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“Some kids climb up; some kids climb down”: Culturally constructed playworlds of children with impairments

In this paper, the author explores how children with impairments can act as self monitoring, autonomous individuals in their play in a community playground. In addition, the notion of children with impairments as creative agents in their play is examined. The evidence presented in this paper is derived from the views and perspectives of children with impairments as playground users, and was collected from the children's photographic scrapbooks and the researcher's own observations of children's play in a naturalistic playground setting. The theoretical perspective for this paper draws on the emerging 'Social model of childhood disability' (Connors and Stalker, 2007) and provides scope to attempt to understand the culturally constructed playworlds of children with impairments.

(abstract, 115 words)

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Keywords: children with impairments; social model of childhood disability; childhood agency; children's play cultures; playgrounds.

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Points of interest

- The *Social model of childhood disability* provides a useful theoretical framework for considering ‘disabled childhoods’.
- In the past, the play of children with impairments has tended to be scrutinized from deficit perspectives.
- A child’s play experience is unique to the specific children’s setting and those playing within it.
- Children are essentially social, relational beings who interact with each other and with their environments in the construction of multiple social realities.
- Children with impairments can be identified as creative agents who self-monitor, make choices and exert control over their play in playgrounds.

Introduction

The concept of children with impairments exercising agency, as ‘agents actively negotiating systems’ rather than ‘objects’ of interventions (Shakespeare and Watson 1998, 19), has received little attention in academic circles, or indeed, in the broader community. In this paper I examine how children with impairments might experience fun, joy, fantasy and creativity in play as part of their constructed playworlds in a community playground. The paper is drawn from a qualitative study into the accessibility of playgrounds for children with impairments. A community playground, in a regional city in Victoria, Australia, was used as the research site. By playgrounds, in this paper, I am referring to play equipment that is purpose designed and built for children to play on. Such play equipment is recognised as being broadly accessible to the public at large and is typically found in public parks, schools, preschools and some fast food outlets.

I define disability according to the social relational understanding of disability articulated by Thomas (1999) as a ‘form of social oppression involving the social imposition of restrictions of activity on people with impairments and the socially engendered undermining of their psycho-emotional well-being’ (Thomas 1999, 156). In the social model of disability a clear distinction is made between the concept of ‘disability’ and the concept of ‘impairment’ and, as such, is adopted in this paper. Impairment is an individual’s functional limitation, defined as ‘lacking all or part of a limb, or having a defective limb, organ or mechanism of the body’ (Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) 1975, 14). The term ‘disabled people’, now commonly used in Disability Studies, draws attention to socially oppressive circumstances experienced by people with impairments (Connors and Stalker 2003; Gleeson 1999; Kelly 2005; Thomas 2004a, 2004b). It therefore

describes the collective experience of being disabled in a social (not an individual, physical or medical) sense.

In research about play in playgrounds, reported in the academic literature, children are generally assumed to be able-bodied. Children with impairments, when they are considered, are typically separated into homogenous impairment groups for which the diagnosed medical condition or disability category is the distinguishing characteristic. Specific impairments are often examined as a variable ahead of other differences such as cultural background, socio-economic background or gender.

Children with impairments are frequently portrayed according to medical model representations where disability is seen as a deficit. Furthermore, children with impairments are often treated as exceptions to what is considered 'normal' (Baglieri and Knopf 2004) and, as needing intervention by adults to assist them to play with peers. The aim of any play intervention that is recognised or recommended is usually to 'remediate' their unfortunate 'condition'. Such interventions attempt to make everyone similar, using non-impaired children as 'normative yardsticks' (Priestley 1998, 208). Within this dominant medical (individual) perspective children with impairments are constructed as incompetent, unskilled or deficient at play, while non-impaired children are regarded as being competent players, who play in 'normal' ways. Children with impairments are rarely credited or observed as having worthwhile abilities or skills as players. Little consideration is given to the idea that children with impairments might contribute to the development of the skills and competencies of their non-impaired peers. While children with impairments are frequently the topic of discussion with respect to their identified deficits, I found no references in academic literature where non-impaired peers were regarded as having play deficits.

