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**Submission for special issue**

**The International Journal of Inclusive Education: Who's In? Who's Out? Inclusive  
Education at the Crossroads**

**Playing with or next to? The nuanced and complex play of children with  
impairments**

**Jenene Burke**

**School of Education, Federation University Australia**

[Js.burke@federation.edu.au](mailto:Js.burke@federation.edu.au)

**Amy Cloughton**

**School of Education, Federation University Australia**

[a.cloughton@federation.edu.au](mailto:a.cloughton@federation.edu.au)

## **Abstract**

This paper examines play as a fundamental children's activity, giving particular attention to the inclusion of children with impairments at play and children's shared construction of their playworlds. Children with impairments are customarily portrayed as incompetent, unskilled or deficient in their play, thus being positioned on the margins (or, as 'who's out?') of mainstream discourses. On the other hand, nonimpaired children are usually regarded as competent players, who play in 'normal' ways (as 'who's in?'). Little attention is afforded to noticing skillful or proficient play by children with impairments and including their perspectives in play research.

The Social Model of Childhood Disability offers a perspective for considering 'disabled childhoods' and framing enquiry into the culturally-constructed playworlds of children with impairments. Evidence from two ethnographic studies that examine children with impairments at play is discussed, employing vignettes that utilize data from researcher and teacher observation notes. The paper documents specific play interactions related to individual experiences and interests and explores how children work together and alone to create meaningful play interactions.

The authors demonstrate how careful observation of children with impairments can uncover how they act with agency and provide examples of their deliberate, but often unnoticed, actions. Furthermore, children with impairments can be identified as active, creative agents who self-monitor, make choices and exert control over their play and who have unique play cultures that they construct for and between themselves. The notion that play for children is a mutual, shared and inclusive cultural experience is supported in this paper.

**Keywords:** children with impairments; children's play; children's agency; inclusive play; social model of childhood disability

## **Introduction**

Research into the play experiences of children with impairments has the potential to illuminate understanding on their capabilities and expertise as they individually and collectively construct their unique playworlds (Burke, 2009). This paper will provide examples of how some children who have been diagnosed with impairments work separately and together to create nuanced and complex play

interactions in ways that appear to go unnoticed in research, and are perhaps under-valued by their teachers or carers. As the authors, we give particular attention to identifying the children's competence, agency and shared construction of their playworlds in the examples provided.

In this paper we draw on understandings from the social relational model of disability advanced by Thomas (1999, 2014) and identified as extension or variant of the social model of disability (Oliver 1990), which is sometimes referred to as the *social materialist* model of disability (Finkelstein 1996; Shakespeare 1994). Thomas (1999) provides a way of theorizing disability by drawing on personal accounts of disabled people to help illuminate the impact of disabling practices on people's lives. Disability is defined thus:

Disability is a form of social oppression involving the social imposition of restrictions of activity on people with impairments and the socially engendered undermining of their psycho-emotional wellbeing. (Thomas 1999, 156)

This social relational variant of the social model offers a way of illuminating the impact of disabling practices by drawing on the personal accounts of people with first-hand experience of impairment and disability. All of the children who participated in this study are diagnosed or attributed with an impairment and all have been allocated to schooling accordingly. The authors present four vignettes from the data of two ethnographic studies that provide examples of children engaging in play as a fundamental children's activity. The children in both studies were active in explaining their actions and perceptions to the researchers during the data collection process.

A social construction of disability challenges us to consider the language used with reference to disability to ensure that it promotes inclusion and is respectful to those with impairments. There is disagreement as to the best way to refer to people with impairments. The terms 'disability' and 'disabled people', are used in this paper to indicate instances where disability is socially imposed and to describe the collective experience of being disabled in a social (not an individual, physical or medical) sense (Thomas 2014). In 'person/child with a disability', the word 'disability' is actually being used to denote disability in a medical sense. It describes a person's functional limitation, or what we have chosen to call their 'impairment', and therefore creates confusion about how the term 'disability' denotes social oppression. Given these arguments, we will use the word 'impairment' to refer to the "functional limitation within the individual caused by physical, mental or sensory impairment" (Barnes 1991, 2). Where a person is identified as having impairment, and not as socially disabled, we use the term 'person/child with [an] impairment[s]'.

Our preference would be to use the inclusive term 'children' to refer to all children, however, as this paper is about play involving children who have been diagnosed with impairment we need a way to differentiate the experience of disability accordingly.

