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## **Children's perceptions of accessible playgrounds.**

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### Abstract

For some children with impairments, playing on a playground with other children is seldom or never experienced. Accessible playgrounds have features that can give children with disabilities the opportunity to gain access to play so that they can be included in play with other children, including peers who do not have impairments. In this paper, qualitative data drawn from the views and perceptions of children with communication impairments and their parents is explored. Interpretation through reflection on this data attempts to make sense of the lived experience of participants in school and community playgrounds as they try to engage with supposedly accessible play equipment that can facilitate participation, yet also create unintentional barriers to play. The social model of disability, which suggests that disability is created by barriers that exclude children from mainstream life, together with the emerging sociology of childhood is adopted as a way of viewing the relationship between children, disability and the playground environment. This paper communicates findings that when researchers offer ways to enable children with impairments to express their views about play, such children are able to express the validity of their play choices. Adults, including teachers, sometimes interpret that the type of play, in which some children who are disabled choose to engage, is of little value, however play choices by such children in this research, indicate autonomy, self-determination and independence in play.

'The voices of those who are silenced are often the best witnesses and have the most powerful things to say.' Smyth (2007).

How do most people come to know disability? Slee (2001) asserts that most people come to know disability 'at a distance' (p. 171). I begin this paper with a description of, what was for me as a researcher, a powerful learning experience that shaped my thinking about the unique, sometimes unrecognised and often undervalued abilities of children who have impairments. Through this experience I gained a deeper understanding of the way in which researchers can recognise, acknowledge and view as 'assets' (Wendell, 1996) the unique abilities of children who have impairments, or alternatively, choose to ignore such differences and view them as deficits. This experience enabled me personally to come to know disability at less of a distance. Furthermore, I will explore data from my research which shows that playground experiences that are chosen by children with impairments are sometimes not valued by adults who instead seek to impose what they see as more appropriate ways for children with impairments to behave. I draw on the notion expressed by Mayall (2002) that 'childhood agency has to be understood within the parameters of childhood's minority status' (p. 21). The

data suggests that adult-imposed control of children's play, particularly for children who are disabled, is based on entrenched assumptions about play that fail to recognise the benefits for children of autonomous and independent play. The evidence of this study indicates that children with impairments, when given the opportunity, strongly communicate the value to them of self-selected play experiences.

### Theoretical perspective

A social interpretation of disability, which suggests that disability is an unequal social relationship that has oppressive consequences for people with impairment, is adopted in this study as a way of attempting to understand disability. In the social model, a clear distinction is made between impairment and disability; impairment being an individual's functional limitation and disability being created by social and environmental factors (Barnes, 1998). Disability is viewed as being socially created by the limitations imposed by features of the environment or as Brisenden (1998) asserts: 'The disablement lies in the construction of society, not in the physical condition of the individual' (p. 24). Adoption of the social model of disability is significant because it provides a way to make sense of how barriers can limit participation in playgrounds, without focusing on an individual's limitations. Thomas's (1999) social relational interpretation of disability adopts 'barriers to being' and 'barriers to doing' (p. 157) as a way of explaining how people with impairments are excluded from physical environments and also in more personal psycho-emotional ways.

In addition, in this paper, children and childhood are viewed through the 'emerging' sociology of childhood as outlined by Prout and James (1997). Children are seen as being active in the determination of their own lives and societies and of holding their own views and opinions that are worthy of study. Childhood is socially constructed, non-universal and culturally specific (Jenks, 2002). The research described in this paper draws on a trend in social research, which through new understandings of childhood seeks to include children as 'participant agents in social research' (Mayall, 2002, p.1), thus involving children as research participants (Sandburg, 2002; Scott, 2000). Childhood is concerned with 'processes in relation to social positions' (Mayall, 2002, p. 1), primarily generational issues between childhood and adulthood (Mayall, 2002, p. 1). Mayall argues that new sociological understandings of childhood can provide a way to learn from the 'gaps and misfits' (Mayall, 2002, p. 1) between children's experiences and their taken for granted positioning in the social order (Mayall, 2002). Mayall (2002) adopts an approach in an attempt to contribute to 'debates about childhood' (p. 2) where she moves between two stances, looking 'up from childhood', and looking down from adulthood (Mayall, 2002, p. 4). I utilise such an approach in this paper by drawing on both children's and adults views of play in playgrounds.