An alternate perspective that will be pursued in this paper is that social interaction between peers with a range of impairments might occur within a rich environment that is culturally beneficial for all children (Wendell 1996). In an inclusive environment, diversity is seen to contribute towards the ‘rich fabric’ (Keefe 2007, 18) of the particular culture. Inclusive play, following this argument, is not only desirable and beneficial, but essential, in an inclusive, culturally diverse society.

Play and culture

Play, as a dominant form of activity for children, cannot be separated from the context in which it takes place. Culture, as a social category, is ‘a way of life, which binds the thoughts, beliefs and language of a group in a specific context’ (Sayeed and Guerin 1997, 53). Children can be seen as having play cultures that are unique to specific children’s individual play communities (Brown 1994; Titman 1994) that children construct for and between themselves. If we apply a cultural lens to the interpretation of children’s experience of play, and draw on Brown’s (1994) study of children’s school playground culture (Brown 1994), we would accept the unique nature and cultural specificity of children’s play experiences, or to use Brown’s (1994) words, ‘[the] culture of play areas is not that of the adult community within a school but resides within the community of children’ (54). Brown (1994) recognises unique children’s play cultures that occur outside adult worlds. He suggests that what might superficially appear to an adult observer as randomly occurring activity in a playground between children can be understood by attempting to comprehend how what is happening in the playground relates to the culture of childhood. Brown (1994) explains this point:

Play areas provide a setting for a cultural forum within which the children can create and recreate meaning from the sum of their experiences. The activities, play, games, social and anti-social behaviours provide a means by which the culture can find expression and by which individual children can seek to meet functional means...they serve an immediate purpose for the children in their own present society (Brown 1994, 64).

The reference by Brown (1994) to children's 'present society' suggests that the play experience is unique to the specific children's setting and those playing within it. Brown's study did not specifically consider children with impairments, but nonetheless his description of unique children's cultures in play environments has equal relevance (as my analysis in this paper will demonstrate) in helping to understand the play experiences for those with impairments. Brown's position, while he does not explicitly make links to disabled children, is compatible with the idea that children exercise autonomy and agency (Shakespeare and Watson 1998) as I will discuss later in this paper.

Theoretical perspective: The social model of childhood disability

Research employing the social model of disability has tended to focus on adults and is relatively untried as a framework that is applicable to research with children (Bishop, Swain and Bines 1999; Connors and Stalker 2003, 2007; Oliver 2004; Priestley 1999; Shakespeare and Watson 1998). Several authors argue that the use of the social model of disability for research with children needs further exploration to establish its suitability as an adequate explanatory framework (Connors and Stalker 2007; Priestley 1999). Children in general and adults with impairments are both traditionally vulnerable minority social groups (Brannen and O'Brien 1995; Mayall 2002; Priestley 1999). How childhood is defined, and how such definitions mesh with constructions

of disability, have important methodological implications for the way children with impairments are viewed, and therefore need to be addressed in this paper.

In the ‘emerging’ sociology of childhood children are active creative social agents who play a dynamic part in the construction of their own cultures and in adult societies (Corsaro 2005). Children, from birth, are already part of society. Childhood should not be seen as a stage of preparation for children to join society. It is a legitimate point of life in its own right which has value and meaning both to individual children and to society in general (Corsaro 2005). The impact of disability has been rarely taken into account in the sociology of childhood, although there is room for disability to be considered as a ‘variable of social analysis’ (Prout and James 1997, 8) alongside class, gender and ethnicity. A key feature of the emerging sociology of childhood is articulated by Prout and James (1997): ‘Children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live’ (Prout and James 1997, 8).