## **Who's in?**

In contrast to children diagnosed with impairment, children considered to be able-bodied are generally regarded as competent players, who play in 'normal' ways. In this way, able-bodied children serve as 'normative yardsticks' (Priestley 1998, 208) for children with impairments, establishing an ableist perspective around certain competencies and expectations associated with the play of children. Goodley and Runswick-Cole, are clear in their assessment that "play is pivotal to practices that centre the normal and push disabled children to the periphery" (2010, 500). These authors blame an emphasis on social and cognitive development as leading to the "dominant discourse of the disabled child as a non-playing object that requires professional therapeutic intervention" for the marginalization of children with impairments. Little credence is given to the notion that children with impairments might contribute in a positive way to the development of the skills, competencies or values of their nonimpaired peers.

## **Who's out?**

According to Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2015, 54), "disabled children continue to be subjected to psychological, relational, systemic and cultural exclusion within so-called inclusive spaces of school and community". Dominant discourses of play for disabled children, in mainstream literature, according to Burke (2009, 2015), are oppressive in nature and indicate a cultural bias. For example, in research about play and play-based learning reported in the academic literature, children are generally assumed to be able-bodied. Children with impairments, when they are included as 'subjects' in research, are typically portrayed as incompetent, unskilled or deficient in their play, and rarely credited as showing or having worthwhile play abilities. Children with impairments, tend to be separated into homogeneous impairment groups for which the diagnosed medical condition or disability category is the distinguishing characteristic. Specific impairments, attributed to a child, are often examined as a variable ahead of other differences (such as ethnicity, socio-economic background or gender). The aim of any play intervention that is recognised or recommended is usually to 'remediate' a disabled child's unfortunate 'condition' (Burke 2012).

Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2015, 52) draw on Thomas (2007) to describe how disablism contributes to the oppression of children with impairments:

We can confidently conclude that children with sensory, physical, cognitive and mental impairments are subjected to everyday conditions of what Thomas (2007, 73) defines as disablism ‘a form of social oppression involving the social imposition of restrictions of activity on people with impairments and the socially engendered undermining of their psycho-emotional well being’. Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2015, 52)

Graham, Nye, Mandy, Clarke and Morriss-Roberts (2018) explicate that children and young people with disabilities are reported to engage in less play than children who are considered to be able-bodied. In a deficit approach children with impairments are constructed as inferior, as “backward”, or as “developmentally delayed” (Priestley 1998, 209). Furthermore, research which attempts to explore children’s perspectives of how they understand or construct their play is scant, particularly for children with impairments (Curran and Runswick-Cole 2014). Some exceptions include studies by Stafford (2017) and Graham et al. (2018). Graham and colleagues completed a thematic analysis of research that examined this issue concerning children with physical impairments, and concluded that there is a need for research that explores play experiences by drawing on the perspectives of these individuals. In this paper, we provide a series of four play vignettes in an attempt to challenge deficit perspectives and biased assumptions by demonstrating that children, who are placed in segregated schooling according to an identified impairment, can engage meaningfully and relationally in play. All children who were participants in the vignettes in this paper were engaged in play experiences in segregated school settings.

## **Play cultures for all children**

Through a sociology of childhood lens (Prout and James 1997), children are identified as participating in peer cultures that they construct for and between themselves in the making of their social worlds. Corsaro (2005) explains this position, using the concept of ‘creative appropriation’ to explain how children draw on and recreate the adult domain to produce their own exclusive peer cultures:

Such [creative] 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, 41-42)

In regard to play experiences, these cultures are unique to specific children's individual play communities (Brown 1994; Sandburg 2002; Titman 1994). As Brown explains, the unique nature and cultural specificity of children's play experiences, resides 'within the community of children' (Brown 1994, 54), serving "an immediate purpose for the children in their own present society" (Brown 1994, 64) and occurs outside adult worlds. According to Brown, play spaces are inherently children's own cultural places where the activities of children that occur through play serve as ways for children to draw from personal experiences and express themselves to create and recreate meaning within the play environment. While play is understood as a social construction, through which children create meaning (Bishop, Swain and Bines 1999), children with impairment are generally excluded from enquiry that recognises their capacities and achievements as contributors, constructors and creators of play cultures.