Together, the social relational model of disability and new understandings of the sociology of childhood form the basis of an approach which frames this research. This theoretical perspective, notably adopted by Connors and

Stalker (2003), Kelly (2005) and Watson, Shakespeare, Cunningham-Burley, Barnes, Corker, Davis and Priestley, (2000), has been posited as a way of researching a 'disabled childhood' (Connors & Stalker 2003, p. 25). Connors and Stalker refer to this emerging theoretical perspective as the 'social model of childhood disability' (Connors & Stalker, 2007).

## Methodology

In this paper, the views of seventy-two children aged six to ten years, comprised of thirty-five children classified as having impairment, and thirty-seven as not having impairment, were accessed through a participatory photographic project entitled *My view of the playground*. In this project, which utilised the technique of photo elicitation, children took photos in a community playground in response to twelve pre-determined categories (reproduced in table 1) and pasted them into a scrapbook, along with comments about the playground places they had chosen to photograph. In addition, in this paper, parents of children with autism spectrum disorders, who were consulted in a focus group discussion, also contribute to the data.

<p><b><i>My view of the playground - record sheet</i></b></p> <p><b>I am looking for</b></p> <p>Somewhere in the playground...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a) ...I like to play most</li><li>b) ...I don't like to play</li><li>c) ...I feel safe</li><li>d) ...I don't feel safe</li><li>e) ...that is the best place to play with others</li><li>f) ...to be by myself</li><li>g) ...that is difficult for me to get to</li><li>h) ...where I have never played but would like to</li><li>i) ...where I want to try hard to do something</li><li>j) ...that is fun</li><li>k) ...where I can work hard (huff and puff)</li><li>l) ...I can pretend</li></ul> <p>Adapted from Greenfield, C. (2003). <i>The outdoor playground through children's eyes</i>. Manakau Institute of Technology.</p>
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Table 1: *My view of the playground - record sheet*

## Analysis

The abilities of children with impairments may often go unnoticed or be credited with little or no value by others. This is not a new idea in research (Billington, 2006; Morris, 2003; Rabiee, Sloper & Beresford, 2004) but one which became apparent to me during data collection and became increasingly significant to my research as it progressed. First, in the analysis that follows, in order to explain the personal learning experience to which I have referred, I will attempt to place it in context. During my first field trip with a group of

children in the community playground I accompanied one of the child participants while she completed the task of taking her pictures. For the purpose of protecting her identity, I will call this participant 'Harriet'. The names of all participants have been changed in this paper to protect their identity. My own name remains as interviewer in the focus group discussion data. Harriet's teacher had previously informed me that Harriet may have difficulty completing the task that required her to take photos of places in the playground in response to the categories I had put in place. Harriet had been diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder and used no speech. According to her teacher, although Harriet seemed to understand spoken language she usually gave little or no response when spoken to and it was difficult to determine what she understood. I was, therefore, aware of Harriet's communication differences and prepared to work towards assisting her to participate in the research. I was also very keen to test the usefulness of the participatory photographic project as a research tool with a variety of children, and hoped that the tool and the way I chose to apply it would enable Harriet to express her preferences about play places. Here I refer to my research notes:

I approached Harriet in the playground and told her that I wanted her to take some photos. I showed her the camera and asked her to take me to *somewhere in the playground where she liked to play most*. Harriet moved away from where she had been standing and started to walk slowly along the playground path; therefore I assumed that she had understood me. Harriet paused at the monkey bars. I asked her if this was the place she liked to play most, but without responding or looking at me she moved on, this time to pause at the slide. I asked if she wanted to photograph the slide, but again received no obvious acknowledgement of my question or my presence. When Harriet moved off again, this time to complete a slow lap around the playground, I followed closely behind. Despite my insistence and questions about where she would like to take her photos, Harriet did not seem to respond to me, except that she was moving around the playground and did seem to be considering places in the playground. Time was passing and we had taken no photographs. I was beginning to think that perhaps Harriet was, after all, unable to understand what I had asked of her or perhaps that she was unwilling to cooperate, but remembered what her teacher had told me about the way Harriet was able to communicate and decided to continue. Eventually, Harriet arrived at the sandpit, and slowly but purposefully walked to the rear of it and knelt down in the sand, facing a timber wall which ran along the back of the sandpit, with her back to me (photograph 1). She picked up a handful of sand and poured it slowly into her other hand and back again several times. She seemed completely engrossed in this activity and totally oblivious to me. I interpreted her body language as showing disinterest in completing the photographic project and that she had become distracted from the task at hand and wanted to play. I was feeling frustrated and unsure what to do next to salvage my data collection attempt. I was about to leave her when I noticed that she was holding up the handful of sand to the side where I was standing, but still avoiding eye contact with me. I hesitated and she moved her handful of sand closer to me. "Do you want to take a photo of the sand?" I asked, and received no verbal response or eye contact in return, but her handful of sand remained outstretched. I understood that she was indicating to me that she wanted me to photograph her hand with the sand in it. When I asked if this was the place she liked to play most, again she presented the sand in her hand towards me and pointed towards it with her other hand. I understood this as an affirmative response. Despite wanting Harriet to take the photo herself, I took the photo so that the opportunity was not lost

(photograph 2). After taking the picture, I held the camera to Harriet to show her the digital image of her photo. She seemed satisfied, not because she nodded to me as I might have expected, but because only then did she return once more to her play in the sand, picking up a handful of sand and pouring it from hand to the other. I asked her to take me to *somewhere in the playground she didn't like to play*, but there was no response (no acknowledgement, no movement) from Harriet. She remained engrossed in her sand play for some time and I could not convince her to do otherwise, until I suggested that she show her teacher the sand. In response, Harriet picked up a handful of sand and went to find her teacher.

Later, I described to the classroom teacher what had happened. The teacher verified that what I had observed was consistent with her observations of Harriet's play at school. The teacher explained that Harriet took the opportunity to seek out tactile play experiences, usually involving sand or water, always preferring solitary play to social play with other children.

Photograph 1: My photo of Harriet playing in the sandpit



Photograph 2: Harriet's photo of where she liked to play most





I interpreted Harriet's actions in holding up the handful of sand to me, as a response to the request I had made to her to, "take me to somewhere in the playground where you most like to play". On reflection, I could see that she had carefully considered where that was to be, by her actions of walking around the entire playground purposefully to consider her response before finishing in the sandpit, the place where, in her opinion, she liked to play most. She had responded to my question by choosing the place she most liked to play and placing herself in it.

Through my prior discussion with Harriet's teacher, I had gained an awareness of Harriet's communication preferences. As I wasn't quite sure how this data collection attempt would pan out, I had chosen to adopt a 'wait and see' approach and to provide Harriet with the opportunity to communicate with me. I was reminded of the words of Morris (2003) who said:

Assume that all children and young people have something to communicate. It is up to us [as researchers] to find ways of understanding their views and experiences (Morris, 2003, p. 346).

