardless of the age group. This invited the children to respond to the environment in ways appropriate for them. As there were so many pinecones, and as the actors were more confident, it was easy to share the resources, space, and narrative scaffold they established, while still accepting creative offers from the children.





Blanket nests.

We noted that the environment of pinecones and fabric nests functioned slightly differently for each of the age groups who visited, but we were not positive whether differences in responses and meaning-making were a result of individual personalities in the groups or because of their ages. In any case, all children were able to enjoy the same space, materials, and story structure, in their own ways. Instead of feeling *dangerous* to the actors, these decisions felt like opportunities for co-imagining and for joyfully making a little magic together.

Our cyclical PBR process brought us to the point that, by respectfully sharing space, resources, and stories, actors and children could co-create something that was not there before and could not have happened without all the participants. Using the Cycle of Co-inquiry after our first offering, we observed and documented both the actors and the children, then “Talked the Documentation” with the actors and educators. At the classroom workshop, we invited the children to be co-researchers, reflecting and making meaning with the actors and using props from the first offerings. Then, as theatre makers, we reflected on that experience and discussed the next steps required to invite the children into the narrative as co-imaginers of possibilities. Reminding ourselves of the necessity of “co-” throughout our process, we encouraged our actors to think like improvisers and be open to offers from children. We provided an abundance of pinecones and devised a flexible framework in terms of movement, theatrical action, and time that allowed the audience to engage playfully and co-create a new narrative.



Eating and sharing pinecones. Actor: Aidan Spila.

### **Flight, Ribbons, and Learning to Make Magic**

While we are satisfied with what we have learned about incorporating pinecones and pinecone play into our immersive theatre experience, we are still in the process of making decisions about squirrel movement, and here, we will share how our research looks when we are still working through some creative questions.

Squirrels are quicksilver, fast moving, aerial acrobats that challenged our actors in terms of movement. Our actors explored a wide range of ideas about how to create squirrel-ness. This exploration included thinking about how we experience squirrels through sound, sight, and gesture. Because physical whole-bodied manifestations of squirrels did not always feel particularly successful, during our creative process we put the full-bodied exploration away for a while to explore more metaphorical interpretations of squirrel-ness. We experimented with rhythmic gymnastic ribbons to evoke the gravity-defying and flowing, rippling, liquid motion of an acrobatic squirrel, as if we were drawing the movement trajectory in space with the ribbon. We teamed the ribbons with the sound recordings of squirrels chattering and remonstrating.



Rehearsing with ribbons. Left to right: Aidan Spila, Emma Abbott, and Ayla Gandall.

For our actors, the connection was clear. The ribbons danced and moved in a way their large human bodies could not, tracing the movement path of a squirrel, rather than operating like a puppet of the squirrel's body. Using the sound recording as a musical score, the actors developed a vignette in which the three ribbon-squirrels explored space and chased and scolded one another. In Van de Water's analysis, she uses the words of Norwegian theatre-for-early-years director Ivar Selmer-Olson, who argues that artists should be open to ambiguity and hard questions in theatre for the very young because "we will never be able to control the way that art will be understood,' whether by children or adults" and because, "like adults, children are able to perceive art as expressing ideas that have not yet been expressed, as well as experiencing the mystery of aesthetics" (Van de Water 2012, 124–25). We determined that whether or not children linked the ribbons with the idea of tracing squirrel movement through the air, the vignette was worth sharing, and we were excited to see how they would respond.



Performing with ribbons. Actor: Aidan Spila.



In our first workshop performance in an early learning classroom, the action did not go as planned, but not because the children reinterpreted the ribbons in unexpected ways. Although the actors began with their rehearsed motions, and the children observed, the dynamic soon shifted. Children, in the enclosed and crowded space of their classroom, *desired* the ribbons. They wanted to interact with the actors in a way that had not been foreseen, grabbing the ribbons as they went by, playing tug of war, and calling to each other. The actors, who were using the pre-recorded squirrel soundscape as a score for ribbon choreography, wanted to carry out their rehearsed structured movement, but the children demonstrated through their action that they wanted to participate, and co-create the narrative instead of just watching it. The actors had not anticipated this interaction and did not know how to respond. In the chronology of our research, this event happened very early, at a point in our research process when actors had not yet learned the significance of sharing resources, reciprocity, and co-imagining narratives. The children perceived the ribbons as an offer to play, but the actors were focused on presenting their choreography. After struggling to control the narrative, the actors responded by trying to put the ribbons away and move on to the next segment of our creative offering. However, the ribbons were so seductive and desirable that a few children retrieved them from our prop box where the actors had hidden them. Children raced around the room waving sticks, playing tug of war, wrapping ribbons around themselves, laughing, shrieking, and calling out “freeze” as if the ribbon sticks were wands ([video of ribbon difficulties](#)). We eventually managed to move on by introducing a segment that involved small rabbit puppets with gentle calming music.



