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1. NOT JUST FOR THE FUN OF IT

Children's Constructions of Disability and Inclusive Play through Spatiality in a Playspace

INTRODUCTION

In Australia, the notion of providing opportunities for children with impairments to access play in purpose-built spaces, and have fun alongside their peers and siblings, has gained momentum, translating into the development of some new and exciting 'inclusive playspaces'. Previously, very little attention or importance was given to the idea that playspaces might exclude some children and carers with impairments from shared play in community spaces. Recently, in paper titled 'Just for the fun of it' (Burke, 2013), I advanced an argument supporting the concept of playspaces that are inclusive of all children and that provide access to the experience of shared play. This paper highlighted the vagaries that apply to various attempts to ensure accessibility and inclusion in purpose-built playspaces. I concluded that inclusion in play environments should be considered an important political objective to facilitate healthy, vibrant, fair and connected communities. The reasons why children with impairments should have access to peer play in community and school spaces, however, are much more complex than merely providing access to fun and entertainment for children with impairments and their family members. When examined through a Disability Studies lens, how children construct disability and form views of those with impairments through their experiences of using in a playspace becomes an issue that requires close attention. In this chapter I explore the concept of spatial exclusion in playgrounds, from a disability studies perspective, by drawing on ideas from Armstrong (1999, 2012), Relph (1975) and Imrie and Kumar (1998) to help explain how space can be used in a playground to convey implicit messages about impairment that highlight difference, particularly, of children who use wheelchairs for mobility.

Playspaces, because of the way they are configured, spatially and physically, are likely to contribute to the creation and production of social constructions of disability and of disabled people. Armstrong (1999) insists that social groups of children can be defined by how children separately and collectively read meaning into the spatial organisation of their environments. Catling (2005) agrees, and claims that school playgrounds provide an 'explicit statement about the relative *status* [emphasis in original] of children' (p. 28). It is likely then, that a similar process of

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social reproduction often applies in playspaces, with regard to how social roles and relationships are defined and understood by children and I interrogate this idea in this chapter, providing evidence from my research. In this chapter, the term ‘playspaces’, as defined by Woolley and Lowe (2012), refers to ‘outdoor environments that have been specifically designed and designated as a place in which children can play’ (p. 2). Such playspaces are recognized as being broadly accessible to the public at large and are typically found in public parks, schools, preschools and some fast food outlets.

The qualitative study reported in this chapter is drawn from a nationally funded Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Project (ID: LP0349365) that examines playgrounds as spaces that potentially offer all children opportunities to be included in peer play. The author was the PhD. candidate who completed the research. The ethnographic study took place from 2004 to 2009 in regional Victoria, Australia.

SOCIAL MODEL OF DISABILITY

Disability Studies, which was described by Barnes in 2004 as ‘a new interdisciplinary area of enquiry’ (p. 28) that is concerned with scholarly exploration emerging from the social model of disability (Barnes, 2004; Gabel, 2006; Thomas, 1999). More explicitly, the term, ‘Disability Studies’, according to Thomas (1999), is used to refer to those who, in studying disability ‘explicitly align themselves with the social movement for the advancement of the social and political rights of disabled people’ (Thomas, 1999, p. 8). Siebers (2008), moreover, agrees with Thomas and emphasises the primary political objective that is inherent within a Disability Studies perspective is ‘to make disability an object of general knowledge and thereby to awaken political consciousness to the distasteful practice called “disablism”’ (p. 81).

Within a social model, disability is understood as a socially constructed phenomenon due to the fact that people with impairments are put in a position of disadvantage because they must overcome barriers that are not impediments to people without impairments. They are disabled by these impediments, not by their own individual attributes (Finkelstein, 2004). A clear distinction is made between the concept of ‘disability’ and the concept of ‘impairment’. Impairment is regarded as an individual’s functional limitation. Disability, in contrast, is defined as something that has been socially created because of limitations imposed on people with impairments by features of the environment, ie, the ‘disability’ arises from the ‘impairment’. The World Health Organisation (2002) explains that disability is viewed as a political rather than an individual issue within the social model:

