Play Probes
Understanding young people through playful expressions

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Understanding young people can be a difficult matter when one is past that age. Stories of misunderstandings stemming from generational divides are ubiquitous. A virus, such as Covid-19, threatens to create a deeper generational divide and possibly lead to the problem reaching a magnitude not seen before. This paper investigates how probes with play triggers can yield a deeper understanding of today’s youth. By analyzing the outcome of 54 youth-created play probes, clustered themes were identified, and the selected ones have been presented in detail. The preliminary conclusions indicate that the play probes allow access to insights about young people using expressive formats such as construction and fantasy play. This study contributes to design research by illustrating how probes can help learn about the inner workings of the young generations. Further, it suggests that adding play to probes can foster enhanced social interactions in families with teenage members.

Keywords: Probes; Youth; Play; Reframing; Materials

Accelerated generational divides
Working with young people and discovering what is going on in their lives can be a difficult task. The amount of information they tend to provide and that can be observed is often only a small fragment of the world and culture they grow up in. Individuals in this specific age group—in this case, ranging from the ages of 14 to 17—are transitioning from being children to becoming adults. This is a critical time and a unique transformation in one’s life—an area of research often neglected in design research.

These young generations are the future; however, there is often a risk of a generational divide arising because of missed opportunities to obtain an in-depth understanding of the lives of these future generations. As stated by Duncan et al. (2009), it can be difficult to learn about this target group, as they are in a transition stage in their life that influences what they might share with people from outside their own network. Studies show that an increasing number of young people get diagnoses such as depression, stress, and other conditions, that are increasingly affecting their mental health (Skovlund et al., 2017).

Through an enhanced understanding of the everyday lives of those younger than ourselves, the proposition is that there is a better chance of building bridges between generations, whereas, on the other hand, there exists a risk of their desires, needs, and struggles being misunderstood and misinterpreted. Using alternative forms of expressions, can be a way to open up for underlying and unforeseen issues in the world of young people.

This paper introduces a possible design research direction we have named play probes. We consider this to be a means for gaining access to insights about young people through expressive formats of their choosing and include play triggers to initiate social interactions with those who are close by. This paper is a part of a bigger research project that investigated how play probes can be developed to aid the quest for understanding young people’s everyday lives, including their thought processes, motives, cultural habits, etc. to be able to understand and design for youth, alternative ways of making inquiries and reach insights that will create
opportunities for radical or alternative framing of design problems. Hence aiming to bring to the surface, possibly hidden social problems that affect life situations for younger people and their school life.

The intention of the play probe is to provide a toolkit for working with young people, across fields, such as design, healthcare and education, that can both provide new knowledge and ways of outlet, but also provides value in return to the young people. What the tests of the probes have indicated, is that despite the probes aiming to get insights about the young people filling it out, the participants also respond positive towards it, due to i.e., exploring materials not present in their everyday-lives, experiencing enjoyment in relation to some of the activities, being social in regards to solving the tasks, the exploration of something new and increased attention and curiosity from their parents and siblings. This feedback is based on interviews, informal feedback and what is present in the probes. Hence the play probe is a means for inquiry that also aims to provide immediate value in return to the young people participating, while additionally providing a safe space and ownership over how, when and how the young people share the information, they feel a desire to share, within the frame set by the probe. An aspect emphasized by the teachers involved in this research, is the prospects of using materials and play through these probes, to provide a voice for things the young people have difficulties expressing through words. The world of young people is not divided strictly e.g., in school and leisure, as a lot of their lives surrounds the social life, needs and emotions that occurs both within school and outside the school, and hence though these probes are to be filled out in their homes, they also present relevant information that are present throughout the young people’s school-time, the teachers emphasized their holistic view upon the young people they worked with.