Davis, Watson and Cunningham-Burley (2000) report that there has been little ‘cross-over’ between the new sociology of childhood and the social model of disability (p. 203) yet there are clear similarities between the two approaches. The *Social model of childhood disability* (Connors and Stalker 2007) emerges from the nexus of the social relational interpretation of disability (Thomas 1999) and the ‘new’ sociology of childhood. It provides a way to research ‘disabled childhoods’ (Priestley 1998; Shakespeare and Watson 1998). Viewed through this lens, both ‘childhood’ and ‘disability’ are understood as being socially constructed and both childhood and disability are considered to be fields of inequity (Prout and James 1997). Children with impairments therefore can be seen as occupying a minority status, both as

children and as being disabled. Furthermore, the social model of childhood disability identifies the importance of ‘giving voice’, recognizing that people with impairments and children have been silent (but not necessarily absent) in research (Connors and Stalker 2003). Both people with impairments and children are seen as diverse individuals, rather than members of a homogenous group (Connors and Stalker 2003, 25). Furthermore this theoretical perspective advocates for micro-level accounts of children’s lives which draw heavily on personal experience, as a means to contribute to macro-level accounts of society.

Childhood agency

A child’s agency has been described as ‘the ability to influence’ (Kennedy and Surman 2006, 35). The notion of agency by disabled children, while often ignored in research, is a dominant theme within the social model of childhood disability theoretical perspective and will be accorded central importance in this paper. Studies that draw on what has been described as the emerging social model of childhood disability (Connors and Stalker 2007) view children through their competencies, their abilities and their agency. Kelly (2005) explains this theoretical perspective: ‘Disabled children are seen as competent social actors who resist dominant discourse and create their own discursive spaces based on their own analyses and experiences’ (Kelly 2005, 263). Priestley (1999) elaborates, drawing attention to the active qualities of children with impairments in managing aspects of their lives: ‘Children are not simply passive recipients. They are also social actors, responding to discursive practices, resisting and reconstructing them to fit their own experiences and priorities’ (Priestley 1999, 93). Both Kelly (2005) and Priestley (1998; 1999) refer to the role of children with impairments as social actors who can exert influence over their

experiences. Children with impairments, when viewed within a social model of childhood disability, can be identified as creative agents who self-monitor, make choices and exert control over their play in playgrounds. They build and negotiate their own playworlds. As Priestley points out, ‘the construction of disabled children as “vulnerable” and passive has desensitised us from their agency as social actors’ (Priestley 1998, 220).

Connors and Stalker (2003), in their study that explored children’s experiences of disability in their everyday lives, interviewed 26 disabled children aged between seven and fifteen, 24 of their siblings and their parents. These researchers, in a similar fashion to Kelly (2005) and Priestley (1998; 1999), report finding that children with impairments are ‘self-directing agents, choosing to manage their day-to-day lives and experiences of disability in a matter of fact way’ (Connors and Stalker 2007, 30). Davis and Watson (2002) highlight the agency of children with impairments by illustrating diverse patterns of resistance employed by their child research participants.

The study

This study involved 72 participant children who completed the *Participatory photographic project*, (adapted from Greenfield 2003; 2004) and compiled personal photographic scrapbooks from their own photos taken in the naturalistic setting of a community playground. The participants were all six to ten years old; 35 were classified as having an impairment and 37 as not having an impairment. Females numbered 30 and males 42. The children were drawn from four primary schools, three of these were mainstream schools and one was a special education school. Ethics

clearance was granted by the [name removed] Department of Education and the University [name removed] Human Research Ethics Committee.