On the social model, disability demands a political response, since the problem is created by an unaccommodating physical environment brought about by attitudes and other features of the social environment. (WHO, 2002, p. 9)

Finkelstein (2001) strongly asserts that disability results from the ‘nature and workings of society’ that oppress people with impairments. As he explains, ‘it is

society which disables physically impaired people' (p. 1). Priestley (1998) isolates theoretical and political elements of the social model that distinguish it from the medical model. The theoretical element is concerned with the study of disability barriers, policies and practices rather than with specific physical, cognitive or sensory impairments. Politically, this model draws on a discourse of disability rights, inclusion and citizenship (Priestley, 1998).

Inclusion of Children in Play Contexts

Inclusion is a fundamental principle within any accessible environment and should underpin the notion of shared play and access to environments in general (Jeanes & Magee, 2012; Nind & Seale, 2009). Inclusion is seen as the major benefit and the desired outcome of accessible community playspaces, particularly for children with impairments (Dunn, Moore, & Murray, 2003; John & Whewey, 2004; Webb, 2003; Yuill, Strieth, Roake, Aspden, & Todd, 2007) however, the principle of inclusion extends to all, not just those with impairments (Beckman & Hanson, 2002). 'Inclusive playspace' has come to describe built playspaces where 'everyone belongs'; that are purpose-designed to include all members of the community (irrespective of age, ability or any other perceivable difference) in the experience of play (Burke, 2013). Inclusive playspaces aim to provide opportunities for children to play together and have fun. As this chapter will explore, such play experiences are spatially enabled by the built environment and the feelings that are engendered by those who choose to occupy it.

Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2010) caution against practices that support separate play arrangements for children according to their abilities. These authors state that:

Play allows educational professionals to separate able and disabled children and ... should be viewed critically and with suspicion.... Play is pivotal to practices that centre the normal and push disabled children to the periphery. (p. 500)

This argument highlights the oppressive nature of dominant discourses of play for disabled children where the instrumental value of play that concerned with learning and development, is privileged over the intrinsic value of play (that concerned with entertainment and enjoyment), and is not disputed in this chapter. A rarely considered and scantily researched aspect of play is how children might construct messages from their shared experiences in children's environments. Conventional playspaces are likely to exacerbate hegemonic views about impairment particularly as they cater only for those who are able to gain access.

There is some evidence that allowing children to play together in inclusive environments ensures acceptance of children with impairments by their non-impaired peers over time. Children without impairments seem to develop empathy and acceptance of difference (Stalker & Connors, 2003; Widdows, 1997). Children

in inclusive kindergarten settings in Greece and the United States were found to be more accepting of children with impairments than children in non-inclusive settings (Nikolarazi, Kumar, Favazza, Sideridis, Koulousiou, & Riall, 2005). Marginalisation of children with impairments in conventional playspaces is well documented in the literature (Dunn, Moore, & Murray, 2003; John & Whewey, 2004; Yantzi, Young, & McKeever, 2010; Widdows, 1997; Webb, 2003).

Corkery (2004) refers to the powerful educational effects of playspaces in influencing children's attitudes and values:

The built and social environment in which children develop will in turn influence their attitudes and values about many things.... Play environments, including playgrounds, are in the public domain and are gathering places where children are likely to have some of their initial interactions with other children who are unknown to them. Therefore these are the places where children have the opportunity to be socialised with the idea of community life, outside the more familiar domains of home and school. (p. 111)

While Corkery's comments highlight the potential of playspaces to facilitate children's social and community interactions, she does not address the impact of space on ensuring who can socialise (and who can't), neither does she attempt to consider how children might make sense of the world accordingly.