From Cultural probes to Play probes

The use of probes as a method gained prominence in research after Gaver, Dunne and Pacenti (1999) introduced the cultural probe. This focused on creating kits that had different activities for the participants to carry out in familiar settings, such as their home or in other everyday natural environments. The activities were of an aesthetic and reflective nature, aimed to provide inspiration to the researcher working with the probes, and were meant to serve as an alternative to the more ethnography-based observational approaches, such as interviews or observations which requires the presence of the researcher (Gaver et al., 1999). As previously stated, working with young people created a desire from us, to give these young people some of the control in how, when and what they wished to share, together with the possibility of going and forth to the probes and even change responses, before handing it back. Both in our interviews with teachers and social workers, it became clear that in many cases where young people are asked to share information, they are met with words only, either written or spoken, and the same goes for how the young people are expected to provide responses.

Design probes

Later, the concept of probes was further developed to fit different purposes and contexts. Mattelmäki (2006) defined the Design Probe and emphasized that we need to take the participants and their probes more serious, by not just using them for inspiration. Hence, the author insisted that the probes should be followed up with, for instance, interviews with the researcher to enable the gathering of actual findings and the creation of inspiration to lead to the next stages of design development (Mattelmäki, 2006).

Overall, a probe consists of different activities within a topic with the aim of using, for example, materials, images, and drawings to discover aspects that might not have been found without the probes. It provides a sense of intimacy when being filled out, as the probes are to be filled out at home. This diminishes some of the ethical issues involved in other ethnographic methods, as the participants are in control of what information they provide to the researcher and how they do it.

Sanders and Stappers (2014, p.6) argue, “Methods and tools for making give people – designers and non-designers – the ability to make ‘things’ that describe future objects, concerns or opportunities. They can also provide views on future experiences and future ways of living.” These authors used concepts that were similar to probes but were used more as synthesizing tools that were handed out before e.g., an interview. In this case, the aim was to create a bigger foundation for the subsequent stages of the design process. The emphasis was still on making and on how materials and tools can elicit findings. The use of a sensitizing phase is explained as participants performing “a series of small exercises designed to let them think about past experiences…” (Sleeswijk Visser et al., 2005, p.126).

Diary method

Another approach for understanding a target group that inspired this study is the use of diary methods (Bolger,
Davis and Rafaeli, 2002). This also offers the benefits of capturing information in real time and in a natural setting for the participants (in their homes, while traveling, and so on). Carter and Mankoff (2005) further elaborate on the use of media in the diary study method. They state that photos can be used later on as cues for associations in, for example, interviews and that the photos often contain crucial information that would not have been available with just a written diary, the background in a photograph for an example.

Play connected to probe design
Generally, play is, for many, perceived as something children do. However, it has been found that play exist across all ages and stages of development. Mouritsen (1998, p.13) argues that “the phasing-out of play is a factor in what we understand as children’s development. This does not mean that adults do not or cannot play. They can and do – more than we are normally aware.”

Play is often described as an activity that is the result of an intent to experience fun and enjoyment (Piaget, 1970); but there exist various different foci and definitions for play. In this research, the definition of play that is followed is in line with that of Mouritsen (1998). However, in a play probe, there are conflicting motivational factors, as the activities do not arise internally but are presented in a specific context. Hence, the probes should contain playful triggers for the purpose of creating enjoyment and supporting playfulness for the participants (Youell, 2008), which could transform into a flow state (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

According to Duncan et al. (2009), it is often a challenge to conduct research of a sensitive nature with young people. They highlight, among others, the transition between being parent-led to shifting to a “young person-centered self-management” (Duncan et al., 2009, p.1692), personal characteristics, socio-cultural characteristics, the resistance to adult authority, and the need for increased independency as factors that complicate the carrying out of qualitative research.

To recap, this study investigates the use of play probes as a proposed method to gain deeper insights regarding young people’s daily lives. The concrete approach used in this study builds on the foundation of three interconnected components: design probes, diary methods, and play triggers.

