

# Free(ing) Play for Disabled Children: a critical Disability Studies Perspective



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS



大家好！你  
知道我有遊  
戲權嗎？

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# Where I'm from! The Centre for Disability Studies, University of Leeds



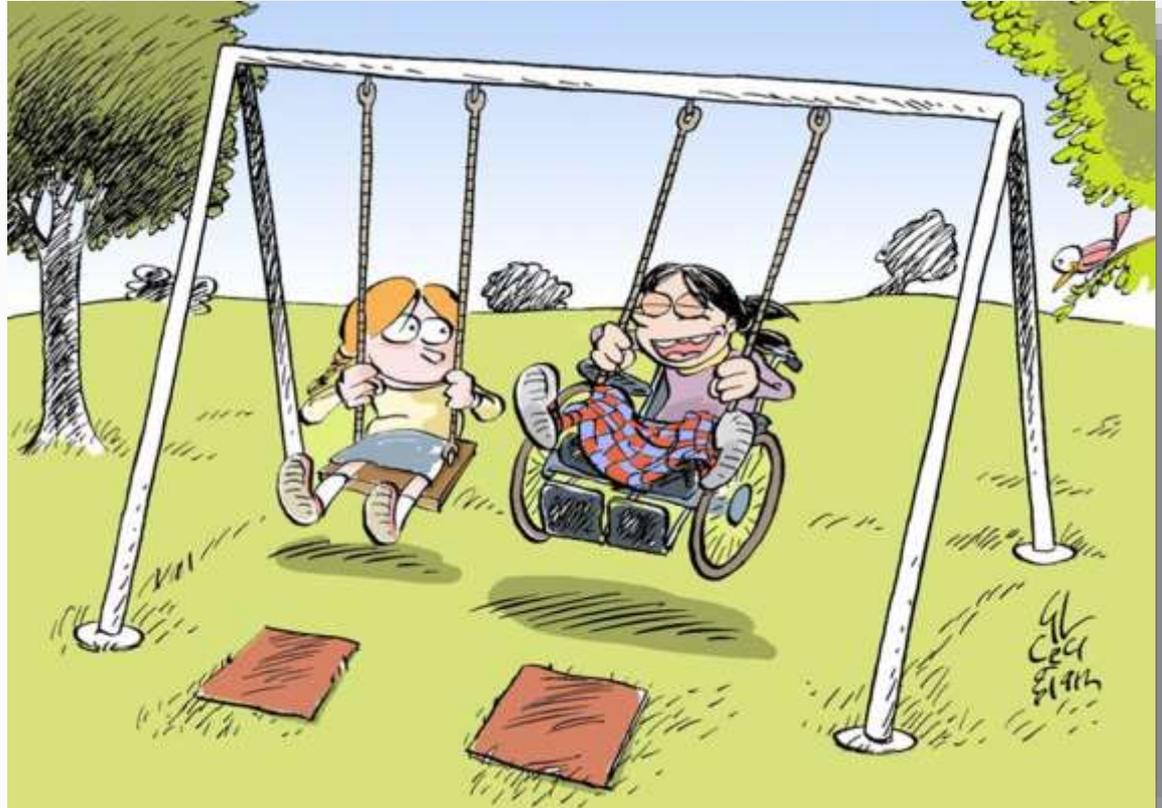
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# My focus today

- ❑ Children with disabilities' right to play
- ❑ Barriers to their play
- ❑ The "politics" of play for children with disabilities



# The perspective I am taking...

## Disabled Children's Childhood Studies

- An approach developed by researchers who are either sociologists or 'critical' psychologists
- It rejects **deficit model** approaches
- Recognises the **agency** of children with disabilities
- Is committed to **child-centred methodologies and ways of working**
- Has an overt 'activist' agenda that seeks to trouble the hegemony (dominance) of the 'norm' (what we think of as 'normal')
- Wants to **enhance quality of life for children with disabilities**



# A rights-based approach

BECAUSE  
EVERY CHILD  
IN THE WORLD  
HAS ONE THING  
IN COMMON.  
THEIR RIGHTS.