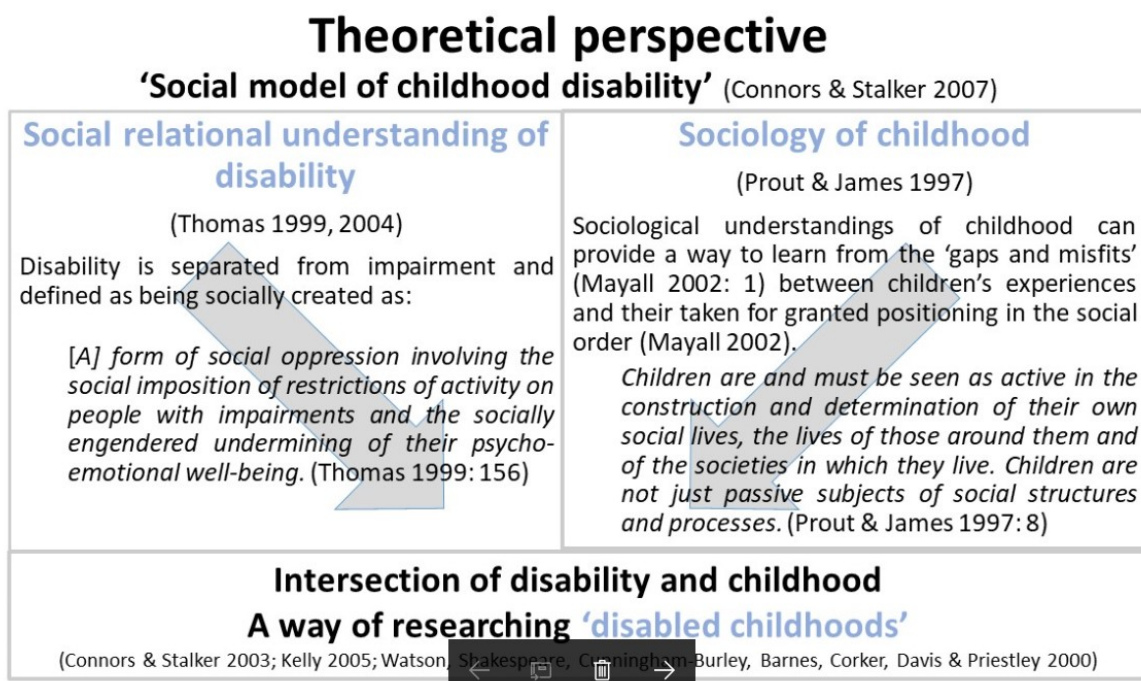
### **Who decides?: The social model of childhood disability**

A child's agency has been described as their 'ability to influence' (Kennedy and Surman 2006, 35). Children cooperatively co-construct their reality in a unique and selective manner through their peer interactions (Edwards, Pope, Tretasco de Guzman, Brown, and Kumru 2006, 37). It is noted that play is an essential part of children's development (Ginsburg 2007) in which children actively, and with agency, build their peer cultures in educational settings where play and learning are entwined (Claughton 2017). This concept of agency can be applied to the play of children with impairments at a theoretical level by adopting the "social model of childhood disability", which was first proposed by Connors and Stalker in 2007 as a potential theoretical perspective in research with children. This perspective is built on the premise that research into both childhood and disability require interrogation through a socio-cultural lens.

Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2010) call for a "social turn" in both disability and childhood studies where the social, cultural and political aspects of childhood are privileged over individualistic essentialist constructions. Consistent with Goodley and Runswick-Cole's call, the 'social model of childhood disability' (Connors and Stalker 2007) is located at the intersection of the social relational model of disability (Thomas 1999, 2003) and the sociology of childhood (Prout and James 1997) where commonalities of these latter perspectives contribute towards the overarching, complementary model. (see Figure 1). Both 'childhood' and 'disability' are understood as being socially constructed (Corsaro 2005; Prout and James, 1997); both disability (Oliver 1990; Thomas 1999;) and childhood (Corsaro 2005; Jenks 2002; Prout and James 1997) have been described as 'fields of inequity' (Prout and James 1997). Each model draws on perspectives of human rights to consider people with impairments and

children as diverse individuals rather than simply members of a homogenous group (Priestley 1999). Children (Corsaro 2005; Jenks, 2005; Mayall, 2002) and disabled people are understood as occupying a minority status. There is recognition that people with impairments and children have been silent, but not necessarily absent, in research. In this paper a socio-cultural lens is used to examine the culturally constructed play-worlds and the potentially socially oppressive nature of barriers to participation of children with impairments. Under this lens children can be seen as having unique play cultures that they construct for and between themselves; they are essentially social, relational beings who interact with each other and with their environments in the construction of multiple social realities. Children with impairments can be identified as active, creative agents who self-monitor, make choices and exert control over their play (Claughton 2015; Burke 2012).