Identification with place is a socially constructed notion that is culturally defined (Armstrong, 2012; Ferri & Connor, 2006; Lupton, 2007). Ferri and Connor (2006) explain how space can be reproductive of inequality. Children construct social norms and their understanding of social positioning from their observation and knowledge of cultural practices. This includes their reading of the environment to learn and construct messages about impairment. Ferri and Connor use a school setting to explain that practices adopted by adults to manage students with impairments can contribute to children's perceptions of difference. The classroom is described as a constructed space that reflects society and which is largely formed by the 'constant struggle over who is included and who is excluded' (p. 127). The authors elaborate:

As a microcosm of society, classrooms and schools represent the degree to which knowledge and individuals are valued... thus embedded in their very structure schools and classrooms teach explicit and implicit lessons about normalcy. For example each time a child with a perceived difference is removed from the classroom for special instruction, or isolated from his or her peers within the classroom, the student and all of his or her classmates learn an important lesson about the educational, social and cultural responses to difference... consequently, all children come to learn about norms and their own positioning, particularly in relation to others. Thus, classroom walls and more subtle divisions within the classroom act as literal and symbolic borders, assigning students to designated spaces that correspond to their perceived value in society. (Ferri & Connor, 2006, p. 127–128)

According to this explanation, children (with or without impairments) construct understandings about the social positioning and ‘value’ of their peers from distinctions they observe in how the school responds to difference. I emphasise, however, that it is not simply a reproductive process. It is important to note that children with impairments are active in the process of constructing their own social positioning and that of others who do not have impairments and vice-versa.

The spatial elements of a playground seem to play an important role in social production. That playspaces do not support play by some people with impairments may be reflective of deeper hegemonic socio-political positioning of people with impairments. Lefebvre (1991) suggests that perceptions of space and the way it is used are inherently socially and politically imposed. Armstrong extends this argument:

Space is political and ideological because it is a social product, derived from power relations in society and political struggle. The repartition of space into areas, social arenas, and sites is not ‘innocent’, nor neutral, but reflects these social relations and political struggles. (Armstrong, 1999, p. 79)

Understandings of disability can be spatially produced and reproduced by children from their reading of the environment. According to Lupton (2009), the meaning of space is produced by the ‘social relations of people within and outside it, through the ways that they use it and imagine it’ (p. 112). Armstrong (2012) draws on Soja’s (2010) concept of ‘spatial justice’ as a new means to explore ‘processes of inclusion and exclusion’ (p. 612), pointing out that ‘questions of “justice” always have a “spatial dimension”’ (p. 112). Spatial justice therefore, according to Armstrong’s (2012) interpretation of Soja’s work, systematically overlooks disability in discussions about discrimination and can be viewed as both an outcome and a process.

Two interrelated ideas, with reference to place, can be used to interpret children’s experiences; that of ‘existential space’ and that of ‘spatial signifiers of difference’. Lived space can be understood through existential space (Relph, 1976). The concept of existential space in this chapter is concerned with how children as members of a cultural group come to identify with playground places and to develop shared cultural identities with place. Relph (1976) describes existential space as lived space that is experienced collectively by people as members of a cultural group. Relph tells us that ‘however we feel or know or explain space, there is nearly always some associated sense or concept of place’ (p. 8). He explains:

Place, in association with space, also has a multiplicity of interrelated meanings. Place is not a simple undifferentiated phenomenon of experience that is constant in all situations, but instead has a range of subtleties and significances as great as the range of human experiences and intentions. (Relph, 1976, p. 26)

I interrogate these ideas, providing evidence from my research into children’s perceptions of playspace in the following pages.

Research with Children

In 2007, Connors and Stalker put forward a conceptual lens through which to examine disabled childhoods that they called ‘the social model of childhood disability’. These authors positioned this theoretical perspective at the nexus of two theoretical approaches in particular, derived from seminal works in these two fields; the social relational interpretation of disability (Thomas, 1999) and the ‘new’ Sociology of childhood (Prout & James, 1997). The social model of childhood disability provides a social constructionist lens through which to attempt to understand the complexities of disabled childhoods and the potentially socially oppressive nature of barriers to participation. In this perspective, passive stereotypes often associated with disabled children are rejected, as is the construction of disability as tragedy, suffering or deficit. Disabled children are viewed as a social group who are marginalised in contemporary society due to their age and perceived lack of ability and the homogenisation of children with impairments into impairment categories is avoided. This perspective steers clear of comparisons of children with impairments with ‘normal’ non-impaired children and seeks to demonstrate ways in which children with impairments can be consulted and active participants in research methodologies and be seen to act within children’s cultures as creative agents actively constructing their playworlds (Burke, 2012). More recently several others have taken a similar theoretical stance to examine children’s experiences of disablement such as Watson (2012), Tisdall (2012), Mallett and Runswick-Cole (2014) and Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2010, 2015).