Research approach
During Fall 2020, three ninth grade classes participated in the study. In total, there were 60 students, and each received a play probe, from a researcher they already were familiar with beforehand. They were informed during the handing out of the probes that they should only open their probe when they reached home, and were then encouraged to explore the content. However, it was emphasized that their participation was voluntary and that they could cease their participation at any point and just return the kit as it was. They were also allowed to stop during an activity if they chose to. Finally, the students were also informed that the kit focused on their everyday lives and that they could choose to remain anonymous if they wanted. All this information was sent out to the parents of the young people two weeks before they were presented with the probes. This was carried out with the help of the three class teachers, who also made sure to collect the probes in the end. However, this was mainly due to the Covid-19 situation at that time and the importance of maintaining social distance from the people they did not see regularly.

Close contact was maintained during the weeks that the students had the probes and during the time after they had completed them. The teachers reported back regarding the questions, discussions, and impressions that were generated during this period, as many of the students actively talked about the probes in class. Other purposes for maintaining this contact were in case sensitive material was gathered through the probes, as it was not a continuous study with the young people. The teachers could then follow up with a student in such a case. The only identifying information that the research contained was the first name of the students (if they chose to share it) and which class they belonged to (A, B, or C). Hence, it would not be possible to identify any student without the teachers’ help.

The probes were created based on the intention of using play elements in the kit. A challenge associated with this is that play is often defined as subjective and internally motivated, and, in this case, the students were asked to fill out a probe kit during a specific period of time. They controlled what they did, how they did it, and when they did it within the parameters that had been set for them. However, this might be more dependent on playfulness and play triggers rather than play. It was decided that the probes would be tested with two foci in terms of play:

1. Play as a memory and past experience
2. Play as an active driver
For the first focus, the activities created were based on the students thinking back and using their memory. In the pamphlet, they were to just describe their favorite play activity from when they were children. Further, in the playground map, they were asked to couple this memory with current activities (for more details, see the list of activities in Table 1. For the second focus, different types of play types (Legaard, 2018) were chosen, and the activities were then created mainly as per these types, while also placing emphasis on exploring the value of the materials. This was done because it is believed that, for this research, not all play types were equally engaging across the 60 students. Thus, there was a need to test more approaches to understand and ensure that there were playful triggers within the probe.

The diary methods (Bolger, Davis and Rafaeli, 2002; Carter and Mankoff, 2005) inspired the probe activities of the Pamphlets, the Two Spheres, Images of a Week, and Use Your Phone. Both the typical diary forms of writing and describing aspects of a typical week were included, along with photography in two forms and a physical aspect in the Two Spheres activity.
For the analysis, the probes were catalogued and structured to enable a comparison of the activities that had some features in common. This also made it possible to obtain an overview of the material for discovering patterns within the data. Mattelmäki (2006) stated that there is no clear method for conducting the analysis of probes but found a set of guidelines based on ethnographic and qualitative research. Hence, some of the author’s suggestions include following up with interviews, structuring the materials systematically, and being explorative when dealing with those suggestions. The author further presents different foci for the analysis of probes, one being interpretation in terms of the material. This was chosen as the material is at the center of the majority of the activities included in the probe.