Figure 1. Social model of childhood disability



Positioning children as “agents actively negotiating systems” rather than objects of interventions (Shakespeare and Watson 1998, 19) offers an alternative way of examining their play, enabling recognition of the “intrinsic potentialities of all children” (Goodley and Runswick-Cole 2010, 499). This perspective highlights the relevance of a “sameness paradigm, rather than a difference paradigm” (Lyons 2003, 5) for understanding play for children with impairments by recognising that children with impairments primarily belong to the larger group *children* rather than to the sub-group *disabled children*. Studies which have positioned children with impairments as active agents report diverse patterns of



resistance employed by their child research participants (Connors and Stalker, 2004, 2007; Davis and Watson 2002; Kelly 2005; Stafford, 2017; Priestley 1998).

## Data vignettes

In this paper we use four vignettes, drawn from two studies, that provide evidence of the agentic nature of play engaged in by children who have been diagnosed with impairments. All children were being educated in the state special education system in Victoria, Australia, and the research was conducted in their schools after gaining ethics approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Ballarat (A04-137) or Federation University Australia (A15-138) which included consent to conduct research from the State Education Department in Victoria, Australia for both studies. All children were informed, verbally and in writing using text and/or pictograms, about the research and they provided written assent to participate. Both studies had parental consent to use photographs taken by participants in the course of the fieldwork, under the provision that any people in the photographs could not be recognized.

## Study 1

The first study (Burke 2009), was a place-based examination of children's perceptions of their play in a community playspace. This study involved 72 children, aged six to ten years, from four schools. Just under half of the research participants (n=34) were identified with impairment and just over half (n=38) with no known impairment. The study utilized data from the researcher's own observations of children's play in a naturalistic playground setting and children's personal photographic scrapbooks, which the children constructed and provided as data sources for the study. The researcher used the technique of photo elicitation where children took photos of places in a built playground and discussed them, providing their perceptions of their play with the researcher and building statements from prepared sentence prompts. For clarity, the children's comments are provided in this vignette in italics, while the prompt text provided by the researcher is bolded.

**Vignette 1: The 'Princess Castle'.** One of the research participants is Nadine, who is aged nine and diagnosed with autism. Her photographic scrapbook reveals photographs of the tower that she calls the 'Princess Castle'. In a photograph that she has taken in response to the prompt "**somewhere in the playground I like to play most**" (Image 1.1), she adds the statement, "*I am a happy princess. It's a*

*Princess Castle. I like to play a sleeping princess*” (Nadine, aged 9, research participant). Nadine chooses to embellish her photo with a self-inking stamp of a smiling face.

Nadine continues her Princess Castle theme for four of her eight photos, moving away from and back to the theme as she navigates the playground to take her photographs. She selects a walkway into one of the playground towers in response to **“somewhere in the playground I feel safe”** which she calls the *“Princess Kiss Tunnel”* (Image 1.2). She recounts to the researcher:

**This place makes me feel happy because** *“true love’s first kiss. It’s a princess tunnel”*. **I feel safe here because,** *“they live happily ever after”*. (Nadine, aged 9, research participant)

Nadine’s Princess Castle theme continues for the guiding statement **“somewhere in the playground I can pretend”** where she selects the tyre steps (Image 1.3) and says, *“I can pretend to be a princess. I am walking up to the stairs and the mirror.* [She later explains that the tyre stairs led eventually to her ‘Princess Kiss Tunnel’ where a metal mirror is fixed to the internal wall]. Nadine’s creative playworld also has a menacing, yet imaginative, quality illustrated by her photograph of a playground structure that adults have labelled as the ‘train station’ (Image 1.4). She selects this apparatus as **“somewhere in the playground I don’t like to play”**, this time electing to use a stamp of a grimacing face. She explains:

**I don’t like to play here because** *“It’s an evil house. I don’t like the spells”*. (Nadine, aged, 9, research participant)

When she researcher questions Nadine about what she means by ‘spells’, and Nadine interprets, *“It’s an evil witch’s house”*. (Burke, 2009)