Illustration : alex leonard

U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child: Article 1

SCCYP  
Scotland's Commissioner  
for Children & Young People



# The Right to Play

‘to enable each child to enjoy their right to play, pro-active measures are needed to remove disabling barriers and promote accessibility’ (International Play Association, 2015: para.5).

- UN CRC (Article 31)  
&
- UN CRPD (Article 30)





# UN CRC & UN CRPD: mutually reinforcing

## Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 31

‘States Parties’ must:

“recognise the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities”

CRC General Comment 17 on the ‘Right to Play’ is also very important

## Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Article 30

‘States Parties’ must take appropriate measures:

“To ensure that children with disabilities have equal access with other children to participation in play, recreation and leisure and sporting activities, including those activities in the school system”

‘Play is a child’s first claim on the community’  
~ Lloyd George (1925)



‘Like literature, art, song, and dance; like politics and love and math, play is a way of engaging and expressing our being in the world’ ~ Sicart (2014)



# Play is *valuable*

- Play has many ‘benefits’ for all children in terms of their physical, cognitive/intellectual, social and emotional development
- It is also important for their ‘psychic health’
- Insufficient access to and inclusion in play has negative impact on children’s subjective wellbeing and mental health
- This can have **lifelong negative impact**



# Mental Illness in Childhood



Worldwide 10-20% of children and adolescents experience mental illness (World Health Organisation)

32% of Taiwanese children and adolescents have a mental illness

Demand for child and adolescent mental health services has grown by 50% over the past 5 years in Hong Kong





Research from UK, USA, Canada and Australia has shown that children with learning disabilities (cognitive impairments) are at a significantly greater risk of mental illness than their peers

WHY? Impairment-effects? Or disabling barriers?

We know they are at much greater risk of experiencing **BULLYING** and this can impact negatively on mental health



# Impact of an unhappy childhood on children with disabilities: internalised oppression



- “We harbour inside ourselves the pain and the memories, the fears and the confusions, the negative self-images and the low expectations, turning them into weapons with which to re-injure ourselves, every day of our lives.”  
**Micheline Mason, disability activist.**

# Free play

The most beneficial type of play for child 'psychic health' (Hughes 2012).

“FREE” in this context has nothing to do with financial costs!

What is free play?

- a) Is pleasurable;
- b) Has no extrinsic goals;
- c) Is spontaneous and voluntary;
- d) Involves some level of player engagement.
- e) When children feel in control of their play (Garvey 1990; Play England 2006; Brown 2014).



# Free Play = choice + engagement + satisfaction

‘satisfaction through play creates a sense of aliveness not often present in other modes of being’ Else (2014: 6)



# International Play Association



2015 Position Statement on Play identified these barriers to children with disabilities' play:

'inaccessible facilities and environments, negative attitudes and inappropriate social policies and programs'.

AND

'imposition of activities determined by adults' onto children with disabilities' play.'



# Physical Barriers

Physical barriers: for example, inaccessible playgrounds, lack of suitable infrastructure (such as affordable means of transport)

Unsuitable design sends children with disabilities the negative message that they are 'out of place': in the wrong place or in the place that is not for them



Photo courtesy of Maria Prellwitz.