As a researcher it is easy to get caught in the trap of excluding or dismissing children with impairments from research because they *seem* unwilling or unable to comply with the task in the way the researcher expects. Billington (2006) refers to Sinason (1994) who suggests that neglecting to acknowledge the unique ways of knowing and thinking in children with impairments, could be viewed as deficit in adults, including professionals, rather than in the child they are attempting to understand. Had I interpreted Harriet's actions in the way I would have regarded the actions of a non-disabled child, based on my expectations of how a child who did not have an impairment might behave and communicate with me, then I would have interpreted Harriet's actions as ones of confusion, disinterest or perhaps not understanding the task. At the time, I very nearly lost patience and aborted Harriet's chances of contributing her views. What had made this particular data-collection attempt difficult, from my perspective, was that I had to reject my predetermined ideas about how the children would complete the task and how long it would take them. Harriet's way of completing the task did not conform to my initial expectations. The "wait and see" approach that I adopted provided me with enhanced understanding of what play in a playground was to this research participant, and also a greater appreciation of the usefulness and application of the research tool in facilitating communication with a variety of children.

The research process and research tools themselves can provide material barriers or 'barriers to doing' (Thomas, 1999, p. 157) that work to silence children with impairments (Watson et al, 2000). The social model of disability provided me with the rationale for attempting to separate Harriet's impairment effects (Thomas, 1999) from disabling barriers which might have denied her access to participation in research (Morris, 2003). Had I chosen to walk away, or to disregard the subtle communication signals Harriet was using with me, this data would not have been recorded. Had I remained solely focused on ensuring that my research activity was completed by each child in the way that I had designed it and that children's ways of communicating it needed to

be the same as everyone else, then data contributed by Harriet would not have been included in the study. Instead, I chose to remain open to the possibility that communication in different ways might offer insights into the worlds of children who are disabled. Consequently I was rewarded with the rich insight provided by my data collection attempt not only with Harriet, but also with some of other children.

My research shows that children with communication impairments are able in some circumstances to validate their play choices in their photographic scrapbooks. Data provided by the children gives insight into their experiences of play in a playground. In the following comments provided by the children, most of whom have impaired ability to communicate verbally, it is possible to gauge a sense of the active play choices made by children with impairments as they negotiate the playground environment.

One example is provided by Ethan's entries in his scrapbook. Ethan has been diagnosed with autism. He uses spoken language sparingly. He has a very cautious nature, and finds changes in routine very difficult. Ethan referred to a particular playground place, the rubber tube bridge (photograph 3) three times in his scrapbook. This piece of equipment seemed challenging for him. When the three entries are pieced together a more complete picture emerges. Ethan tells of the challenge and difficulty presented 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 falling, the possible outcome of falling (cry if you fall) and the need to be careful. In the dialogue reproduced from the pages of Ethan's scrapbook, note that the italicised print was provided for students to respond to. The dialogue in quotation marks and the photograph were provided by Ethan. He uses the sad face stamp on both occasions:

*Somewhere in the playground where I can work hard (huff and puff)*  
*This place makes me feel like this ☹ because "the bridge and I might fall. Cry if you fall" (Ethan).*

*Somewhere in the playground that's difficult for me to get to*  
*This place makes me feel like this ☹ because "have to climb. Be careful".*  
*It's difficult for me to get here "because I'd cry. If not careful, I would fall"*  
(Ethan).

Ethan seems to be articulating his concerns about climbing on the bridge and his understanding that there are dangers associated with climbing on this rope bridge. However, despite what appears to be a place associated with fear of falling and the potential for tears, Ethan doesn't seem put off from persevering with the challenge offered by this playground place. Ethan's third entry for *somewhere in the playground where I want to try hard to do something* is enlightening.

*This place makes me feel like this ☺*  
*"I want to try hard here because "you have to climb". (Ethan)*

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



Photograph 3:  
Ethan's photograph of  
the rubber tube bridge

*'I want to try hard here  
because you have to  
climb'*

Other child participants in the study demonstrated that they could exercise choice and autonomy by selecting play places where they could engage in solitary play. Most selections were in response to the category *somewhere in the playground I can be by myself*. This research category was deliberately worded in a neutral way, to avoid suggesting that being by oneself was either desirable or non-desirable, thereby allowing the child research participants to make such a distinction.