Figure 2. The Princess Castle



Image 1.1

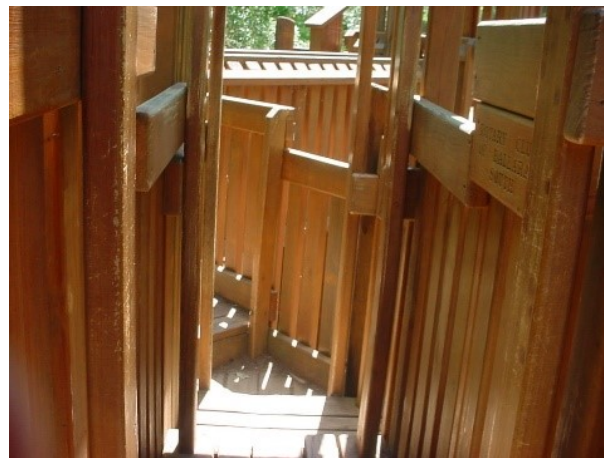


Image 1.2

Photograph: A wooden playground that shows two peaked towers. Photographer: Nadine



Photograph: A wooden playground with a narrow corridor that looks like a maze. Photographer: Nadine



Image 1.3

Photograph: a wooden playground that shows a ramp that is made of tyres that are face up so you can see the holes. Photographer: Nadine

Image 1.4

Photograph: a wooden playground that shows small structure like a house with a sign 'train station' on one side. Photographer: Nadine

**Vignette 2: Playing on the tyre swing.** Carl, who is 10 years old, uses verbal language sparingly. He experiences unsteady balance due to motor impairment, and therefore riding the red tyre swing (Image 2.1) is an unpleasant experience for him, as he explains in his scrapbook: *'I don't like to play [here]. It goes too fast, gets dizzy. My head feels yucky'*. Carl embellishes his statement in his scrapbook with a stamp of a sad face to communicate his negative feeling about playing on the swing. While watching Carl in the playground, as the researcher, I make the following journal note:

*I observe Carl in the playground at the red tyre swing with a group of boys. Four boys are positioned on the tyre. Carl has chosen to push the swing for the other boys and is doing it in a robust way that is creating howls of approval, laughter and encouragement from the other boys. (Extract from research journal) (Burke, 2009)*

Figure 3. Playing on the tyre swing



*Photograph: A red tyre swing suspended by three chains hangs in a playground.  
Photographer: Carl*

Image 2.1 'I don't like to play [here]. It goes too fast, gets dizzy. My head feels yucky'.  
(Carl, research participant)

## **Study 2**

The second study (Claughton 2019) utilized a critical ethnographic methodology where the fieldwork took place over a 10-week period. A group of five participant children aged between six and eight years old, involved in play-based learning in a special education setting, were examined. The teacher and researcher collected data in the form of observational notes and photographs of the research participants engaged in play. The research methods were informed by the mosaic approach (Clark 2005). The mosaic approach draws on multiple perspectives of those involved in the research using various means of representation. In this research, data from a variety of sources that included interviews with teachers and parents, observations by the researcher, photographs taken by the researcher and research participants, and researcher and teacher interactions with the children themselves were combined. The aim of the research was to reposition children with impairment and their play, recognising the agency and ability they bring into their play scenarios. The data was collated into short vignettes that demonstrated the exploration and development of a play-based investigation by the child participants. The two vignettes explored here are short interactions that happened within a single session of play-based learning.

**Vignette 3: Sharing the hat.** This vignette (refer Figure 4), and Vignette 4, describe a play interaction that takes place between Vince, Peter and later, Sam, three six-year old boys, all of whom have been diagnosed with autism, and who are participants in the study. Peter sits at a table with a ship's wheel



that Jane, the teacher has made, and a captain's hat. The researcher is sitting playing with Sam, and she is able to observe Peter playing a captain game while watching a screen that contains a shot of a boat on a lake. Peter starts out with a boat that he is able to 'steer' through the water (Image 3.1).

As Peter starts to play, Vince comes over to join in. Vince verbally asks for a turn, and Peter responds by handing over the captain's hat and ship's wheel so Vince can have a turn (Image 3.2). After a moment, Peter asks for it back and Vince hands them both (hat and wheel) back to Peter for a turn. As Peter and Vince continue to play, they settle into a routine. Without any discussion, they silently negotiate to take turns with each item. For a few minutes, one wears the captain's hat and the other steers the ship. After that, they swap.

After some time, Vince decides to leave and explore something else, and Peter finds a video of the Titanic to look at. The video is a five minute animation of the Titanic hitting an iceberg and sinking. Sam shows some interest in knowing more about the Titanic, and leaves the researcher and walks over to watch what Peter is doing. Sam spends five minutes watching before he verbally asks Peter if he can take a turn. Peter happily hands over the hat and ship's wheel to Sam (Image 3.3).