The participatory photographic project utilised the technique of photo elicitation, the aim being to ‘explore the meaning of the images with the respondent’ (C. Burke 2005, 32). The children were transported to the community playground, where each was supplied with a digital camera and a ‘buddy’ (research assistant) and were asked to take a photos of a place in the playground that fitted each of 12 guiding statements. The guiding statements can be found in Figure 1. My view of the playground - record sheet. The role of the buddy was to read each of the guiding statements and to follow the child around the playground as they took their photos. Several days later, back in their school classrooms, the children compiled individual photographic scrapbooks (some with adult assistance) and embellished their own photographs with written statements, prompted by sentence stems, to explain why they chose to take each photograph (Figure 2. Sample page: My view of the playground). Each child also indicated their feelings about their choice of the playground location pictured in each of their photographs by adding one of three personally selected self-inking stamps. Reproductions of the three stamps are provided in Figure 3. Self-inking stamps used in the Participatory photographic project. Each child and I then discussed the meaning of their photographs in a follow-up interview.

[insert figures 1, 2 and 3]

Children were required to assent to their participation in the study through active, positive agreement to their involvement (Cuskelly 2005). As there are no

strong reasons for identifying participants, I decided to protect their identities and avoid possible future regret that could result from disclosure of research participants' identities (Ballard and McDonald 1998). Therefore, the children's real names are not used in this paper. With regard to the photographs used in the study I asked the children to avoid taking photographs with people in them in the *Participatory photographic project*.

This study draws on a small sample of children, and while these participants cannot be considered representative of all children (both impaired and non-impaired) who use playgrounds, it attempts to provide some understanding of the life experiences of specific playground users with respect to their playworlds. As the participants are not representative of all children with impairments, the insights conveyed through this study need to be interpreted cautiously. In the analysis that follows, I provide the impairment classification of each child as a means to reflect and better understand his or her individual lived experiences. This approach is reported in research by Watson and others (2000). I also refer to individual children's 'impairments effects' (Thomas 1999) where necessary to explain the significance of the child's experience in light of their impairment. It is, however, the 'collectivity of disability experience' (Shakespeare and Watson 1998, 22) rather than the experiences associated with various impairments that I am attempting to understand and to portray.

Emerging themes

This section contains excerpts selected from some of the scrapbooks of the child research participants, along with each child's accompanying photographs. The excerpts are used to illustrate several sub-themes from the data that demonstrate the

broader identified theme of children's agency. I have chosen strong examples that are particularly reflective of children with impairments as actively seeking playmates, of constructing their own playworlds, of children demonstrating their understanding of the negotiable rules of the playground culture, of their self-direction of play and of their creation of fantasy playworlds.

Children with impairments active seeking of playmates. Some children explained that there were places frequented by peers in the playground and that if they were seeking other children to play with, then they could go to these places. Hugh, for example, who is eight years of age and classified as having an intellectual impairment, has a clear strategy for meeting playmates. He photographs *somewhere in the playground to find new people to play with*, which is the swing bridge (photograph 1) and chooses the happy face stamp ☺. He explains: “*You can walk on it and you can stop and talk to people about playing*”.

[insert photograph 1]

Hugh's strategy for initiating peer play involves finding a place where he can start a conversation about playing. He uses the common experience of playing on the bridge with another child as a deliberate and strategic ploy to engage the other child in conversation. Evan, aged nine, who is classified as having intellectual impairment, uses a similar strategy to Hugh, but at the monkey bars (photograph 2). He says: “*I'd hop on and I'd find friends*”. Evan, in a matter-of-fact way, expresses the strong sense that, by being on the monkey bars, others who are in the same place will become playmates. He explains that he chooses the happy face stamp because, “*it's nice to*

have new friends”, which is possibly an indication of his gregarious and friendly attitude and his willingness to play with unfamiliar peers. Evan’s strategy involves finding a place where others are playing and then playing alongside them. Both Hugh and Evan make active conscious choices, demonstrating the non-random and clearly deliberate nature of their actions.

[insert photograph 2]

Both children, notice that there are popular places in the playground that other children like, where they can engage in play with others. What might otherwise appear to be ‘apparently random’ (Brown 1994, 55) events can reveal interesting insights into children’s cultures that are often not valued or noticed by adults. These strategies are clearly not random, but quite deliberate ways of gaining access to peers on each child’s behalf.