The notion of interpretive reproduction can be used to explain a child’s ‘evolving membership in their culture’ (Corsaro, 2005, p. 24). Corsaro explains:

Children’s production of peer cultures is neither a matter of simple imitation nor direct appropriation of the adult world. Children creatively appropriate... information from the adult world to produce their own unique peer cultures. Such appropriation ...extends or elaborates peer culture; children transform information from the social world in order to meet the concerns from their social world... to create and participate in a peer culture at specific moments in time. (Corsaro, 2005, pp. 41–42)

Through interpretive reproduction, children actively engage with and participate in the interpretation of their worlds and cultures rather than merely imitating or internalising from encountering cultural situations. Children, like all humans, can be positioned as social agents who act independently of imposed social structure (Prout & James, 1997).

RESEARCH METHODS

In my study, data were collected from children, who compiled personal photographic scrapbooks and were observed at play in playgrounds. Of the 72 child research

participants, aged six to ten years, from four selected primary schools (three mainstream schools and one special education school), 34 children were identified as having an impairment and 38 as having no impairment. All children and schools have been referred to by pseudonyms in an attempt to conceal their identities. To gain insight into the lived experience of playspace users, data were also obtained from a series of focus group discussions with parents of children with impairments and adults with impairments, and from my field notes of observations as a participant observer in school playgrounds and other sites. Ethics approval was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Ballarat and the Department of Education and Training, Victoria, Australia. This study draws on a small sample of research participants, and while these participants cannot be considered representative of all children and adults (both impaired and non-impaired) who use playgrounds, it attempts to provide some understanding of the life experiences of specific child playground users with respect to their playworlds. The participants are not representative of all children and therefore the insights conveyed through this study need to be interpreted cautiously.

The social model of childhood disability perspective endorses the utilisation of personal (micro) accounts of experiences as a way of enabling the researcher to construct and illustrate macro-level analysis (Connors & Stalker, 2003). The methodology adopted in this study provides the scope to seek insight into children's lived experiences in playgrounds. The decision to draw on the perspectives of children with impairments creates a new set of research considerations that takes into account the unique circumstances of working with children. The research, therefore, needs to engage child participants and be age and developmentally appropriate for children with a variety of participation, communication and learning capabilities. The research methods aim to elicit responses from children so that their views, feelings and ideas can be communicated, and to satisfy ethical requirements for research with participants considered potentially vulnerable both as children and as people who have impairments.

All participant children completed a photographic scrapbook project, where they were asked to take photographs of playground locations and equipment in a local community playground in response to each of 12 guiding statements (Figure 1. 'My view of the playground': Guiding statements). They later compiled their photographs into a scrapbook (some with a great deal of adult assistance) and provided written explanations for their choices. Each page in the scrapbook contained one of the guiding statements, a space for the corresponding photograph and three sentence stems that children were asked to complete: 1. This place makes me feel like this... because... ; 2. I chose to take this photo because... ; 3. I can [insert appropriate guiding statement] here because... . In follow-up interviews I discussed with each child their photo choices and their responses to the sentence stems in more detail. I also observed the children with impairments at play, both during a field trip to a community playground and in their own school playground settings. The children 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 ‘feelings’ stamps; a smiling face ☺, a sad face ☹ and a grimacing face 😬.