Children indicated that they valued places where they could be alone. For most children with impairments, such places were viewed positively. Being alone was rarely seen as an undesirable or unwanted experience. Only two children classified as having impairment chose the sad face stamp for this category. Such data refutes the idea that playgrounds are accessed by children solely as places to engage in active, social play. Children in this study expressed that they clearly sought and valued places to be by themselves. Children provided several different reasons to be alone, which as part of data analysis were divided into themes according to reasons given by children: to rest or gain respite from play; to hide, be invisible or play tricks on others; to think and reflect; to be safe; to find privacy and solitude; to be autonomous and independent.

There were numerous examples provided by children, however in this paper I have included a selection of children's comments for each identified theme:



To rest or seek respite from play:

*This place makes me feel like this*



*because "nobody can see me".*



*I chose to take this photo because "I kind of like it".*

*I can be by myself here "just for a couple of minutes, not a long time" (William).*

To hide, be invisible or play tricks on others:

*This place makes me feel like this*



*because "I can hide and no one can find me. No one sees me".*



*I chose to take this photo because "it's heaps of fun".*

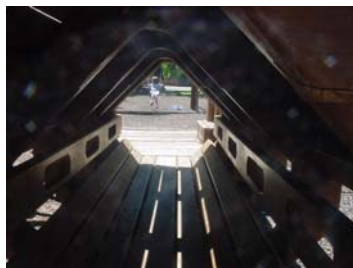
*I can be by myself here because "it's my cubby house" (Evan).*

To think and reflect:

*This place makes me feel like this*



*because "it's nice and cosy. It gives me time to think".*



(Benjamin)

To be safe:

*This place makes me feel like this*



*because "I can feel safe".*



*I chose to take this photo because "no robbers can get you or strangers".*

*I can be by myself here because "it's a safe playground" (Barry).*

To find privacy and solitude:

*This place makes me feel like this*



*because "I like the swing a lot"*



*I chose to take this photo because I chose to take this photo because "I love swinging high because the wind comes and feels good ... whoosh ... against my face and it blows my hair back and that feels nice". I can be by myself here "I can swing really high" (Riley).*

To be autonomous and independent:

*This place makes me feel like this*



*because "I can swing".*



*I chose to take this photo because "it's fun".*

*I can be by myself here because "I can push myself" (Sharnie).*

*This place makes me feel like this*



*because "you can bounce on it".*



*I chose to take this photo because "it's bouncy".*

*I can be by myself here "because I am the boss of myself" (Fred).*

Children with impairments in the literature are often portrayed as needing play remediation and intervention by adults to assist them. Children, in such studies are discussed in terms of their deficits, which in turn are seen to lead to play difficulties. Drawing on a 'social model of childhood disability' (Connors & Stalker, 2007), children with impairments can be identified as exercising choice, agency and self-modifying their own play experiences according to their abilities.

The types of places chosen and the sorts of reasons children gave for their choices were similar for children both with and without impairments suggesting the relevance of a 'sameness paradigm, rather than a difference

paradigm' (Lyons, 2003, p. 5) for understanding play in playgrounds for children with impairments.

The comments provided by the children who were classified as having disabilities, in their photographic scrapbooks, show that the children are able to make choices, and experience enjoyment and through self-selected play experiences. One of the features identified by Prout and James (1997) as a characteristic of the emerging sociology of childhood identifies children as needing to be seen as active social players in their own right:

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. Children are not just passive subjects of social structures and processes (Prout & James, 1997, p. 8.).

This fundamental recognition that children, including children with impairments, are social beings who inevitably exercise their agency, is articulated by Prout and James (1997). When considered in the context of the choices the children (whose photos and comments are reproduced above) were clearly making, they are revealed as being active in the construction and determination of their own play and communicating to me their choices of what play in a playground is to them. Harriet, similarly, demonstrated to me that her choice of play involved engaging in passive, tactile and peaceful play on her own. Her play was serving a purpose that was important to her at the time. Her play and her choices were no less valid because of her preference to play in only one place in the playground, or because she chose to do it alone. Alderson (2000) describes this particular autonomous feature of children's play thus:

[to] many children...play is freedom from adult control, spontaneously doing as they like because they enjoy that, and for no other reason, an especially precious time which they rarely have (Alderson, 2000, p. 96).