# Attitudinal Barriers

For example, attitudes of other children:

A British NGO has found that 82% of British children with learning difficulties (cognitive impairments) have been bullied, 58% have been subjected to bullying physically (Mencap, 2007)



# 'Vulnerability' and 'risk'



- 'Vulnerability' is a much contested concept and it is best considered carefully
- There are genuine risks faced by children with disabilities in poorly designed spaces
- But there are also exaggerated fears about safety and this can lead to the exclusion of children with disabilities from playing
- Safety concerns can be a convenient excuse (by service providers) for not responding to the needs of children with disabilities



# Let's consider two important play contexts

- Playgrounds and Home



# Barriers in playgrounds

- Physical barriers (inadequate design) prevent children from playing independently
- Noise, overcrowding, temperature, illumination, design, inaccessible surfaces
- Lack of or inaccessibility of resources / game materials
- Accessible 'special' functions in playgrounds can lead to further segregation
- Barriers in Attitudes: Non-disabled children do not always ask children with disabilities to play
- Parents' anxieties about the difficulties faced by their children in such situations have led some families to avoid playgrounds



# Barriers to play at home

- Physical barriers - for example lack of space: children need help to move around the home; insufficient adaptations to the home
- Lack of accessible toys or assistive technologies
- Attitudinal barriers - often children with disabilities are not invited to play at the homes of their friends and vice versa
- Parents a) not having enough time to support play; b) not knowing how to support play; c) being exhausted by care work



# The Most Significant Barrier

- We are unlikely to make adequate progress with regard to supporting free play for children with disabilities until we have address the

The Politics of Play



# Thinking Point:

Do we need to consider the ableist framing of play?

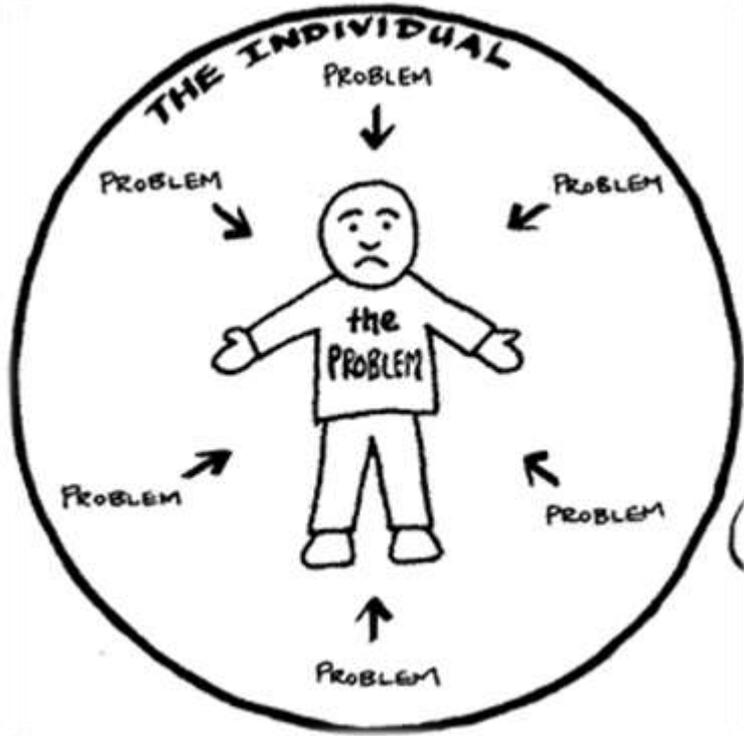
- What do we imagine when we think of:
  - a) The ‘playing child’
  - b) The ‘playful child’?



What ability-expectations do we have?



# How the 'problem' of play for children with disabilities is traditionally understood



"A comparison of the play skills of normal boys and boys with sensory integrative dysfunction"

"The textbook leads students through the steps involved in planning learning environments and curriculum that **capitalize on play** to facilitate children's achievement of explicit developmental outcomes..." (my emphasis)

- Play is 'adulterated' – made to fit adult agendas – used as a tool to assess or remedy 'dysfunction' (i.e. as part of rehab/education/other therapy) etc.



# Play Rhetorics or Discourses

- Dominant play ‘rhetoric’ of 20<sup>th</sup> (and into 21<sup>st</sup>) century is ‘play-as-progress’ (Sutton-Smith 1997).
- Influence of psycho-educational perspectives.
- Play for ‘normalisation’ is a big part of most children with disabilities’ lives.
- Care needs to be taken that ‘playful’ activities designed for rehabilitative or educative purposes don’t squeeze out all time for free play
- “Other children play. You do ‘therapy’” Micheline Mason



# A different perspective?

- According to a more ‘social model of disability’ approach this is a problem of disabling barriers:

PLUS

- ‘the imposition of activities determined by adults’

Disabled children should have access to high-quality, and playful education and rehabilitation.

