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findings

INFORMING CHANGE

Inclusion of disabled children in primary school playgrounds

In recent years the trend has been to educate disabled children in mainstream schools, partly as a response to the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (2001). One of the themes of *Every Child Matters* (2004) is that children should enjoy and achieve, and this applies to the educational context. Based on qualitative research focusing on disabled children, this study investigated the play in playgrounds of six schools in Yorkshire. It reveals how disabled children were included in play and identifies both *organisational, social and physical* barriers and good practice to the inclusion of these children in play at both playtimes and lunch-times.

- Disabled children were seen to be involved in many types of play. Their inclusion was often facilitated by themselves, by other children or by staff and sometimes included the adaptation of play.
- For the disabled children, play friendship groups ranged from one person to a special friend or a larger sized group, although some played by themselves.
- Moving school, which was an issue for some disabled children, could have an impact on the development of friendships and thus inclusion in play.
- Organisational barriers included: the existence of individual routines for disabled children that resulted in shortened or no playtime; the treatment of all disabled children in a school as one group rather than as individuals; lack of staff training; and concern about taking risks, which limited play opportunities.
- Social barriers sometimes existed because: disabled children spent more time with adults than their peers; staff with responsibility for individual disabled children attracted other children; and staff sometimes did not encourage a disabled child to undertake a form of play they wanted to do and were capable of doing.
- Physical barriers, such as ramps and toilets, had been addressed in most school buildings, but no school had systematically audited and acted upon an audit of the playground for inclusive play.
- Good practice included individual routines allowing for playtimes, training, valuing and retention of support staff. In addition, some staff were able to encourage confidence in disabled children's play.

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Background

The increasing integration of many disabled children into mainstream education since the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (2001) has led to an examination of the physical and educational needs of disabled children in and around the school buildings. However, little attention has been paid to the disabled children's experiences in primary school playgrounds. This research sought to develop an understanding of the issues that affect the inclusion of disabled children in play in the playgrounds of six primary schools in Yorkshire. The disabled children included in the study are referred to as the 'focus children' of the study.

Disabled children's inclusion in play

The researchers observed a wide range of play in all six schools involved in the study. This play was identified as play with high verbal content, play with high imaginative content, play with high physical content and less structured play (such as walking, talking, sitting and watching). Many of the focus children were included across all four categories of play. In some situations focus children were included in play without any adaptations, while in other situations the focus children adapted play or used their technical aids as a tool of inclusion. Sometimes other children adapted their ways of playing so as to include the focus children. Sometimes the Personal Support Assistant (PSA) or lunch-time supervisor enabled the inclusion of the focus children. Some of the focus children created their own play opportunities, either by themselves or with other children.

How the social world of playgrounds can influence inclusion

From the children's point of view those who were good to play with were friends who were well-behaved and had positive attributes, such as being kind. Children who were not good to play with were poorly behaved and exhibited negative attributes, exemplified by swearing and fighting. Friendship bonds were reinforced by play and friendship groups were an important part of this. The focus children might have large or small friendship groups. Moving school could create problems for developing friendships and getting to know people to play with; this was particularly an issue for some of the focus children.

Children initiated play in several ways: gathering people to play something particular; finding a group and then deciding what to play; finding friends and then deciding what to play. Sometimes a child was perceived as the 'boss' of play, because they were very skilful or owned equipment for playing with. Solitary play sometimes took place by choice and sometimes was due to exclusion. Children found various ways to overcome being left out of play. These included finding alternative people to play with, playing by themselves, spending time with a member of staff or persuading them – or a friend or relative – to intercede on their behalf or finding a younger child to play with.

Barriers to inclusion in playgrounds

Barriers to inclusion in play for the focus children were identified as organisational, social and physical.

Organisational barriers

- Lack of afternoon playtime in some schools.
- Reduced play opportunities at break and lunch-times for some focus children because of their individual routines – many of which were historic in origin and had not been reviewed.
- Training of staff with responsibilities for disabled children was, in the main, related to issues such as health and safety.
- Finding the balance between taking risks and maintaining health and safety was not easy for all school staff responsible for focus children; this sometimes resulted in limitations to play opportunities for the focus children.