After the video is finished, Sam hands the hat back to Peter who captains the ship while the video is played again. When it is finished, Peter hands the hat back to Sam who takes another turn (Image 3.4). Unlike earlier when Peter and Vince were playing by alternating the wheel and hat, Sam and Peter take turns using the hat and wheel as a set. (Claughton, 2019)

Figure 4. Sharing the hat



Image 3.1.



Image 3.2.

*Photograph: A boy (Peter), wearing a captain's hat stands in front of a TV looking at a boat on a lake. Photographer: Amy Claughton*



Image 3.3.

*Photograph: A boy (Peter) wearing a captain's hat stands in front of a TV that shows an image of the Titanic sinking. Another boy (Sam) stands off to the side looking at the TV. Photographer: Amy Claughton*

*Photograph: Two boys (Peter and Vince) sit at a hat, desk looking at a TV showing a boat on a lake. One boy (Peter) wears a captain's hat, the other (Vince) holds a ship's wheel. Photographer: Amy Claughton*



Image 3.4.

*Photograph: Two boys (Peter and Sam) sit at a desk looking at a TV that shows the Titanic hitting an iceberg. One boy (Peter) wears a captain's hat and holds a ship's wheel. Photographer: Amy Claughton*

**Vignette 4: Thundering trucks.** Sam and Vince start their day playing with construction toys. They begin by building small vehicles that they are calling trucks (Image 4.1). Jane takes a teachable moment to show Sam how to use a pivot to create an articulated truck that can easily turn corners. The play progresses to a more complex interaction from here. Despite the play scripts and instructions on how to build construction-toy trucks that the teacher has placed nearby to provide a visual aid for children to follow, both boys choose to create vehicles of their own invention. After building his truck, Sam begins to build a road. Initially this is a two-way road, but eventually evolves into a dual carriageway. Sam tests out building the road. While he does that, Vince starts to build on the idea by using one of the available pieces of bark to make a tunnel for the road (Image 4.2).

Sam continues to add flat strips of wood to build the lanes of the carriageway. Vince continues to add complexity to the carriageway by adding a bridge and beginning to construct a road under the bridge (Image 3.3). Before long, the road is complete. Sam turns his attention to his truck, and puzzles out the best way to stack cars on it for transportation. Vince and Sam continue to play on the road with their trucks, driving them back and forth. The trucks crash into each other, and fall off the road (Image 3.4).

Sam drives his truck down to the bridge and suddenly stops his truck. He exclaims, "Oh no! A road block!" A second truck comes along behind the stationary truck and crashes into it. The trucks spill off

the bridge and onto the road (Image 3.5). Vince brings his truck over to Sam's crash and shouts, "Oh no! It crashed into them as well" (Image 3.6). For several minutes, the trucks, guided by each boy, continue to crash into the roadblock and into each other.

Figure 5. Thundering Trucks



Image 4.1.

*Photograph: A boy (Sam) sits on the floor holding a construction-toy truck on a road, constructed from two strips of wood pieced together. Photographer: Amy Claughton*



Image 4.2.

*Photograph: A boy (Vince) sits on the floor behind a wooden road covered with a curved piece of bark to make a tunnel. He is pushing a construction-toy truck through the tunnel. Photographer: Amy Claughton*

Image 4.3

Image 4.4



Photograph: A long stretch of road constructed from strips of painted wood, three long and two wide, with a wooden tunnel half way along. Construction-toy trucks sit on and around the road. A boy (Vince) sits at the end of the road playing with a truck. Photographer: Amy Claughton



Photograph: A long stretch of road, constructed of strips of painted wood, three long and two wide, with a wooden tunnel towards one end. Near the front of the photo is a wooden bridge. Construction-toy trucks sit on and around the road. Photographer: Amy Claughton



Image 4.5

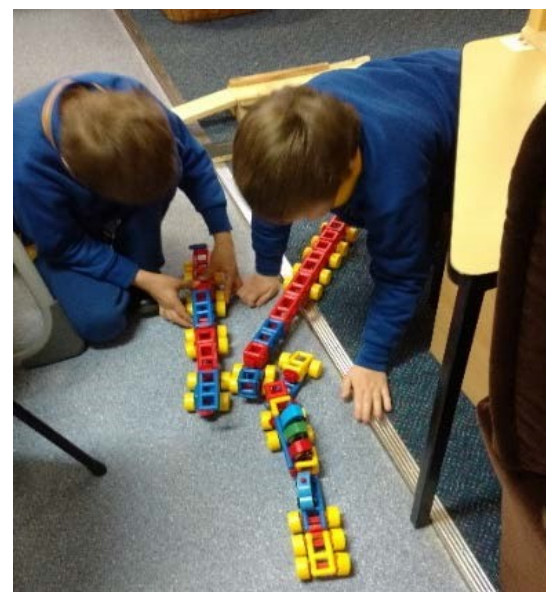


Image 4.6



*Photograph: Two large construction-toy trucks are crashed together by a boy, with the front of one resting on the back of the other. They are on top of the bridge. Photographer: Amy Cloughton*