Greenfield’s (2003) study utilises the technique of ‘photo elicitation’ that has been described by C. Burke (2005) as the ‘coupling of words and images allowing for interaction between the two’ (p. 32). Using photo elicitation can provide the scope to stimulate responses from children, to facilitate communication with children, to triangulate with data from other sources, and as a tool to assist children to contribute their perspectives of playgrounds to the research. Photo elicitation is described by some authors as a useful way to facilitate communication with children, including very young children (Clark, 2004; Greenfield, 2003) who use limited spoken language or who have limited literacy skills; furthermore, the adoption of visual methods, in research involving the participation of children, can provide ways of engaging effectively with the children (Clark, 2004; Greenfield, 2003; Moss, Deppeler, Astley, & Pattison, 2007) by mediating and facilitating the communication between the researcher and the children (Christensen & James, 2000).

For this chapter, my field notes, children’s photographic scrapbooks and focus group discussion transcripts, I reflected on the data in to try to discover structures of meaning. This process is described by van Manen (1990, p. 30) as one of six ‘methodological themes’ to ‘animate inventiveness and stimulate insight’ into phenomenological structure. Van Manen sees, ‘reflecting on the essential themes which characterise the phenomenon’ (p. 30) as part of the process of phenomenological research. The themes that emerged through analysis of the scrapbook data at times converged with themes drawn from my research journal

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

(Burke, 2012, p. 969, adapted from Greenfield 2003; 2004).

Figure 1. ‘My view of the playground’: guiding statements

and from the focus group discussion transcripts. In these instances I combined the data under the identified theme and then attempted to describe the phenomenon through ‘the art of writing and rewriting’ (van Manen, 1990, p. 30). For this chapter, I grouped pieces of text with attention to issues of access for children with physical impairments including that concerned with a particular playspace item, known as a ‘Liberty Swing’. In the playspace this was the only piece of equipment where any children mentioned physical impairment even though there was also an accessible sand pit, wheelchair accessible seating and a variety of swings for a range of children in the playspace.

The playground places that children photographed and their accompanying written statements and comments provide insights into how children read and spatially construct their environment with respect to disability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

I present some illustrative examples of data in two parts. First, I provide three vignettes drawn from a focus group with parents of children with an impairment from my study followed by a discussion linking the concept of existential space. Second, I offer data from the children’s scrapbooks and some of my own photographs, followed by discussion about places in the particular play site that act as spatial signifiers of difference. Two of the research participants in this study are Dominic and George, both six years old and both use wheelchairs for mobility. When they visit conventional playspaces, both boys are compelled to sit and watch non-disabled children play because the equipment is inaccessible to wheelchairs. George’s mother, Anita, and Dominic’s mother Lisa, as participants in the research study, explain the situation in Vignettes 1, 2 and 3.

Vignette 1: George.

Kids [without impairments] can run riot. George can’t access Hungry Jack’s playground at all. He goes to parties there and he sits in a party room and watches other kids. (Anita, mother of George)

Vignette 2: Dominic.

I’ve got twins and my son [Dominic] sits there and watches his [twin] sister and you can see his little face and sometimes I’ve said to him, “What’s wrong, mate?” and he’s said, “Stupid cerebral palsy”. He can’t express himself but he’s angry because he can’t do what she’s doing. She’s running around. She’s on the swing, she’s on the slide. He just wants to be normal like everyone else. (Lisa, mother of Dominic)

Vignette 3: George.

George visited an accessible playspace and found a musical play element that was accessible from his wheelchair. Anita, his mother, describes the scene:

They've got the bell things... and they're great. They're big. So all my son has to do is push it and it makes a noise and he spent at least five, ten minutes just pushing these bells, pushing, pushing, hearing the different noises and he thought that it was fantastic. They were at his level for his wheelchair and other kids were playing next to him. And he had a couple [of bells] he was playing, and other kids were playing [other bells]. And he just thought it was the best thing ever. He'd never been to a playground before that had something other than just walk around it or have to get out of his wheelchair to go down a slide.
(Anita, mother of George)

Aside from cultural differences between children and adults, children with impairments and children without impairments can be polarized into separate cultural groups by spatial arrangements. I use Vignette 1 and Vignette 2 to help explain this point with respect to separate play arrangements for children with impairments and the different places that they inhabit compared with their peers without impairments. George and Dominic, in the examples provided in Vignettes 1 and 2, are spatially positioned outside (or on the periphery) of the cultural play landscape of their peers. Their membership of the cultural group, 'children', is limited by their overlapping membership of the group, 'disabled children'. Consequently they are denied spatial justice (Armstrong, 2012) because of the exclusive configuration of the playspace. When children with impairments are segregated from children without impairments by physical barriers or adult-imposed practices then they may experience difficulty sharing collective identity with place. I refer to Relph (1976) who asserts that cultural groups have been socialised 'according to a common set of experiences, signs and symbols' (p. 12).