Social barriers

- Focus children, who spent a great deal more time than many of the non-disabled children with staff, were restricted in their opportunity to play with their peers (although they also sometimes displayed more confidence in their dealings with adults).
- Adults who spent time associated with one or two particular children (for example, PSAs for the focus children) could become a magnet for other children, thus influencing other social interactions within the playground.
- The organisational issue of balancing risk with maintaining health and safety was sometimes compounded by the attitudes of the staff member who might be with a focus child at any one time. Thus, sometimes, children wanted to do things but were prevented from doing so, or thought not capable of the activity, by a member of staff.

Physical barriers

- Some physical barriers existed to the inclusion of disabled children in play in the primary school playgrounds investigated. These related to access to playgrounds and the fixed equipment within them, the design of the playground and the fixed equipment and details in the playing surfaces and access between them.

Some examples of good practice

The research identified good practice in some organisational and social aspects of the schools visited. However, little good practice, except for the provision of ramps, was found with respect to physical issues in the playgrounds.

Organisational good practice

- The retention of morning and afternoon playtimes in one school.
- Mixed age groups sharing playtimes in another school.
- In some schools, routines for individual focus children were identified which did not impinge on playtimes or lunch-times.
- Staff had been on relevant courses in one school: their contribution and value was acknowledged and they were retained in the school.
- Some of the PSAs benefited from experience over a period of years, and learnt more about the child they were responsible for by talking with parents and professionals such as physiotherapists.
- In order to help the transition from one school to another, for disabled children, some teachers discussed the situation with their class before the new child arrived.
- Some teachers used PE lessons as an opportunity for focus children to be included in activities, develop skills and transfer these skills to the playground.

Social good practice

- Two of the PSAs would take the focus child they were responsible for to the playground during class time if they felt that the child would particularly benefit from extra play outdoors.
- School staff were able to help a focus child develop confidence to such an extent that they were enabled to go into the playground by themselves after a period of time.

Suggestions for the future

Acknowledging the limitations of this qualitative study, the researchers suggest that the following could improve the inclusion of disabled children in play opportunities in primary school playgrounds:

School routine: the retention – or reintroduction – of afternoon playtimes; the possible introduction of playtimes allowing mixed age groups to play together.

Individual routine: the inclusion of free-time – playtimes and lunch-times – in disabled children's reviews.

Staff experience: the acknowledgement and reward of good quality work by staff responsible for disabled children.

Training: a variety of training for staff, relevant to their situation and responsibilities. Once staff have been trained they should be encouraged to stay with a school. It might be appropriate for trained and experienced staff to remain responsible for a particular disabled child over a period of time in order to help develop the child's confidence.

The role of staff in the playground: staff should be helped to understand the constructive and supporting, but not dominating, role that they can take in the playground with respect to disabled children's play. This could be by awareness training and a mentoring system.

Power relations: decisions about disabled children, their routines, desires and aspirations relating to outdoor play in the playground should be based upon a dialogue between child, parents or guardians, school staff and, if appropriate, external support staff.

Audit of play and playground and action on the audit

An audit should be undertaken in all primary school playgrounds. Such audits should include access to playgrounds and the fixed equipment within them, the *design* of the playground and the fixed equipment and *details* in the playing surfaces and access between them. Children's involvement in such audits will make them more meaningful. Any such audit should be accompanied by a fully resourced action plan detailing the priorities, responsibilities and costs.

About the project

The research was carried out in 2003 by a multi-disciplinary team consisting of Helen Woolley, Marc Armitage, Dr Julia Bishop and Dr Mavis Curtis, based in the Department of Landscape at The University of Sheffield. Jane Ginsborg, currently a Research Fellow at the Royal Northern College of Music, Honorary Lecturer at the University of Sheffield and Associate Lecturer with the Open University, and Joan Beal, University of Sheffield, also contributed at various points of the project. Two classes of children in six schools in Yorkshire were involved in the research. Children's opinions were listened to in small group discussions and mapping exercises. Observations of play were undertaken in the playgrounds. Relevant staff in the schools were also interviewed.

For further information

The full report, *Inclusion of disabled children in primary school playgrounds* by Helen Woolley with Marc Armitage, Julia Bishop, Mavis Curtis and Jane Ginsborg is published for the Foundation by the National Children's Bureau as part of the Understanding Children's Lives series (ISBN 1 904787 66 5, price £11.95 or £9.95 for NCB members, plus £3 p&p for orders under £28).

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