Children actively building and negotiating their playworlds. Several children, in their photographic scrapbooks, demonstrate how, in order to play with others, they actively build and negotiate their playworlds. One example comes from William, aged ten, who has a condition that is accompanied by intellectual impairment, balance difficulties and muscle weakness. His description of how he plays with his friends on the playground is interesting because William has clearly developed play strategies that accommodate his ‘impairment effects’ (Thomas, 1999). William photographed the rubber tyre swing (photograph 3) twice in response to two different categories. The rubber tyre swing has a vertical stack of tyres above it that can be accessed from below by standing on the swing seat and climbing up the vertical tunnel using the

individual stacked tyres as footholds (photograph 4). This tyre tunnel can also be accessed from a platform at the top (photograph 5), that is reached from one of two alternative sets of stairs of varying difficulty. One set of stairs is tight, enclosed and relatively steep, and the other is less steep and not enclosed. William's first photograph is of the black rubber tyre swing (photograph 3) which he photographs as *somewhere in the playground to find new people to play with*. He chooses the happy face stamp ☺ and states: I can find new people to play with here because "*all the new people always end up playing there. Other people will be there*".

[insert photographs 3,4 and 5]

William has chosen a place to play that he recognises is popular with children. Other children are playing there and he wants to play there too. For him, it's a place to find new people. However, William also chooses the black rubber tyre swing for a second photo as *somewhere in the playground that is difficult for me to get to*, which provides further insight into the complexity and calculated agency of William's play on the rubber tyre swing. William chooses the sad face stamp ☹ to indicate his dissatisfaction because of the difficulty he experiences climbing. He explains: "*It's difficult. My arms get wiggly. It's hard to climb up the tyre*". Although William states that climbing the tyre stack is difficult for him, clearly this does not prevent him from playing there. It would seem that his motivation to play with other children, as he indicates in his first photo, outweighs the difficulty. He continues to explain: "*Some kids climb up, some kids climb down*". The apparent simplicity of this statement is deceptive. William has observed that some children climb up the tyre stack from below, while some climb down from the platform above. Importantly, he has

discovered that climbing in the same direction all the time is acceptable to his playmates. He adds, *“I don’t climb up it”*. One of the effects of William’s impairment is that he has great difficulty climbing up the tyre stack. Nonetheless, he can climb down it. William chooses to climb down the tyre stack and then find an alternative route back to the top via the stairs, thereby avoiding difficulty resulting from his lack of upper body strength, which he describes as his arms getting ‘wiggly’. By using this self-regulating strategy, William has strategically self-adapted his play to match his physical capabilities. He can play at a place he has identified as a ‘social hub’, with other children in a way that is somewhat unusual but which is apparently acceptable within the peer culture.

An illustration of similar creative play behaviour can be observed in Carl’s play in the playground. Here, I draw on data consisting of my observations of play, as well as Carl’s scrapbook. Carl, who is ten years old, experiences unsteady balance due to motor impairment so riding the red tyre swing (photograph 6) is an unpleasant experience for him as he explains in his own words: *“I don’t like to play [here]. It goes too fast, gets dizzy. My head feels yucky”*.

[insert photograph 6]

Carl embellishes his statement in his scrapbook with the sad face stamp ☹ to communicate his negative feeling about playing on the swing. While watching Carl in the playground I made the following journal note:

I observed Carl in the playground at the red tyre swing with a group of boys.

Four boys were positioned on the tyre. Carl had chosen to push the swing for the other boys and was doing it in a robust way that was creating howls of

approval, laughter and encouragement from the other boys (extract from research journal).