As for the case studies (Stake, 1995; Flyvbjerg, 2006), the probes were of a qualitative nature, and, to obtain findings from them, they were first structured, grouped, and then directly interpreted (Stake, 1995). Thereby, different themes arose, of which some seemed to be more emphasized than others. The following table presents the topics and themes that were generated from the probes. On the next page see table 1 and 2 for an elaborated overview.
Table 1. Overview of themes and topics from the probes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pamphlet</th>
<th>Playground Map</th>
<th>Two spheres</th>
<th>Dream Job Bag</th>
<th>Use Your Phone</th>
<th>Build It</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The pamphlet served as a short presentation of the participant and included their name, age, likes and dislikes, etc. In the last pages, the participant was encouraged to write or sketch something that inspired, entertained, frustrated, or motivated them during a typical week—a sort of framed diary. Different words/framings were used, to see what led the young people to share the most details.</td>
<td>This was an icon-based map over a playground with five typical activities (playhouse, sandbox, swing, seesaw, and slide). The participants were asked to map out what they did in their everyday lives, with their family, and in their spare time that correlated with the activities in the playground. The framing was again used to test the influence of the different words while also gauging how the mapping worked in general.</td>
<td>There were three versions of this activity. All aimed at answering what young people like to do on their own and together with others: One, where the participant was merely asked to list the activities they like to do on their own and with others. In the other two versions, the participants had to do the same; but instead of writing these things on a list, they were asked to fill two transparent spheres, that could be opened, with the two types of activities. See figure 1.</td>
<td>Different items were placed in a small plastic bag, and the participants were made to choose from these. The objects that they imagined would be in their work bag if they had their dream job were to be chosen and explained. The items could be chosen either on a tangible level (a wire because the participant dreams of working as an electrician) or on an abstract level (fabric because the participant needs to have a soft side as a psychologist).</td>
<td>Three versions of activities that were aimed at involving phone cameras were presented. The activities were as follows: making a collage of a week, creating a treasure hunt using images, and finding an everyday object, turning it into a character, and taking a picture of it.</td>
<td>A collage of activities. Containing wood glue and different wooden sticks, cubes etc., the participants were asked to create, either 1. something important to them or 2. a version of a playground activity for young people.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clay Construction</th>
<th>Social LEGO</th>
<th>Images of a Week</th>
<th>Five Things on an Island</th>
<th>Your Bird House</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The participants were to use a pack of silk clay to create an animal-like creature, a hero, or a monster that informed something about the young person, and then give the creature a backstory and a name.</td>
<td>Bricks of different size and color were presented together with the task of creating something in collaboration with another person who was either a friend or a family member. The participants were to then discuss the activity and the object created.</td>
<td>With disposable cameras, the participants were to take pictures for a week. This was an open task, where they could share whatever they found relevant during the week.</td>
<td>Considered a warm-up exercise, the participant was asked to list the five things they want to bring with them to a deserted island.</td>
<td>The participants were required to decorate a birdhouse, presenting their style if they were a bird. This involved a small cardboard birdhouse and different materials to be used for decoration.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Identified selected themes

As previously stated, there were three themes that became clear throughout the probes: (1) family, (2) identity, and (3) relationships. These themes contained both positive, negative, and neutral statements or information, but they paint a picture of what—among many other things—is possibly going on in the minds of young people. Each of the three themes have been discussed below with examples taken from the probes.

Table 2. Overview of themes and topics from the probes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEMES</th>
<th>TOPICS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SPORT AND HOBBIES</td>
<td>Horse-riding, skateboarding, golf, soccer, gymnastics, dance, athletics, karate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXERCISE</td>
<td>Running, fitness, training, using weights, bicycling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GAMING</td>
<td>PlayStation, Computer, Among Us, Counter Strike, Mario</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VACATION</td>
<td>Diurso Sommerland (theme park), camping trip, skiing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CREATIVE</td>
<td>Painting, sewing, writing poems, sketching, singing, playing music, writing stories, editing pictures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RELATIONS</td>
<td>Friends, parties, gossiping, being together, “hygge,” watching TV, laughing, shopping, trying new things, alcohol, talking, eating, inspiration, going to the beach, playing computer games</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAMILY</td>
<td>Board games, discussions, cleaning, travelling, siblings, shopping, eating, card games</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HOME</td>
<td>House, safety, different on the outside compared to the inside, relaxing, family, being together, friends coming over, pets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BEING ALONE</td>
<td>Homework, watching TV, being creative, spa treatments, reading books, cooking, baking, sleeping, listening to music, programming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NATURE</td>
<td>Walking alone, walking the dog, being outside, running</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDENTITY</td>
<td>“Beneath the surface lies the real me,” “I often feel different and that is okay,” “My feelings go up and down,” “I often change my opinion,” feeling embarrassed, being smart, strong, different, naïve, isolated, loyal, clever, friends’ statements: “my friends says I am clever”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESPONSIBILITIES</td>
<td>Cleaning, homework, working, siblings, feeling busy all the time, having difficulty getting up in the morning, school, money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCHOOL</td>
<td>Homework, tired, frustrating courses, boredom, inspiring courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PHONES</td>
<td>TikTok, social media, FaceTime</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Family