*Photograph: Two boys (Vince and Sam) lean over three construction-toy trucks that have crashed together. Photographer: Amy Cloughton*

## **Discussion**

The data, consisting of four vignettes of play episodes involving children, provided examples of the intentional and purposeful approach to play observed in and communicated by children with impairments. In framing the discussion through this lens, children with impairments are positioned as social and relational beings and creative appropriators who construct multiple realities. It is assumed that as active social agents, children were engaged in meaningful and purposeful play (Goodley and Runswick-Cole 2010; Luckett et al 2007). They can be recognised as active agents who self-monitor, make choices (Cloughton 2015), construct and co-construct meaning within their playworlds and exert control over their environments. It is possible to acknowledge them (in Vignettes 2, 3 and 4) as contributors to the development of their peers, whereas Vignette 1 involved solitary agentic play. Nadine's fantasy playworld, described in Vignette 1: The Princess Castle, seemed to be a creative, rich and imaginative environment, in which, in the course of her play experience, she described herself as a princess who lived happily in the tower, featured a romantic interest with a prince and the menacing undertones of an evil witch who lurked in the stairwell casting magic spells. For a child who appeared quiet and introverted, had limited verbal language, and who attended a special school because she had been diagnosed with autism, this insight into her rich fantasy world told of the depth and creativity of her thinking. A strong sense of Nadine's creatively constructed playworld can be gauged through her eyes by her dramatic description of her selected playground places. Even though she did not seem to be playing with others, she was able to communicate how she experienced her own playworld within the time and place parameters of the selected playground.

In Vignette 2: Playing on the Tyre Swing, Carl, who was non-verbal and did not like to sit in the tyre swing himself, chose to push other children who were sitting in the swing. Carl recognised that his peers liked to swing, even if he did not. By pushing the swing, Carl found a legitimate and socially acceptable way to become part of the shared play experience, without disclosing his reticence to take his own turn on the swing.

In Vignette 3: Sharing the Hat, Peter and Vince conducted a non-verbal, complex negotiation to take turns sharing the captain's hat and wheel by swapping items. In contrast, Peter and Sam conducted a separate (and also non-verbal) negotiation to take turns at who was able to hold both the captain's hat and wheel. In both encounters, children navigated a social contract, with limited spoken dialogue.

During the play they showed a definite preference for parts of the videos, and it was in these preferred parts that they often took their turn with the items (or favourite items). For example, with the Titanic, Peter liked to have the wheel when the ship hit the iceberg, and would negotiate to have his turn at that point of the video. This trading of items, or taking of turns, showed an awareness of the individual interests and preferences of peers. The children were able to create shared meaning in the construction of their own play worlds. They 'creatively appropriated' (Corsaro 2005, 40) ideas from their experiences to construct play cultures which connected them to each other and with their play, thus "actively shaping their own experience" (Edwards et al. 2006, 45) as they negotiated interactions with each other.

If play reflects a child's interaction and intrinsic motivation (Claughton 2015, 2017) then the capacity to recognise and consider the preferences of others shows the intrinsic willingness of children to support the social and relational elements of their co-constructed play cultures. In Vignette 3 especially, the active engagement in social and relational elements of play interactions by children with impairments could be identified. The Thundering Trucks scenario (Vignette 4) demonstrated a similar outcome. In the interaction between Sam and Vince as a "collective social activity" (Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson 2007, 54) the two boys worked together to construct a fantasy playworld with multiple realities. Sam and Vince had different ideas, or realities, of what the roads would look like, but combined these ideas to create an "interpretive reproduction" (Coraro 2005, 40) of their shared imaginative constructs. Play, in this instance, was experienced through cooperative control (Graham et al. 2018, 174) as the children were individually and collectively responsible for shaping the play experiences and creating negotiated peer cultures. Graham and colleagues (2018) discussed the notion of control, where individuals share their playworlds with others. In Vignettes 2, 3 and 4, the children were able to control their play interactions and exert choice using both cooperation and their preferences in play. These play episodes demonstrated the children's own thinking and self-awareness (Bishop, Swain and Bines 1999) of preferences of themselves in relation to others. Peer interactions between the children played an "increasingly active role in shaping their own identities and social niches across cultures" (Edwards et al 2006, 37). Children were identified, when playing with their peers, as exerting agency in complex interactions and collaborations that indicated a social connection. It can be useful to frame play in this context as activities that provided children "freedom, choice and control" (Graham et al. 2018, 173). This understanding of play puts the player at the centre of the activity, and acknowledges the child-led and child-negotiated nature of their interactions within their co-constructed playworlds.

