



Jenene Burke

School of Education

Liberty on the Swings



The research project

This paper will report on an aspect of an Australian Research Council funded Linkages Project being conducted in the School of Education at the University of Ballarat.

The research aims to investigate the social benefits of play for children who use community playgrounds that have been designed for a wide range of users.



Ballarat Community Playground

Located on the shores
of Lake Wendouree.



Remodelled and extended in 2003

- A Liberty Swing was added
- Rubberised ground surface material
- Other modifications to increase access for children with disabilities.



Theoretical framework

A social constructivist perspective which adopts a subjective approach to constructions of reality that are shared across social groups is assumed.

This paper will examine user perceptions of the Liberty Swing in relation to how playground places are constructed with social consequences.



Social Model of Disability

This study is framed by the social model of disability which suggests that disability is created by inaccessible physical environments.

Disability ceases to exist when barriers to participation are removed.

“The disablement lies in the construction of society, not in the physical condition of the individual. (Brisenden, 1998, p. 24).



User perspectives

Perspectives of playground users are considered important to this study.

- Trend in research towards using approaches that use children as participants (Sandburg, 2002; Scott, 2000).
- Children seen as competent, honest (Roberts, 2000) and reliable research participants with opinions of their own (Brooker, 2001).
- Adults use playgrounds



Research methods

- Participatory photographic project, (Greenfield, 2003) conducted in four local primary schools.
- Focus group discussions
 - parents of children with disabilities,
 - therapists and teachers who work with children with disabilities
 - adult who have disabilities (liberty swing users)
- Reflections and field notes of the researcher



Accessibility in playgrounds

Physical access:

users gain access to use play equipment

Psychological access:

how the environment impacts on the way a person feels and allows them to do what they want to do

Social inclusion:

the opportunity to be included in play with others
the major benefit and desired outcome of
accessible playgrounds

(Dunn & Moore, 2005; John & Wheway, 2004; Webb, 2003).



Psychological accessibility

Accessibility is more than a matter of admittance or logistics; it is also a quality of experience... A place that supports people's activities and desires, permits them to be and to do what they want, and causes them a minimum of pain, frustration and embarrassment is more accessible than a place that confuses, harasses or intimidates people." (Davies and Lifchez, 1997, p. 41).



Welcome and wanted

- It is vital that children feel 'welcome and wanted' (Widdows, 1997) in inclusive environments.
- In addition to physical access to playground, psychosocial factors concerning the quality of play as well as feelings of social inclusion are significant in determining accessibility.



Parent perspectives of accessibility

If you can't get in in a wheelchair, you just don't go. You just turn around. You go home. (Parent of child with disability).

If you can't get into something then you're not welcome because they've put the barrier up saying, 'we don't want anyone using a wheelchair here' ... If they put in a step then you're not allowed in there. (Parent of child with disability).



Access and inclusion

- If play equipment is **not accessible**, children will not be able to gain entry to the play environment to be included in play.
- If families of children with disabilities or the children themselves feel that they are not **included**, then no matter how accessible the play equipment is, they are less likely to use it.



Accessibility has a psychological element

Good inclusive design will send messages which tell them [people with disabilities]: you are important"; "we want you here"; and "welcome"... When making access arrangements this psychological element needs to be considered carefully... What message does that communicate? How will it make a disabled person feel? (Napolitano, 1996, p. 33).



Approx. 2.3% of children with disabilities use wheelchairs (ABS, cited by Robbe, 2006).

However this group of children seems to be the most disadvantaged when it comes to accessing playgrounds.

Need to also consider parents/grandparents/carers who may have mobility impairments. (Incidence of disability increases with age)

Should not be excluded from playgrounds on the grounds of being a minority group.

If we get it right for the most disadvantaged group then we get it right for everyone.

Staying in the wheelchair to play is necessary for some children:

physically lifting children onto equipment can be difficult for parents; older children with physical impairments can be heavy,

generally want more independence as they get older, and in some cases are too fragile to be lifted out of wheelchair.



Which swing is more accessible?



What is a Liberty Swing?

A swing that caters for:

- Children and adults who use a wheelchair
The child can use the swing without the need to leave their wheelchair.
- Children and adults who are unable to use a standard swing
- All children and adults

“It has a moulded plastic seat that can be folded down and the children are then fastened in with a safety belt.” http://www.varietyaustralia.org.au/pages/news_show.asp?Id=10



Liberty Swing.