Children such as Harriet, who are classified as having autism, have often been identified as seeking opportunities for solitary play experiences (Wolfberg, 1999). From an adult perspective, or looking down from adulthood (Mayall, 2002), children playing alone in the playground seems to be seen differently from way the children who contributed their ideas, described their solitary play in the playground. In this study, in one of the focus group discussions, parents (Anthea, Wanda, Dianne and Cora) of children who have autism spectrum disorders, verified that they have observed their children seeking play places to be alone:

Jenene *Do any of your children actually seek places where they can be alone in playgrounds?*

Anthea *Oh, yes.*

Wanda *Yes.*

Cora *Yes, Cody does. He likes the dark cubby hole tunnels. If there's a lot of children, there's a lot of holes and he'll just go and stay in a corner and play there.*

Anthea *I think that's where we find the safety issue does come in. If the kids are on the playground, Kirby will probably be at the fence just because he wants*

*to be as far away from that situation as possible. And then that opens up that he'll have time to find a way to get over the fence. He doesn't mean to be near the fence. That's just as far as he can be to get away from other people.*

Jenene *So the quiet spaces and hidey holes are important?*  
Cora *Yes.*

According to the mothers, they have observed how their children who have autism spectrum disorders, clearly demonstrate through their play choices, a strong desire to engage in solitary play, in a similar way to how Harriet demonstrated her preferences to me earlier. Kirby heads to the boundaries of the playground to escape other children, Cody seeks out quiet, private places to play. Wanda expresses her desire to use a playground as a place where her child can access peer play as an alternative to playing alone:

Jenene *But for you as parents, you'd like to be able to go to a playground so your kids can play with other kids?*

Dianne *Definitely.*

Wanda *Oh, yeah. It's a part of life regardless of what child it is. Like if you go somewhere it's nice to think that if the other kids are playing, you'd like to think that they can join in and play rather than [be] a loner off by themselves.*

Wanda seems motivated by a concern that children with impairments should be able to fit in with others, to conform to the type of play experiences that she considers most valuable for her child. Her comments "join in and play" and avoiding being a "loner" indicates the high value she places on peer play and also her interpretation that solitary play is an unsatisfactory and undesirable play option for her child. She seems to wish that her child was more sociable. The same focus discussion group provided further evidence of adults undervaluing of children's own play choices. If we continue to follow the dialogue provided by Kirby's mother, Anthea, in the focus group discussion, she advocates what she believes is a better way than solitary play for Kirby and that is to play with other children. To this end, she has put in place rewards for Kirby to encourage him to play with others. Her belief is that the social skills required for playing with other children can (and should be) developed in Kirby by interventions that encourage him to play with others.

Wendy *So does Kirby socialise with the other kids?*

Anthea *He does now. I take him to the park to socialise. Do you know what I mean? So I think it's a real personal thing for each person. I feel that at school. There's a rule for Kirby at school that he has to play with other kids at playtime. If he doesn't, then he doesn't get a treat at the end of the day.*

Jenene *Are you happy with that rule?*

Anthea *I am happy. I made that rule.*

Jenene *Okay, I'm just wondering. Does he need time out?*

Wanda *How do you find out? Does he know that you ask the aide?*

Anthea *He has a series of boxes and ticks that he has to get through the day. If he doesn't get through all the boxes, he doesn't get to choose his treats.*