Carl, like William, finds a way of engaging in peer play that allows him to avoid activities that are difficult and unpleasant for him but which permit him to play with his friends. It appears that while swinging on the swing ‘feels yucky’, pushing it for others is well within Carl’s capabilities. Brown (1994) discusses how the capacity of each child to ‘establish themselves within a game-playing or social group will determine their ability to build relationships, to develop greater confidence and consequently to gain status’ (Brown 1994, 63-64). Both William and Carl demonstrate what appear to be successful attempts to find roles for themselves within the play that their peers are engaged in. This is an example of two children with impairments encountering problems in a playground but then applying their own ‘local-based solutions’ (Davis 2004) to overcome such problems. They find ways to join in which circumvent the limitations of their ‘impairment effects’ (Thomas 1999) in active, creative ways by building and negotiating (Priestley 1998) playworlds with others. Both boys also demonstrate a recognition and understanding of the negotiable rules of children’s playground culture.

Self direction in play. Ethan is a ten-year-old, who is diagnosed with autism and uses spoken language sparingly. He has a very cautious nature and finds changes in routine very difficult to cope with. Ethan refers to a particular playground place, the swing bridge (photograph 7), in three pages (out of 12) in his scrapbook, indicating to me that it is a significant place to him. This piece of equipment seems to be quite challenging for him. When the three entries are pieced together, a coherent picture emerges. Ethan tells of the challenge and difficulty presented to him by this

playground place and how he manages to overcome it. In the first two entries, *somewhere in the playground to work hard* and *somewhere in the playground that is difficult for me to get to*, Ethan describes his concern about climbing on the swing bridge. He uses the sad face stamp ☹ on both occasions. In response to the guiding statement *somewhere in the playground where I can work hard (huff and puff)* Ethan states: This place makes me feel [sad] because “*the bridge and I might fall. Cry if you fall*”. His response to *somewhere in the playground that’s difficult for me to get to* is: This place makes me feel [sad] because “*have to climb. Be careful*”. It’s difficult for me to get here because “*I’d cry. If not careful, would fall*”.

Ethan (who is considered profoundly autistic) seems to be articulating his concerns about climbing on the bridge and his subsequent understanding that there are dangers associated with it. However, despite what appears to be a place associated with fear of falling (“*I might fall*” and “*I’d fall*”), the identified possible outcome of falling (“*I’d cry*”), his awareness of the potential for tears (“*cry if you fall*”) and finally his recognition of the need for caution (“*be careful*”), Ethan is not deterred from playing there. Ethan’s third entry, where he chooses the happy face stamp for *somewhere in the playground where I want to try hard to do something*, is enlightening: I want to try hard here because “*you have to climb*”.

[insert photograph 7]

Ethan expresses the desire to try hard to complete the activity. His use of the happy face stamp suggests that, after all, playing on this equipment is not a totally unpleasant experience. He seems to have a strong desire to attempt, and furthermore, master the climb that he describes as being a difficult and challenging activity that

might make him cry if he falls off. What emerges from this example is Ethan's desire to persevere and overcome a major personal challenge derived from a playground location. Despite Ethan's economical use of language, he has articulated his concerns clearly. This example, expressed by a child diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder who uses limited spoken language, provides insight into his complexity of thought and multiple emotions. Additionally, we derive a strong sense of Ethan's desire to master a challenge despite feeling fear and finding the task unpleasant. The point I make here is that the built environment of the playground offers an almost overwhelmingly difficult challenge to Ethan, yet he demonstrates the desire to meet that challenge and to self-regulate his learning towards mastery of a new physical skill.

Creation of fantasy playworlds. Another way that children with impairments demonstrate creative self-direction of play is by their active creation of unusual or imaginative possibilities or ways to use the play environment. The use of creativity, fantasy and autonomy in the children's emotional and psychological construction of the socio-spatial environment are illustrated by Nadine. Nadine, aged nine and who is diagnosed with autism, photographs the tower that she calls the 'Princess Castle' (photograph 8) as *somewhere in the playground I like to play most*. She chooses the happy face stamp ☺ and adds: "*I am a happy princess. It's a Princess Castle. I like to play a sleeping princess*".