Spatial separation denies shared cultural experiences and can lead to playground users experiencing place through either insideness or outsideness (Relph, 1976). As such, it is difficult for children without impairments to experience the place identity of the impairment-influenced culture, despite all belonging to the larger cultural group, children. For children with impairments, being able to experience place collectively as part of the broader children's social group is likely to assist in building shared cultural understanding between all children. Consequently, a strong argument for the importance of inclusion for children can be derived from such reasoning. An example of inclusion is provided by George's mother, Anita, in Vignette 3. Unlike the spatial arrangements described in Vignettes 1 and 2, in Vignette 3 George is permitted to occupy this social space and engage in a more conventional experience. A shared cultural experience is possible here because of the configuration of the built environment of the playspace. Anita further explained that the experience she describes in Vignette 3 was derived from the only example she was aware of where George, up until he was six years old, had been able to visit a playspace and actively participate in play, without watching others from the sidelines or be carried around a playspace by a carer.

Spatial Signifiers in a Playspace

The second idea associated with the lived space of the playground, is that of the role of spatial signifiers in cultural reproduction. Spatial signifiers are signs and symbols that are read from and into places by individuals within the cultural structure of society (Titman, 1994). Imrie and Kumar (1998) maintain that places can act as ‘spatial signifiers of difference’ (p. 385) in which exclusionary practices signal, highlight, extend, reinforce and legitimate differences between those who are impaired and those who are not. Spatial markers, when associated with certain social groups, signify difference between those who use particular spaces and those who do not (Imrie, 1996). For many disabled people, ‘access to specific places is a constitutive part of how they come to be defined and recognised’ (Imrie & Kumar, 1998, p. 357–358) by others. Spatial demarcations or ‘spatial markers’ thus produce and reproduce social exclusions.

The complexities of the built environment, and the consequent ways in which it affects disabled people’s lives, are difficult to ascertain. Imrie and Kumar (1998) state that ‘the configuration of the built environment is implicated, in quite complex ways, in the material circumstances, identities and daily lived experiences of disabled people’ (p. 358). Imrie and Kumar (1998) draw on social constructionist theory to explain how space acts as a medium for conveying messages about impairment, asserting that social relations are ‘constituted in and by space’ (Imrie, 1996, p. 12–13).

A Liberty Swing as a Spatial Signifier of Difference

In this study, a Liberty Swing, pictured in Photograph 1 by one of the research participants, Riley, provides an example of a spatial signifier of difference. A Liberty



Photograph 1. Riley’s photo of a Liberty Swing

Swing is a swing that was purpose-designed to allow a person to swing whilst seated in a wheelchair. It was designed in Australia and is frequently installed in large public playgrounds and special education schools. The comments provided by the children in their scrapbooks that accompanied their pictures of the Liberty Swing have been aggregated below. Of the 15 children who chose to photograph the Liberty Swing in their photographic project, they selected it under the following guiding statement categories.

Table 1. The number of children who photographed the Liberty Swing, in relation to their chosen guiding statement

<i>Somewhere in the playground where...</i>	<i>Number of participants</i>
I have never played but would like to	9
I don't feel safe	2
I don't like to play	2
I want to try hard to do something	1
I feel safe	1

Most children who photographed the Liberty Swing indicated they were excluded from using it. Examples of children's comments where they express that they were excluded are:

It looks like fun. ... I wish I could go there. I don't know why I can't.

This place makes me feel like this ☹ because "nobody lets me go on it. Nobody lets anyone go in without a wheelchair. I'd like to swing on it but I can't. I would like to swing on it because it's cool. I'd swing high on it".