The social and emotional element of play influenced how the children actively shaped a mutual forum (Brown 1994) through which the play experiences developed. The children actively, and perhaps

instinctively, created different playworlds with each other – self-monitoring their interaction to support individual abilities of self and others. The varied interactions demonstrate that “in play... a reciprocity and a feeling of solidarity between children take place” (Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson 2007, 52). Whilst both Sam and Vince ‘checked-in’ with Peter to play his game (Vignette 3), Carl (Vignette 2), and Sam and Vince “creatively appropriated” (Corsaro 2005) each other’s ideas to connect and build a co-constructed shared playworld (Vignette 4). Each child made a clear choice of action, seamlessly and unceremoniously, to support each other’s play and interaction. Brown discusses how the capacity of each child to “establish themselves within a game-playing or social group will determine their ability to build relationships, to develop greater confidence and consequently to gain status” (1994, 63–64).

The dynamic between the children changed depending on the combination of individuals playing together. From the scenarios described in the vignettes, it was clear that “children think, fantasise and play all at the same time” (Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson 2007, 51). Children demonstrated agency through the actions they took that developed mutually respected rules within play interactions. These rules reflected the abilities and interests of their peers, and shaped their play experiences. Sam and Vince’s approach to playing together with the trucks was different to how Sam and Peter approached playing with the captain’s hat and wheel. Those interactions were different again to the exchanges between Peter and Vince, and those of Carl and his playmates. This indicates that “rules must be constantly defined and redefined” (Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson 2007, 51). Each interaction negotiated, sometimes implicitly, different techniques and rules for the players to abide by.

Children with impairments could be observed to contribute to the development of their peers by actively making choices about their interactions and engagements. Over time and through sustained play engagement, “children learn to know each others’ perspectives and gradually learn to understand them” (Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson 2007, 51). The opportunity to play alongside peers is valued by children with impairments (Graham et al 2018). Vignette 3: Sharing the Hat demonstrated the same ‘game’ being played by peers, however, there were different rules. It becomes important to allow for child led play-based interactions, because children learn from each other in play (Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson 2007). Both Sam and Vince negotiated playing the game with Peter by verbally asking to play with him. In Vignette 4: Thundering Trucks, the play scenario flowed more organically with Sam and Vince building on each other’s ideas without verbally asking permission to become a part of the game. Carl adopted his role as the driver of the swing without announcing to his friends that he would push the swing. The children were contributing to the development of their peers by identifying how they could interact with each other to build on the skills within shared playworlds.

## **Conclusion: What are we going to do about it?**

As iterated earlier in the paper, the particular conception of play is vital to determine either undermining or promoting forms of inclusive research, policy and practice. (Goodley and Runswick-Cole 2010). In their two-year study of children that explored the lived experiences of disability of 26 disabled children aged 7 to 15, Connors and Stalker (2007) pondered on why the majority of their child research participants focused on the similarities, rather than differences between children. It seems from the evidence presented in this paper that children's similarities might provide a useful lens for interrogating their experiences within an inclusive play and educational environment.

The evidence from this paper supports the notion that children with impairments are active, creative agents who self-monitor, make choices and exert control over their play within unique play cultures that they construct for and between themselves. Careful observation of, and shared inquiry with, children with impairments can uncover the deliberate, strategic, but often unnoticed actions in which they engage during play as they co-construct their playworlds. The 'Social Model of Childhood Disability' (Connors and Stalker 2007) provides an often-ignored perspective whereby the competence, creativity and agency of children with impairments can be recognized, identified and appreciated, and provides a way to ensure they are included, valued and recognized within the boundaries of children's experiences. Children are essentially social, relational beings who interact with each other and with their environments in the construction of multiple social realities adding support to the notion that play for children, regardless of any impairment, can be a shared and inclusive cultural experience.

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