In the probes focused on play memory-based activities, family was often highlighted. This included incidents and specific events, such as a family trip or a holiday, but also included more generic memories as well, such as spending time together as a family. From the teachers’ feedback, the most highlighted factor that the students talked about was that their parents and (older) siblings were curious about the probe and it evoked a lot of conversations over the dinner table. Further, many of the students even happily informed the teachers that their family got involved in the activities from the probe. One of the interviewed teachers said that it was her general impression that young individuals were left alone too often and desired a higher degree of interaction with their family and interest from their families in their lives.

This can also be seen from the probe activities that were focused on the students’ current everyday lives or, rather, from the lack of the presence of their families in those probe activities as compared to the memory-based ones. Although, as stated, family was mentioned in many probes, it does not seem to take up much of the young people’s attention in their everyday life. Friends, sports, and hobbies all receive greater attention.

The few incidents in which the family was present (out of a total of 54 probes) are listed as follows (translated from original language):
• Pamphlet: On what transpires during a week, girl, 15 years old:
  Day 1: A movie, Day 2: My family, Day 3: My girlfriend, Day 4: A song, Day 5: first language lesson in
  school, Day 6: Nature (I was out walking), Day 7: A new song
• Five things to bring to an island: girl, 15 years old:
• Playground map and pamphlet, boy, 14 years old:
  Pamphlet, about challenges: cycling to school, filling the dishwasher, vacuuming, doing my homework
  and spending time with my family during the day. In the playground map, about the seesaw: It is
  where I am together with my five-year-old brother. It makes me happy.
• Two spheres: On activities with others, girl, 15 years old:
  Playing board games with my family

From some of the activities, there is a clear connection between family, memories, feeling safe, and being
home. These elements were connected more than half the time when family was mentioned, mainly in terms
of memory and, less often, in activities, as there was greater focus on more current information.

![Family Sketch](image)

*Figure 3. A girls’ sketch of her family*

Two examples from the probes:
• Playground map: Comparing with a playhouse, girl, 15 years old:
  The playhouse is my home: safety and family.
• Playground map: Comparing to the slide, boy, 14 years old:
  It reminds me of when I was with my family in “Djurs Sommerland” (a theme park in Denmark).

**Identity**

The creations produced from the silk clay activity often contained specific human behaviors or traits that were
either directly or indirectly linked to the person carrying out the activity. This seems to reflect either a specific
trait that the young people would like to portray or, like in the case with the lizard (see below), contain
information about their possible struggles.

The following text examples are translated from original language and were accompanied by creations such as
the one shown in Figure 4 below:

Girl, 15 years old, chose a lizard-like creation: “I think of myself as a lizard. It keeps to itself, often in the dark
They are sometimes seen; but if they are scared, they lose their tail.”

Girl, 15 years old, chose a dog-like creation: “Because it is mainly happy and believes in the best in other
people. I would be a dog, as I can often be a bit naive.”

Girl, 15 years old, chose an owl-like creation: “My friends said that I should make an owl, because they think
that I am clever.” (shown in figure 4)
Boy, 15 years old, didn’t create anything, only described it: “Its name would be Carsten because it is an awesome name. It is a smart monster but sporty. And of course, has a lot of power.”

Boy, 14 years old, chose a hero-like creation, with a round body, small feet, and an antenna: “He is very strong like me.”