Ribbon desires. Actors, left to right: Ayla Gandall, Aidan Spila, Emma Abbott.

Using *Flight*, we could interpret this experience in so many ways. In terms of practice-based research, we responded by talking the documentation through *Flight's* Cycle of Co-inquiry to help us identify



how to make changes that would support actors and children as co-imaginors of an immersive theatre experience. For example, drawing on multiple perspectives of the process, we could focus on children's meaning-making and their desire for what's called "dizzy play" (Ayles, Fitzsimmons Frey, Mykietyshyn 2020; Makovichuk 2014, 101), or we could focus on co-creation and creative possibility, or we could discuss the total pandemonium and mayhem and profound anxiety that our actors experienced when they lost control and were confronted with their assumptions about children and immersive theatre research. Early childhood educators learn to notice, name, and then nurture as they move through the Cycle. As our chart of Co-inquiry Descriptions indicates, as theatre practitioners, we explore questions within the theatrical construct, offering and accepting children's desire to contribute to the narrative and to co-construct shared experiences.

The vision of the *Flight* framework highlights how curriculum and creative decisions reflect professional values of democratic citizenship and equity and principles that children are citizens and active participants in society. Our hierarchical artistic decisions established a structure which mobilized an atmosphere that demanded children submit to adult control and rules rather than approach the creative experience on their own terms. Dalija Acin Thelander, who creates award-winning dance productions for infants, argues that creative decisions point to assumptions and to beliefs about children, power dynamics, and the values artists would like to affirm or contest. She explains that artists' answers to "why" they make an aesthetic choice reveal whether "they are interested in confirming something, or criticizing" (Acin Thelander, in Fitzsimmons Frey 2023, 112). Our process demonstrated that, like the students Thelander teaches, our creative team members were so absorbed in discourses about children, childhood, and how theatre is made, that we had not questioned our ideas or seen the political implications of our creative choices. The honest reflective Co-inquiry process meant that the creative team experienced a significant paradigm shift, drawing away from how we, as individuals, may have been treated by adults when we were children. Instead, we have begun learning to make decisions based on positioning children not only as mighty learners but also as co-researchers with whom we can co-construct meaningful experiences if we establish conditions that facilitate them. *Flight* reminds us that democratic citizenship means that children and their families have opportunities to freely participate and act upon their experiences (Makovichuk et al. 2014). When we create meaningful aesthetic experiences, we also need to embrace the idea that children might choose to freely participate in them, and possibly repurpose those experiences to suit their own interests and meaning-making. At the same time, we want to be sure that the other side of "co-" is fully actionable and create conditions that enable the adult actors to be visible, rather than invisible, and to share their creative ideas and explorations within a space that fosters democratic relations.

*Flight* argues that equity means that each person receives what they need to participate and contribute—and our dramatic structure in this early offering asked children to stay in place, to wait until the adult actors were done, until the moment when we planned that they would get their turn during after play (the play time we had prepared for). We also did not offer adequate resources (i.e., abundant ribbon sticks) for children to fully participate in the experience in the ways that they craved. At the same time, the actors did not have what they needed: they did not feel like they were able to share their best work. The actors were so overwhelmed at this point that we decided not to include the ribbons as part of the next offering. We needed to take time to reflect on the experience and learn more about our creative process through other resources first—and in fact, the resource we decided to explore was the pinecones we discussed in the previous section. We also needed to understand how to work with children and the ribbons better. Co-researching with actors and children means acknowledging that children's meaning-making through play and actors' experiences

can propel us toward a richer, more meaningful experience for both children and actors. As artists who want to create a respectful, democratic environment, we changed our approach to working when we explored the ribbons.



Ribbon envy.

As mentioned above, one of *Flight's* core values is play and playfulness and expressing a playful disposition, and one way we have reflected on our ribbons experiments is through that lens. To be playful with children requires adults to follow children's lead in their play (Makovichuk et al. 2014). Children often create disorder and reorder within playful experiences, which can feel uncomfortable for adults who focus on order, routines, and appearances (Neugebauer 1993). All of these adult concepts were present in our original un-flexible ribbon choreography, which linked each actor gesture to a squirrel sound and a fixed narrative. Our tantalizing resources (i.e., the three ribbon sticks) and inventive but predetermined choreography left no room for children to co-create—although, to be very clear, their presence, curiosities, and actions meant that they were operating as welcome and valued co-researchers in our PBR process.



Ribbon exploration. Actor: Chelo Ledma.