Nadine continues this 'Princess Castle' theme for four of her eight photos, moving away from and back to the theme as she navigates the playground to take her photographs. She selects a walkway into one of the playground towers as *somewhere in the playground I feel safe* and calls it the "Princess Kiss Tunnel" (photograph 9).

She recounts: This place makes me feel [happy] because “*true love’s first kiss. It’s a princess tunnel*”. I feel safe here because, “*they live happily ever after*”.

Nadine’s Princess Castle theme continues for the guiding statement *somewhere in the playground I can pretend* where she selects the tyre steps (photograph 10) and says, “*I can pretend to be a princess. I am walking up to the stairs and the mirror*. [She later explained to me that the tyre stairs led eventually to her ‘Princess Kiss Tunnel’].

Nadine’s creative playworld also has a sinister quality illustrated by her photograph of a playground structure that adults have called the ‘train station’ (photograph 5.17). She selects this apparatus as *somewhere in the playground I don’t like to play*, this time electing to use the grimacing face stamp. She explains: I don’t like to play here because “*It’s an evil house. I don’t like the spells*”. After probing what I thought was an out-of-context comment regarding ‘spells’, Nadine informed me, “*It’s an evil witch’s house*”. Nadine’s fantasy playworld seems to be a creative, rich and imaginative fairytale environment, resplendent with herself as a happy princess who lives in the tower, featuring a romantic interest and the menacing undertones of an evil witch lurking in the stairwell casting repugnant spells. For a child who appears quiet and introverted and who attends a special school because she has been diagnosed with autism, this insight into her rich fantasy world tells of the depth and creativity of her thinking. A strong sense of Nadine’s creatively constructed playworld can be gauged through her eyes by her dramatic description of her selected playground places.

[insert photographs 8, 9, 10 and 11]

In the illustrations provided, the children all of whom have an impairment, provide substantial evidence of their ability to actively and creatively manipulate the physical environment and the way they interact with both the built structures and their peers in order to become included as equal play participants. The strategies reported are particularly important for children to engage in social play.

Discussion: Active negotiation and construction of their playworlds by children

Children are likely to perceive play as ‘child directed activity’ (Sandburg 2002, 2) and according to their unique socially constructed peer cultures (Brown 1994). Brown (1994) identifies a unique children’s play culture that occurs outside adult worlds: ‘The apparently random activities which an observer of a playground will see, can best be put into ordered place by an understanding of the relationship of each activity to the culture of childhood’ (Brown 1994, 55). Children with impairments who took part in the photographic project demonstrated that they actively selected places to play in the playground.

As I have demonstrated, playgrounds provide a context for some children, like Ethan who is autistic, to comprehend difficult situations and to strive to overcome challenges offered by the built play environment. Some children with impairments also demonstrate the deliberate and planned nature of their strategies for finding playmates and approaching unfamiliar children to facilitate play. Other children, such as William, who has intellectual and physical impairments, and Carl, who has motor impairment, demonstrate their creative ability to find culturally acceptable roles for themselves while engaged in social play with their peers. They are able to modify and strategically adopt ways of playing that accommodate their impairment effects within the peer playground culture.

Some of the children, like Nadine, creatively constructed playground places in ways that that allowed them to adopt imaginative roles in their play, yet they were able to differentiate between children's pretence and adult 'reality' of place and play roles. There was plenty of evidence of calculated, deliberate and sometimes powerful reasoning of children with impairments when it comes to their play on a playground. They demonstrated a level of capacity and capability that is generally not recognised by carers, parents and teachers. These data also demonstrate, on a theoretical and empirical level, that it is possible to gain considerable depth of understanding about children with impairments through the way of looking, and way of understanding, which is provided by the social model of childhood disability as a theoretical perspective. The variety of responses and experiences derived from the children's scrapbooks provide evidence to refute stereotypes of children with impairments.