Figure 4. An owl made of silk clay, by one of the students

One interesting aspect is that social media was mentioned in only two out of the 54 probes. This includes the pamphlet where the students described their interests, inspirations, etc. during a week and all the other probes’ activities. The two incidents where social media was mentioned are as follows: Girl, 15 years old, stating that she would bring her phone, and, hence, social media, as one of the five things she would bring to an island. Another girl, 15 years old, in the Two Spheres activity, states TikTok as something she likes to do on her own. YouTube, computers, and games, on the other hand, were highlighted multiple times.

The lack of the mention of social media can of course be due to many factors, not explored for this paper, such as the following:

The probe had a physical context to it, and, hence, social media was not in focus.
Social media might be such an integrated part of their lives that they perceive it as an integrated element of everything else.
Mentioning the computer or phone (which others do) automatically includes social media
Social media is not as important to these young people as we think.

Relations
Friends do play a significant role, as mentioned previously, in terms of both physical interactions, such as in the context of parties, fitness, and sports, and being together, e.g. the word “hygge” in the original language (roughly translated to coziness) was mentioned multiple times, often together with friends. Digital platforms or interactions are also highlighted across the probe activities, genders, and classes. The majority of the boys mentioned games, and FaceTime, calling each other, and the game “Among Us” was present throughout a large number of the probes.

In the pamphlets aimed toward inspiration, entertainment, and motivation, friends also take up a large amount of space. In contrast, friends are not mentioned at all in the pamphlet focused on frustration.

One example stands out; a 15-year-old girl described and drew the following when asked about what challenged her during a typical week in the pamphlet (translated or described and written in chronological order):
"Afraid of being too loud." "Wanted to hit him." "I couldn’t sleep." "It was embarrassing to be the last" (drawing of a goal line). See Figure 5 below, of the sketches.

**Figure 5. A girls’ sketches of challenges during a typical week**

She also filled out a significant higher number of “activities I like to do alone” (16) compared to “activities I like to do with others” (4) in the Two Spheres activity. Further, she did not mention the word friends anywhere in her probe. Friends were present and explicitly mentioned in all of the other 53 probes in various contexts and activities.

**Possible implications**

Different themes and statements were identified from the probes. There was significant variation among the probes in terms of what is shared and to what degree; but even in those probes that present limited information, subtle attributes of the individual filling it out, can be seen. For instance, the case of the girl mentioned in the previous section signifies a feeling of solitude. However, this can also be seen in some of the other probes. One of the boys, for instance, presents a considerable number of different struggles through his probe, and not much else; he claims to be tired in school, to have issues at home, and a created a silk clay creature that placed an emphasis on being strong. Whether this is what he perceives or desires is unclear, but it is the only thing that he presents that has a different character than the struggles. Many of the boys seem to have difficulties regarding sleep; they mention being tired, having difficulty getting up in the morning, feeling tired in school, etc. This seems to be an issue mainly presented by the boys, with only a few girls mentioning sleep as an issue.

It might not be surprising that relationships, family, and identity are the three themes that were clearly seen in the probes given the stage at which the lives of the students were when they filled out the probe. However, the probes can reveal aspects of what lies beneath these themes and what can be further explored. Additionally, it can perhaps also help us acquire an enhanced understanding of the world that they live in. In general, they still need their families and the interaction with them while also having a separate part of their lives that goes on outside the family and inside themselves by finding their own identity. These three themes might be important layers in their process of defining themselves as individuals.

A fourth theme could have been creativity, which occurs across all classes, genders, and types of probes.
existence of a creative outlet, whether it be programming, writing stories, painting, or playing music, is present in a majority of the probes. This also correlates with the tendency observed during the silk clay activity, which seems to have triggered an interest and the investment of time for the participants who were presented with this type of activity.

First findings about play probes
From the 60 probes, 54 kits were handed back, either completely or partially filled out. Below, some of the findings from play probes as a method, have been highlighted and elaborated upon.