In spite of the fact that we did not include the ribbons vignette in the next iteration, we identified ribbons as an area for further exploration and growth in our February 2020 mini artist residency. Reflecting through the Cycle of Co-inquiry, we looked at children's clear desire to be part of the ribbon-squirrels and the actors' discomfort with the chaos that resulted. We believed the ribbons had aesthetic potential and offered an opportunity to introduce a theatrical language that also invited multimodal literacy explorations. How could we embrace the "dizzy play" the ribbons seemed to encourage and still create an aesthetic work that offered something meaningful to children? Working with a smaller group of children in a more "artist-residency" format, we decided to share the ribbon-squirrel prop and learn how children wanted to play with them. In this exploratory (rather than performative) research investigation, the ribbons were something that some children wanted to play with and master. One boy spent almost all of our one-hour visit practising the skill, first with a researcher and then on his own, determining the method of undulation and creating spirals in the air.





Help with ribbons. Researcher: Margaret Mykietyshyn.

As co-researchers, the actors and children played with the ribbon sticks together in their classroom, which afforded us an opportunity to think differently about the potential of the ribbon prop, and about the possibilities of co-imagining narratives that used those ribbons—without being concerned about children’s safety or creating a chaotic environment. The ELM children were contributing to our research initiative through their dedicated and self-directed play. Below, we offer an analysis of the way the boy in the picture above approached playing with the ribbon stick. Understanding his serious exploration as play is helping us to reimagine ribbons as an aspect of our immersive theatrical experience.

Aspects of Play and Child-led Practice-Based Research Examples					
Aspect of play	Intrinsically motivated	Enjoyable and pleasurable	Child-initiated	Symbolic or non-literal component	Actively engaged
Characteristic description	It is an end in itself and done only for the satisfaction of simply playing (Hughes, 2010).	Children tend to express positive affect/pleasant emotions when engaged in play.	The child must freely choose to engage in play as opposed to forced to play (Vandenberg, 1983).	Component meaning behaviors may be exaggerated in intensity or duration, or the player uses objects to represent other objects.	Whether physically, psychologically, or both, as opposed to passive or indifference to the activity.
Example	Although we offered the ribbon as a tool, the boy decided that he wanted to play with the ribbon and playing with the ribbon was an end in itself, since he was not being encouraged to achieve anything or apply these skills in the future.	The boy was focused and serious, but also smiling.	The boy drew the ribbon away from the rest of the group and worked out how to manipulate it on his own. Then he drew aside a member of our creative team and asked her to show him some techniques.	It is possible that the boy accepted the ribbon as squirrel. He repeated this play over an extended period of time.	After some time the boy moved to a different area of the classroom to practice on his own: clearly child-led play.



Ribbon-squirrels remain an area for further exploration for us. We know that children are interested in the ribbons and the ribbon sticks. As with the successful experiment with the pinecones, we believe that we need an abundance of props to share, more space for exuberant action, and more time for our child theatre audiences to explore them while also experiencing an actor-prepared scaffold of squirrel business. Stephen Rable emphasizes the importance of creating material that is important to the adults as well as the children (Rable, in Van de Water 2012, 134). We believe that shared, meaning-rich ribbon experiences that satisfy both actors and children are possible, and we will continue to investigate the ribbons as an abstraction of squirrel-movement trajectories because it appeals to us aesthetically.



Ribbon mastery.

Norwegian director Ivar Selmer-Olson maintains that relevant art for young children has to challenge them here and now: “They have the right to experience the extraordinary, to experience powerful, pleasure-giving, and challenging art” (Van De Water 2012, 124). Within theatre for early years practitioners, there is a debate about whether art for young children is primarily a communication of ideas (and, therefore, that the *audience* is central), or whether art should be

challenging, as Selmer-Olson suggests, and is in fact a confrontation in which *aesthetics* are central (Van De Water 2012, 131). In our case, since *Flight* highlights the importance of developing multimodal literacies *and* of children's meaning-making, we value the opportunities for theatrical communication and for confrontation. Whether or not children ultimately understand the ribbons as tracing squirrel movement through the air may not matter to our performance, but what will matter is that they feel like they and their imaginations are welcome to co-create something magical and special in that moment of the immersive experience.

As a facet of the Cycle of Co-inquiry, our classroom explorations enabled us to take a step back so that the children could choose how or if they wanted to step forward. This allowed for a more democratic interaction between the actors and their co-researchers. Our pinecone play learning, which supported exuberant, enthusiastic, child and adult co-creation, helped us see how creating an immersive theatre experience featuring the ribbons could be possible. By talking the documentation, we determined that we need to provide more opportunities for our child audience to experience using the ribbons for themselves. Time to master the skill and to experiment needs to be part of the immersive experience itself. In addition to providing more ribbons as resources and thus creating a space of abundance, we need to create a more flexible scaffold for this vignette that will, like the pinecone play, be able to accommodate multiple narratives, and adjust as our future audiences offer imaginative and unexpected possibilities. Ideally, in the spirit of co-research, adults and children will both revel in the inspiration the ribbons provide. As a result of our process, while recognizing that adults need to be engaged and interested, we found ways to centre children, to meaningfully make space for their agency and for interpreting their meaning-making on their terms: through relationship, play, and fostering magic together.