Wanda *Oh, okay.*

Jenene *What does he choose, just out of interest?*

- Anthea *He can have a friend over or go to a friend's house. He can choose dinner, which is usually [from a local fast food restaurant]. Or go to a park. So he has a list of about seven things [to] choose one each night because, what was happening was, he was choosing to have a friend over every night and it was driving me nuts.*
- Cora *So it's one a week?*
- Anthea *Well, yeah. What happens is it comes off next week...*
- Wanda *Once he picks it, it comes off?*
- Anthea *...and it all goes back on for the next week.*
- Jenene *So he's very social?*
- Anthea *He is now. And that's the thing. You see what happens? You've got to encourage it. Unfortunately the world is what it is and he is a minority. He has to join my world. That's my view on it. It's not everybody's view. You have to be cruel to be kind or whatever. Yeah, it may be cruel to him but it's worked in the end ... He's got lots of friends so it's worked for him. If I went to a park, I would encourage him not to be in a corner away from children.*

Kirby's mother, Anthea, is adamant that Kirby should play with others and tries to facilitate social play by putting rewards in place for her son. She indicates that Kirby "has to join my world" is vindicated by the fact that Kirby's ability to play with others has been enhanced by her approach to encouraging social play. This view is based on assumptions that the world of the able-bodied, and the way social interaction and play are valued, are determined and enforced by the able-bodied majority. Educators who suggest that children with impairments need play remediation are drawing on similar assumptions.

## Conclusion

Alderson (2000) cites research by Holdigan who found that play for children is often about being in the present relationships, whereas for parents it is more about developing the individuals for the future. Alderson's (2000) opinion is that views such as those expressed by Kirby's mother can be seen as a form of adult control exercised over the play of children with impairments:

Adults use play with a purpose to educate children, to assess their physical, cognitive and emotional development, to help them practise for their adult future, and to occupy and control them gently but firmly (Alderson, 2000, p. 96.).

When children exercise autonomy and determination they can be seen to be making clear choices about play. I argue these choices should be encouraged, permitted and supported where possible. Enjoyment of play by some children with impairments can be difficult to identify because of their communication differences, in much the same way that I experienced difficulty interpreting Harriet's preferences during the data collection attempt described at the beginning of this paper. We can tell that play is fun for able-bodied children when they smile, laugh or use language to communicate pleasure. In children with autism spectrum disorders or those who have communication or cognitive impairments, these usual communication indicators may be absent.



Children might, however, communicate the same feelings of fun and pleasure but in different ways using their individual communication strengths (Morris, 2003). There is a tendency to assume because we don't observe the expected communication signs or that children are playing alone, that such children are not having fun or that their play experiences have little value to them. Kirby and the other children were identified by their mothers as preferring solitary play experiences but the mothers indicated that they would prefer their children to play in more "normal", socially interactive ways. By way of contrast, I return to the image described earlier in the vignette of Harriet's field work. She knelt down in the sand, and was quietly pouring sand from one hand to the other. There was a quality about her play such that, although her enjoyment of play was not obvious at first, the delight in the repetitious, passive, tactile and self-selected task was identifiable. Harriet, by placing herself in her preferred play space, demonstrated her choice of this type of play, as did the other children whose views are shared in this paper. Ethan was able to articulate his desire to meet self-determined challenges despite the fear and anxiety he felt and expressed.

I am suggesting that the oft expressed emphasis on play remediation for children with impairments could be viewed as a sort of play enforcement based on adult judgements of what constitutes desirable play. Adults, including teachers, sometimes interpret that the type of play, in which some children with impairments choose to engage, is unsuitable or unsatisfactory. I argue these judgements may be made based on able-bodied adult values and assumptions about the value of certain types of play and deficit views of the abilities of children with impairments. The question about the necessity of play intervention as a teaching strategy is raised. I suggest that play intervention may not be as important as some adults might think when it serves as a way of denying opportunities for choice and autonomy for children with impairments. For adults who adopt a play remediation emphasis, it is easy to forget, or perhaps easy to fail to recognise, that play choices and self directed play in playgrounds by children who have impairments can indicate autonomy and independence in play. Furthermore, with reference once again to Prout and James (1997) 'emerging' sociology of childhood, such choices in children's play by the children themselves, put children in the position of being the determinants of 'their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live' (Prout & James, 1997) and are important for this reason alone.

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