How accessible is it?

Not very accessible, because only people who use wheelchairs can use it.

Very accessible, because anyone can use it. It is designed for use by all children.



What does the Liberty Swing mean to those who use it?

Adults with disabilities

- Viewed the swing as a place where they could socialise with other adults who have disabilities.
- Value community effort to have them included in playgrounds (felt welcome and wanted).

A carer of adult with disabilities

- suggested that her clients liked to go there because of the quality one-on-one time they could have with their carers.



What does the Liberty Swing mean to those who use it?

Adults with disabilities and parents of children with disabilities value the Liberty Swing because of the opportunity it offers for people with disabilities to be visible, included and accepted in the community.

*Just being out in the community and also it helps other people not be afraid because other kids don't see them as strange if they've been... Kids in a wheelchair can join in.
(Parent of child with disability)*



"Yes, even grown ups too. I've been down to the Liberty Swing and people have seen me down there and they've said, 'We've often wondered what this does. Can we just watch your little fellow over here? And they've come in and they've been really interested. They've walked past and they've seen this thing and never seen it in use. "Oh, is that how it works?" One day I couldn't get the ramp off because you have to unhook the ramp off to get it to go. I couldn't lift it off myself... it's really a two person thing and I couldn't do it. Not strong enough. A couple of blokes walking past came in and said, "oh, would you mind if we help you," and they just pushed my son and they were talking to me about his disabilities and stuff. They said they'd never known anyone who had a disability. And you know, it just stops that staring at people. People just walk past and stare but kids are out there more doing stuff and they could say, "Oh wow! Did you see that child?" (Parent of child with physical impairment)



Promoting access for all

Adults with disabilities put forward the notion that children without disabilities should be given the opportunity to access and experience the liberty Swing.

They saw it as an educative opportunity to promote understanding by children of issues facing people with mobility impairments.

Give people a wheelchair. Give people who don't use a wheelchair the opportunity to sit in a wheelchair to see what it feels like and be in the Liberty Swing in the spare chair. (Adult with disability)

Have a spare wheelchair... It gives the young kids a chance to know ...what sitting in a wheelchair is. (Adult with disability)

Others can come and still be a part of what of you are doing. We are not saying they can't access it. They're more than welcome to come and see how things have to be developed and built for us to feel a part of the community. (Carer of people with disabilities)



Perspectives of child participants



My view of the playground - record sheet

I am looking for

Somewhere in the playground...

- a)...I like to play most
- b)...I don't like to play
- c)...I feel safe
- d)...I don't feel safe
- e)...that is the best place to play with others
- f) ...to be by myself
- g)...that is difficult for me to get to
- h)...where I have never played but would like to
- i) ...where I want to try hard to do something
- j) ...that is fun
- k)...where I can work hard (huff and puff)
- l) ...I can pretend

Adapted from Greenfield, C. (2003). *The outdoor playground through children's eyes*.
Manakau Institute of technology.



Somewhere in the playground
where I have never played
but would like to



This place makes me feel like this
because... *It's fun*



I would like to play here because...
I wish I could go there. I don't know why I can't.

I chose to take this photo because... *It's a
dangerous swing.*



Responses of children who completed photographic projects

Of the 14 children who chose to photograph the Liberty Swing, they selected it under the following categories:

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



Most children who photographed the swing indicated they felt excluded from using the Liberty Swing:

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

This place makes me feel like this 😞 because it looks like fun.

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

Some of the children expressed negative views of disability and fear of the swing:

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

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

...It's a dangerous swing...

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

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



Of 14 children who included the Liberty Swing in their photographic project

- 13 children associated it with sad feelings, 😞
- 1 chose the happy feeling stamp 😊



Children's comments suggested

- Motivation to use the swing
 - Exclusion from using the swing
 - Fear of injury or punishment
 - Ignorance about how the swing worked
 - Curiosity
-
- Constructions of negative views of disability

Why might children have these views about the Liberty Swing?

- Physical barriers actively discourage children without disabilities from accessing the swing.



Barriers to inclusion



The Liberty Swing is inaccessible to children without disabilities, not because of the design, but due to the creation of additional barriers which discourage children without disabilities from using it.



Removing the barriers requires a deeper and more subtle approach than the 'put in the ramp' approach. One of the ways in which the attempt goes wrong is when, in removing one barrier, another barrier is created (Napolitano, 2004, p. 31).