There is strong evidence that children are creative agents and self-determiners of their play experiences on a playground, as demonstrated by their choices of places where they chose to play, as well as places they chose not to play, as articulated by them in their photographic scrapbooks. The ways in which children interact with their play environment on a micro-level demonstrates the hidden life of childhood as it is experienced by them in a playground. This is further evidence of children's unique play cultures and the exercise of agency by children with impairments. I point out that I would not expect that these types of insights are confined to children with impairments or linked to being impaired. Rather I expect that similar evidence would be drawn from the accounts of children without impairments, possibly being the same for all children regardless of impairment.

Summary and Conclusions

In this paper, I have presented an array of evidence that demonstrates that children with various impairments, who took part in the *Participatory photographic project*, act as autonomous individuals and self-monitors of their own play to various extents on playgrounds. The insights provided by the children with impairments who participated in this research show that they are able to make choices, and to experience enjoyment through self-selected play experiences.

The main conclusion I wish to make based on the evidence presented in this paper is that all children, including children with impairments, are essentially social, relational beings who interact with each other and with their environments in the construction of multiple social realities. To better understand children with impairments as social agents who act and interact with degrees of autonomy and agency, it must nonetheless be accepted that such children operate within a 'minority status' (Mayall, 2002, p. 21) both as children and as people with disabilities. The pervasiveness of functionalist views, underpinned by medicalised views of disability, that are embedded in our general social understandings of what children with impairments are capable of, tends to restrict possibilities and perpetuate negative stereotypes in two ways. Primarily, opportunities afforded to children with impairments to act as social agents are restricted because of assumptions about the limits of their capacities; and secondly, adults are unlikely to recognise that children with impairments are capable of exercising personal agency in their play (Priestley 1998) and, in fact, play in rich, meaningful and creative ways. The upshot is the production and reproduction of social injustice as children with disabilities are misunderstood and undervalued.

In attempting to determine whether children with impairments are disabled in a social sense in playgrounds, the evidence from the *Participatory photographic project* uncovers little to suggest that they are socially disabled. Provided the children in the sample are able to be independently mobile or have the means to articulate their play preferences, they are able to engage in play quite freely and, most importantly, actively and creatively. The ‘good news’ for parents of children with impairments may be that their ‘fears’ for their children as being unsociable and incompetent may be unfounded.

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I am looking for somewhere in the playground...

- a) ...I like to play most
- b) ...I don't like to play
- c) ...I feel safe
- d) ...I don't feel safe
- e) ...that is the best place to play with others
- f) ...to be by myself
- g) ...that is difficult for me to get to
- h) ...where I have never played but would like to
- i) ...where I want to try hard to do something
- j) ...that is fun
- k) ...where I can work hard (huff and puff)
- l) ...I can pretend

Adapted from Greenfield (2003; 2004).

Figure 1. 'My view of the playground': guiding statements

Somewhere in the playground I like to play most.

This place makes me feel like this ... because...

I chose to take this photo because...

I like to play here most because...

Figure 2. Sample page: 'My view of the playground'

Figure 3. Self-inking stamps used in the participatory photographic project

Photograph 1: Hugh's photograph of the swing bridge.

Photograph 2: Evan's picture of the monkey bars.

Photograph 3: William's photograph of the tyre swing underneath the vertical tyre tunnel.

Photograph 4: Inside the vertical tyre tunnel, photographed from the top, by Hugh.

Photograph 5: The vertical tyre tunnel photographed from the platform above by Nadine.

Photograph 6: Carl's photograph of the red tyre swing.

Photograph 7: Ethan's photograph of the swing bridge.

Photograph 8: Nadine's photograph of the 'Princess Castle'

Photograph 9: Nadine's photograph of the 'Princess Kiss Tunnel'.

Photograph 10: Nadine's photograph of the route to the 'Princess Kiss Tunnel'.

Photograph 11: Nadine's photograph of the 'Evil Witch's House'.