### **Fledgling PBR for the Very Young**

Children support our PBR by sharing their ways of making-meaning, and by playing with our creative team: in so doing, they act as co-researchers in a way that is reminiscent of theatrical devising (see Ayles, Fitzsimmons Frey, and Mykietyshyn 2022), challenging actors to accept their imaginative offerings during the course of the immersive theatrical experience. *Flight* explains that playing is “inventing, creating, imagining, and taking risks in the spirit of learning,” and that to be playful with children requires adults to follow children's lead in their play (Makovichuk et al. 2014, 53). To play freely and joyfully adult co-researchers must be willing to be generous with time, energy, and resources, and to embrace the potentiality of spontaneity, chaos, and unpredictability that often comes about in play. We expand *Flight's* ideas to suggest that play-based responses to experiences can not only move between “the world as it is,” and “the worlds they [children] create” (Makovichuk et al. 2014, 99), but also the world as a performance presents it.

With pinecone play, we learned that a messy and loosely structured scaffold welcomed our child co-researchers to respond and advance the narrative. As we cycled through our reflective process, we became aware of how much our creative team's previously held discourses about children, theatre, and hierarchical adult-child relations influenced the work we were creating—and we realized that we all needed to disrupt our habits and adopt an image of the child that recognizes children as inventive, creative, and capable co-researchers. Actor training is often based in relationships exclusively with other actors and creators and not necessarily with an audience. Even actors trained in improvisation are often more used to accepting offers from adult audiences rather than from child and youth audience members. After working through the Cycle of Co-inquiry, our actors were

confident and flexible enough to accept children’s ideas about pinecones. Actors were able to embrace children’s improvisational offerings and respond with “yes, and.” Rather than feeling the need to control the experiences, our actors saw the co-creation and co-imagining with our young co-researchers as opportunities for all members of the creative team—including the adults—to play and learn and share.

Ribbon play is another example of how adopting flexible thinking that accepts children as co-imaginors of the entire evolving theatrical experience will enable multiple, and potentially unexpected, co-creation possibilities. Our explorations with ribbons taught us how to be mindful of meaningful ways to work with very young children as co-researchers; how to pay attention to democratic “co-imagining” and to honour children as mighty citizens; and how to interpret their play-based and play-full meaning making in ways that served our goals to conduct PBR with children. Expanding our conception of how children may want to engage with our performance material, and ensuring that abundant resources and space are available to support their interests, are key ways that we are effectively developing *The Urban Wildlife Project*. Through our experience, we developed strategies to open up spaces for children’s co-creation of the theatrical worlds that an immersive experience can offer—to co-imagine the magical, ephemeral moments Hovik advocates for.



We jump so high! Actor: Aidan Spila.

Our research process affirms that creative practice-based research that positions very young children as co-researchers can be rich and generative, but it is essential to establish a responsive environment that honours each child as a capable mighty learner and citizen (Makovichuk et al. 2014) and to envision an immersive theatrical offering that values each co-contributor, whether child or adult. We used *Flight* to guide our play with children and *Flight*'s model of co-inquiry to structure our reflection on our theatrical experiences with young children. Furthermore, by honouring very young children’s

meaning-making through play, and by establishing conditions for playfulness, the children could be active co-researchers in our performance-based research. Democratic relationships in PBR, where child audiences are valued as co-contributors, can move us beyond a static and repetitive theatrical offering to a rich and multilayered theatre piece. By respectfully sharing space, resources, and narratives, actors and children co-create something that was not there before and could not have happened without all the participants. The possibilities are endless.



Taking flight. Actor: Aidan Spila.

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## Notes

1. Our names are presented alphabetically, to emphasize that our leadership, writing, and creative processes are non-hierarchical and collaborative, and to demonstrate equally shared authorship.
2. For more detail on the dramaturgical process, see Ayles, Fitzsimmons Frey, and Mykietyshyn (2022).
3. Theories of play and playfulness stem from a wide range of disciplines, including Reggio Emilia approach, Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, and Piaget's cognitive developmental theory, not to mention more drama- and theatre-based approaches to play such as Keith Johnstone's Impro theatre theory (1979), Viola Spolin's theatre games approach (1985, 1986, 1999), and Dorothy Heathcote's inspiring concepts of Mantle of the Expert and Rolling Roll (1995).
4. Loris Malaguzzi (1981) describes multimodal literacies and the multiple languages of children in his "100 Languages" poem that became a primary Reggio Emilia principle.
5. For more information regarding ways people often emphasize children's futures rather than their presents, see the idea of "human beings vs. human becomings" in James, Jenks, and Prout (1998).

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