Barriers to inclusion

- Some barriers are in response to safety concerns
- Liability paranoia? Moore, (2003)
- Protection of children vs extending them
- Harm to children with disabilities through stigma
- Denies access to inclusive play



Suggestions for consideration

- Use a fence that is constructed of a material that does not block the swing from view.
- Use a lower fence that still protects bystanders from the momentum of the swing and crush risk.
- Locate the swing in a more prominent position in the playground and on an interesting route so that users need to move through the playground to gain access to it.
- Change the sign on the gate indicating that access is available to all, but that care needs to be taken when the swing is in use.
- Use a system where the key is more accessible to all users, not just those with disabilities.
- Have times when all children can be encouraged to use the swing under the guidance of a supervising adult.



They [children who use the Liberty Swing] just love it. People are amazed how much my son loves being on a swing and they will push him for hours just to watch his face on the swing and they're just like, "he really enjoys this". I'm like, "yes". They know that there's normal things that these kids can do as well as the things that they have to deal with. (Mother of child with physical impairment)



- Need to view safety not in terms of making environments as safe as possible, but making them as safe as they need be.
- Perhaps the most important benefit of the liberty swing is that it provides access to feelings of pleasure and fun for children and adults with physical disabilities.
- This is of greatest significance to those children who are otherwise excluded from using conventional play equipment.
- The potential disabling effects created by psychological barriers to access must be considered alongside those disabling effects created by physical barriers.



Industry partners

Jenene wishes to acknowledge the Australian Research Council and her industry partners in the project:

- *Central Highlands Area Consultative Committee*
- *The Lions Club of Ballarat.*



Bibliography

- Barnes, C. (1998). A social model of disability: a sociological phenomenon ignored by scientists. In T. Shakespeare (Ed.), *The disability reader: social science perspectives*. London: Cassell.
- Brisenden, S. (1998). Independent living and the social model of disability. In T. Shakespeare (Ed.), *The disability reader: social science perspectives*. London: Cassell.
- Brooker, L. (2001). Interviewing children. In G. MacNaughton, S. Rolfe & I. Siraj-Blatchford (Eds.), *Doing early childhood research: International perspectives on theory and practice*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen and Unwin.
- Connell & Sanford, 1999
- Crotty, M. (2002). *The foundations of social research: meaning and perspective in the research process*. Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin.
- Davies, C., & Lifchez, R. (1987). An open letter to architects. In Lifchez, R. *Rethinking architecture: design students and physically disabled people*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Dunn, K., & Moore, M. (2005). Developing accessible play space in the UK: a social model approach. *Children, youth and environments*. 15(1) 332-346.
- Dunn, K., Moore, M., & Murray, P. (2003). *Developing accessible play space: a good practice guide*. Retrieved 7 June 2004, 2004, on the World Wide Web: http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellant/groups/odpm_urbanpolicy/documents/page/odpm_urbpol_026876.hcsp
- Greenfield, C. (2003). *The outdoor playground through children's eyes. Research report*. Auckland, NZ: Manukau Institute of Technology.
- Hatch, A. (2002). *Doing qualitative research in education settings*. Albany: state of New York Press.
- John, A., & Wheway, J. (2004). *Can play, will play*. London: National Playing Fields Association (NPFA).
- Moore, R. (2003) Book review: Designing for play. *Children, Youth and Environments*. 13. (1).
- Napolitano, S. (1996). Mobility impairment. In G. Hales (Ed.), *Beyond disability: towards an enabling society*. London: Sage Publications.
- Roberts, H. (2000). Listening to children: and hearing them. In P. Christensen & A. James (Eds.), *Research with children: Perspectives and practices* (pp. 225-257). London: Falmer Press.
- Sandburg, A. (2002). Children's concepts of teachers' ways of relating to play. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 27(4), 18-22.
- Scott, J. (2000). Children as respondents: The challenge for quantitative researchers. In P. Christensen & A. James (Eds.), *Research with children: Perspectives and practices* (pp. 98-119). London: Falmer Press.
- Variety Australia. (2005). A chance to swing. World Wide Web 10/032006 http://www.varietyaustralia.org.au/pages/news_show.asp?Id=10
- Webb, R. (2003). Public play provision for children with disabilities. Bray, Ireland: Sugrath. Retrieved May 30, 2005 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.playireland.ie/news.pdf>
- Widdows, J. (1997). *A special need for inclusion*. London: The Children's Society.



Js.burke@ballarat.edu.au