The informal interviews conducted with the teachers indicate that the students who participated in this study generally found the activities to be “fun but strange.” During the teacher interviews, all of the teachers mentioned that their students came up to them and talked about the probe informally. Further, a few days before returning the probes, all the teachers had a conversation with their students about the probes. In all three classes, the following feedback was stated multiple times:

- The students enjoyed the fact that the probes encouraged conversations and involvement from their families. The teachers further elaborated on this, as it was their general impression that young people often wished for more interaction with their families.
- The students enjoyed carrying out the activities and shared their thoughts and results with each other.
- They found the activities to be strange and talked curiously about them with others, including teachers, families, and peers.

Probe kit considerations
There was a tendency that the tasks that focused on the struggles and entertainment in the participants’ lives were filled out more often than those focusing on motivation or inspiration. The richness of the associated information was also (in most cases) deeper. There were more details even in the sketches compared to those that provided information about motivation or inspiration.

The materials seemed to frame the activities, and those asked to create lists, descriptions, etc. during activities often completed the tasks in a different way than those who were directly presented with the materials (the Two Spheres, the Dream Job Bag). For example, when asked to fill out what would be in their dream job bag, a computer was often drawn—sometimes as the only thing, sometimes together with a few other generic objects, such as a phone (see Figure 6). The influence of the materials could be seen in the Two Spheres activity as well:

Those who were asked to write down a list, on average, wrote down 2.65 things. In the (physical) spheres, the average was 4.3. Often, there was a bit more elaborate description of the activities for the spheres as compared to the list.

Figure 6. Two examples from the Dream Job Bag

One of the activities involved silk clay, in which the participants were asked to construct a character. In total, 20 of the probe kits contained this activity. With one exception, all of the containers had been opened, and the
silk clay had been interacted with. Further, 14 participants had created some version of a character and described its features. The animal-like creatures seemed to have been given the most features that were related to humans.

Selected probes, that were filled out, was presented to i.e., teachers and healthcare-professionals working with young people. During those interviews an emphasis were put on how the young people in general approached the silk clay differently than many of the other activities. One example was a boy who in all the activities emphasized in different ways – both explicit and implicit, that he found the play probe tedious, however when looking at the silk clay figure, he put more effort both into the creation of it and the background-story of it and presented a bit more personal information about himself and his values regarding how to be a friend (see figure 7).

Figure 7. A silkclay-dog created to represent friendship

Early conclusions on play probes
Particularly construction activities, anchored in the ideas of construction play and fantasy play (Legaard, 2018), seemed to evoke an interest and involvement from the students. This conclusion is based on the feedback received from the teachers and the actual probes. They are also the ideal types of play for a probe, as they can be encouraged through the materials and framing.

At this stage, activities with an emphasis on games or physical play have not been tested, and social activities have only been tested to a low degree. More tests and research into a variety of play probes are needed. What can be said though is that there are indications to suggest that a play probe is a useful tool for gaining insights into young peoples’ lives, both directly from the probes and through the playful aspects. The feedback gathered from the teachers supports these indications and the young people overall responded to the probes positively. Through feedback from people working with this target group and the analysis of the probes, there are indications towards positive results, when applying some of the approaches from the play probes, also when working with e.g., mental health in young people.

For the data acquired from the probes to be more detailed, the probes need to be revised in relation to playfulness. The content of the probes should have a more specific focus rather than “everyday lives,” as this tends to be too broad to reach a firm conclusion. Further, interviews with the young people participating would have been optimal afterwards, but it is not possible at this time. The play probes could even be employed for a possible alternative direction for further development: as a conversation tool between parents and their teenager.

Play probes will be continuously explored. The next step will be to take the findings presented in this paper and develop a better framed play probe in collaboration with experts working with young people, such as
researchers and/or teachers, in order to use the probes as a tool for depicting a specific field of questioning combined with the use of follow-up interviews with the participants. We imagine, as a second step, that the insights and inspiration attained from the results of the probes can be translated into categories of tangible materials that can be used in cross-disciplinary co-design workshops.

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