This place makes me feel like this ☹ because "I'm not allowed to get in there. I'm not allowed to play in there. I would like to play on this".

This place makes me feel like this ☹ because "I never went there. I have never been in here before". (This child admitted that she didn't know what the swing was for).

"It looks like fun". This place makes me feel like this ☹ because "I can't play there".

I love it. I can't get on it and I wish I could.

This place makes me feel like this ☹ because "I can't do what I want to do".

One child expressed curiosity about disability: “I’d like to know what it’s like in wheelchair”.

One child associated the swing with being a safe place: This place makes me feel like this ☺ because “you can’t fall off”.

These comments raise the question of why many of the children who say they would like to play on this swing are unable to do so. I have attempted to answer this question in the discussion that follows. Moreover, some of the children expressed negative views of disability and an awareness of the potential danger to them or getting into trouble in using the swing:

It’s a swing. It’s big. It’s too high and I can slip out.

I don’t like the wheelchair swing because it’s for wheelchair people. It’s not a good place for children. I don’t feel safe here because it’s dangerous. It could just start up and hit me.

...It’s a dangerous swing...

“I’d get into trouble if I played on it”. This place makes me feel like this ☹ because “I’m just dying to get on it but I can’t because I might get into trouble. I want to have a swing on it. I’d like to play here because it might be really fun”.

“Wheelchairs have to play on it. It’s their swing”. This place makes me feel ‘yucky’ because “I don’t like it and it makes me feel sick. It’s not nice because you have to go in it if you have an accident. I don’t like to play here because it’s for wheelchairs and crutches”.

Of 15 children who included the Liberty Swing in their photographic project, 12 children associated it with sad feelings, ☹ and three chose the ‘happy feeling’ stamp ☺ (Burke, 2006).



Photograph 2. A key is required to operate the Liberty Swing



Photograph 3. Sign on the gate of the Liberty Swing enclosure



Photograph 4. The Liberty Swing is located on the periphery facing away from the playground



Photograph 5. Childproof lock on the gate of the Liberty Swing enclosure

The children’s comments about the Liberty Swing suggest that some research participants perceive the structural space occupied by the Liberty Swing as a place that is restricted to those who are different because they use wheelchairs. The size and physical presence of the swing (Photograph 4), the thick palings on the tall fence dividing the swing from the rest of the playground (Photograph 4), the signage restricting the area around the swing to ‘users and carers’ (Photograph 3), the childproof gate and lock (Photograph 5) and the swing’s location on the periphery of the playground (Photograph 4), are likely to convey spatial messages to young playground users. Some of the children in this study explained that they felt excluded from this space and that only people who used wheelchairs could use this space. Thus, the children have noticed that the space is demarcated for disability and only certain types of disability. Interestingly, the swing has a fold-down seat, that enables a child to use the swing without being seated in a wheelchair, meaning that it is actually a more inclusive piece of play equipment than a conventional swing, but this use is not promoted and no children in this study seemed to be aware of it.

From the evidence of this study, a few examples of which are provided in this chapter, it would seem that children partly construct their own and others’ value and social positioning according to whether they are included in or excluded from certain playground spaces. The social value and capabilities of some children with physical impairments are conveyed through space by implicit messages about impairment in play spaces. The absence of children with impairments from mainstream play activities, and their presence in others, communicates messages to their peers from which contribute to their socially constructed notions of disability.

Another example of a spatial signifier of difference is conventional play equipment that does not cater for other than ‘normal’ children. The playspaces featured in Vignette 1 fit this description. Within such environments, as explained previously, the differences between those who can play and those who can’t become

blatantly apparent. Alternatively, children with impairments often avoid accessing such spaces. Lack of contact in play environments of non-impaired children with their peers with impairments, according to Davis, Priestley and Watson (2004), can result in culturally deprived situations in which non-impaired children are prevented from learning about the ‘true diversity’ of their peer group. Furthermore, hegemonic practices that exclude people because of their impairment are normalized. Davis and his colleagues explain:

In forming social networks and personal relationships within a disabling environment, non-disabled children learn that their social world functions without disabled people and learn not to question the exclusion of disabled people from the adult world. (Davis et al., 2004, p. 20)

Some children in this study demonstrated their understandings of disability through their comments about the Liberty Swing. These comments provide strong evidence of the social messages that children read spatially from the environment. Consider George as described by his mother playing in the ‘accessible’ playground that contains certain sensory equipment in Vignette 3. George plays alongside other children ringing the bells. By being permitted to occupy this social space and engage in a regular play experience alongside ‘normal’ children, his capabilities and his behaviour are likely to be normalised by his playmates and he is seen as being capable, and likely sees himself as capable, of participating in play alongside his peers. The playground becomes his environment too, and a shared cultural identity with place is possible for all the children included in the immediate environment. In comparison, in Vignette 2, Dominic is compelled to sit on the sidelines, unable to access the play space being utilised by other children, watching his sisters playing together. His physical presence as a spectator of play is normalised as one of absence from the play experience. He is cast (seemingly in his own eyes) as an incompetent player who is incapable of participating in peer play. The limitations of his impairment are highlighted to himself (as reported by Lisa, his mother) and, most likely, to his sisters who are engaged in the act of playing. Barriers that are often imposed on such children seem to limit their opportunities to exert their own free choice and act as creative, autonomous agents in their play.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

A playspace is a site of the processes of social construction that occur also in the broader world beyond the playground. Central to this argument, drawing on the social model of childhood disability (Connors & Stalker, 2007), is the recognition that children with impairments have the capacity and opportunity to act as agents in their play in the playspace. Such processes can contribute to the inclusion, or alternatively to the oppression, of disabled people. In this chapter I have provided evidence of children with impaired mobility and children without impaired mobility divided into separate cultural groups by spatial arrangements. Spatial separation thus

denies spatial justice and prevents shared cultural play experiences in designated playspaces. For children with impaired mobility, being able to experience place collectively as part of the broader children's social group is likely to assist in building shared cultural understanding between all children. To redress this spatial injustice, a focus on finding ways for all children to gain access to inclusive play and opportunities for social interaction with peers must be accorded central importance over adult choices and institutional priorities imposed on children that deny them access to play.

I have drawn attention to the fact that some children in this study demonstrated their understandings of disability through their comments about the Liberty Swing. The Liberty Swing provides strong evidence of the social messages that children read spatially from the environment and can be described as a spatial signifier of difference. This is likely because of the way the swing is positioned and promoted in the playspace, rather than the actual capabilities of the swing. Exclusionary practices, therefore, signal, highlight, extend, reinforce and legitimate differences between some of those who are impaired and some of those who are not.

Considering the examples presented in this chapter, I urge the reader to consider how children without impairments might construct impairment, and how children with impairments might consequently view themselves in relation to their non-impaired peers from their reading of the way the built environment is configured. Wendell (1996) asserts that insider knowledge, if acknowledged and accepted by people who are not disabled, can contribute beneficially to the social fabric, enriching our thinking and consequently changing the way we understand each other. We may become able to embrace and understand a broad array of ways of doing and being that are not solely confined to the dominant 'ableist' adult view, but which draw on rich and varied discourses. Such a priority is vital for all children, not just those with impairments. Being denied opportunities to learn about and experience the true diversity of their peer group can thus result in play deprivation for non-impaired children. Importantly, from a disability studies perspective, some children with impaired mobility are unable to access spatial justice. Furthermore, within a play environment bereft of children with impairments, the subsequent social messages that non-impaired children receive may lead them to accept social segregation for people with impairments as a 'normal' part of life and the consequent devaluing of disabled people.

Play, as a major social institution, influences the shaping of society. By gathering in playspace environments, children who do not necessarily know each other learn about others, social values and the communities in which they live. This cultural learning is an important by-product of a child's play experience and emphasises that inclusive play is not just about children experiencing fun and pleasure from such activities. It is important that practices are adopted that enable children with impairments to be independent, welcomed and included as equals in children's environments such as playspaces.

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