BUT

This is not the same as free play. They have the right to free play. Free of adult agendas!

Free play also supports child development, so there is no need to see this type of play as a waste of time/frivolous!



‘Adulteration’  
of play



Focus on changing the environment not changing the child



"When a flower doesn't bloom you fix the environment in which it grows, not the flower."



~ Alexander den Heijer



# NEW RESEARCH: survey of parents of children with disabilities in Taiwan & Hong Kong

Angharad Beckett, Pedro Encarnaç o, Chun-Yu Chiu and Simon T.M. Ng.



*Please attend paper by Dr Chiu, in which she discusses the Taiwan findings!*

98 % of parents in Taiwan (TW) and Hong Kong (HK) said that play was 'important' or 'very important' for their child

- Almost half of the parents from the HK sample reported that their child infrequently plays with other children
- ‘Children of the same age have great study pressure. Other parents have arranged too little play time, therefore it’s difficult to find playmates.’
- 44.8% TW parents and 50.8% HK parents said that other children are ‘sometimes unkind and unfriendly to my child’.
- 56.3% TW parents and 55.7% HK parents said that other children infrequently or never ask their child to play with them.
- Nevertheless, most parents in both locations expressed a clear preference for inclusive playspaces (suitable for children of all abilities) 73.9% (TW) and 88.5% (HK).
- ‘less boring when you have normal (sic) students by your side’ (TW).
- ‘the kid has his pride, he doesn’t want to stand out’ (TW), ‘make him/her feel like s/he is no different from others’ (TW).
- ‘more contact, more understanding, more tolerance’ (TW), ‘inclusive society’ (HK)



- Over 50% of respondents from TW and HK parents reported that their child plays for less than an hour a day.
- *'The child has high study pressure. Parents feel troubled. Relationship is affected and so is the child's self-esteem and self-confidence. Through play, children can release some of the pressure. Hope that the government can adjust the aims of education and let children have real time to play.'* (HK)
- Other barriers identified included
  - Insufficient space at home for play
  - Insufficient and inadequate community playgrounds (too far away)
  - Safety concerns about playgrounds (amongst TW respondents)
  - Parents being so busy due to long working-hours, domestic and caring responsibilities they do not have enough time to play with their child



# Tentative conclusions...

- The barriers to play for children with disabilities in Taiwan and Hong Kong echo those elsewhere in the world
- But there are particular cultural factors here too
- High urban population densities and insufficient accessible and inclusive playspace
- Social stigma
- Long working-hours cultures and insufficient welfare support/social care for disabled families meaning these are **families under pressure**



**What can we do  
to change this?**



# Much more research is needed to answer this question!

## But existing research tell us...

- Public transport can improve ‘journey to play’;
- Powered mobility and other assistive technologies can support play for some children with disabilities;
- Schools and teachers can help stop bullying;
- Occupational therapists can advise on design of playgrounds or find ways to help children achieve their play goals.





# The Parent Ally

- Be aware of the risk of 'over-scheduling'
- Children need time for rest and relaxation
- Societies need to provide support for families of children with disabilities to give parents more time to spend enabling their child to play and playing with their child
- Advice for parents on facilitating free play and the value of free play



# Inclusive Playgrounds: requires good design & social interventions/public pedagogies



# The Professional Ally



# Wheelchair Painting!

An exploration of unstructured play by Elivira Psaila, Physiotherapist, University of Malta



**Let's become  
PLAY ALLIES &  
PLAY ADVOCATES**



**Let's set a new agenda.**

**To fight for ALL children's  
right to free play!**

