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Liberty on the swings

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For some children with disabilities, playing on a playground with other children, is seldom or never experienced. Accessible playgrounds have features which 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 disabilities. A piece of play equipment that is often installed in inclusive playgrounds is the Liberty Swing, a purpose designed swing which allows a person to swing while seated in a wheelchair.

In this paper, qualitative data drawn from the experiential accounts of Liberty Swing users and children who are not Liberty Swing users is explored. Interpretation through reflection on this data attempts to make sense of the lived experience of participants as they attempt to engage with supposedly accessible play equipment that can facilitate participation yet also create unintentional barriers to play.

This paper is concerned with determining what constitutes an accessible play environment and how unintentional negative social messages can impede social inclusion of people with disabilities. An argument is advanced for broad implications that need to be considered when designing playground environments in order to enhance inclusion of people with disabilities. This paper concludes with a discussion of the importance of inclusion for people with disabilities and their families.

Play environments can vary considerably in regard to how accessible they are for playground users who have disabilities. Access to quality play experiences can be difficult for playgrounds users who have mobility impairments, particularly those who use wheelchairs, and this can result in them being unable to use the playground. A piece of play equipment which is often installed in accessible playgrounds is the Liberty Swing, a purpose designed swing which allows a person to swing while seated in a wheelchair. There have been contradictory views expressed about the value of this swing in playgrounds. In this paper, the views and perspectives of some Liberty Swing users will be presented to contribute to the debate.

This paper draws on research into the social benefits of play for children who use accessible community playgrounds. The research is currently being conducted in the School of Education at the University of Ballarat and is funded by an Australian Research Council Linkages Grant. The research explores the perceptions of playground users in relation to the local community playground in Ballarat which is located on the shores of Lake Wendouree. This playground was remodelled and extended in 2003 and 2004. A Liberty Swing was added, rubberised ground surface

material was applied to a portion of the playground, as well as other modifications to increase access for children with disabilities.

This paper examines user perceptions of the Liberty Swing in relation to how playground places are constructed with social consequences. A social constructivist perspective, which adopts a subjective approach to constructions of reality that are shared across social groups, is assumed in this paper. This approach is justified by the premise that an individual's responses are based on their perceptions of reality (Hatch, 2002) or as articulated by Crotty (2002) "meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting" (p. 43). Qualitative data is examined in an attempt to understand the acceptance and perceptions of the Liberty Swing from the perspectives of playground users.

The social model of disability which suggests that disability is created by inaccessible physical environments is adopted as a way of viewing the relationship between disability and the playground environment. In the social model, a clear distinction is made between impairment and disability, impairment being the individual's functional limitation and disability being created by social and environmental factors (Barnes, 1998). Or as Brisenden (1998) puts it: "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 this paper will focus on barriers which limit participation in playgrounds, rather than focusing on an individual's limitations.

Data were collected through several methods which aimed to provide insight into the lived experience of playground users. A participatory photographic project, which was modelled on a similar method to that undertaken by Greenfield (2003), was conducted in four local primary schools. One class of children from each school was taken into the local community playground and children were asked to take photographs of playground places in response to certain set categories. Two examples of these categories are: "Somewhere in the playground where I like to play most", and "Somewhere in the playground where I feel safe." The children then compiled a scrapbook of their photos and explained the connection between each category and the photograph that they took. In addition to this, data were collected from several focus group discussions that were conducted with parents of children with disabilities, therapists and teachers who work with children with disabilities and adults who have disabilities. The reflections and field notes of the researcher were also included as data.

Perspectives of playground users are considered important to this study. There is a trend in social research towards the utilization of approaches to the study of childhood which involve children as participants (Sandburg, 2002; Scott, 2000). Children have been found to be competent, honest (Roberts, 2000) and reliable research participants with opinions of their own (Brooker, 2001). Adult playground users have also been included as participants to add a further perspective regarding their perceptions as users of playground environments. Some of these adults were parents or carers of children or adults with disabilities. Other adult participants were adults with disabilities who were frequent users of the Liberty Swing.

Gaining access

Accessibility in a playground is, to some extent, determined by whether users can gain access to and use play equipment. However, accessibility is not just about gaining physical access. Davis and Lifchez (1987) argue that accessible sites can

differ considerably from each other according to the quality of the experience they offer to the user. These authors maintain that:

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 & Lifchez, 1997, p. 41).

Attempts to design equipment for use by a range of users, including those with disabilities, offer challenges, not the least being that in providing access to one user, another user may be excluded. While one hundred per cent accessibility for any piece of play equipment is generally considered impossible, Dunn and Moore (2005) suggest that all children should be able to access at least some of the play equipment in the playground. Furthermore, they argue that what playground providers need to ensure is access for all children to be included in play with peers. Social inclusion therefore is seen as the major benefit and desired outcome of accessible playgrounds (Dunn & Moore, 2005; John & Wheway, 2004; Webb, 2003).

Parents of children with disabilities stated, in Widdow's (1997) research, which investigated the lives of families who had a child with a disability, that it is vital to their child's self esteem that their child feels 'welcome and wanted', not merely included in inclusive settings. Gaining insight into the feelings and perceptions of those who use playgrounds can help determine how accessible and inclusive a playground is to those who use it. Participants in this research, who were mothers of children with disabilities, expressed the importance to them that their child was able to gain access to social settings:

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).

For these parents, good physical access was essential to allow them and their families to get in to the place to which they were seeking access, in order to be included in the activities that were offered. Feelings of disappointment that the physical barriers created, of not being welcome or wanted, are palpable when expressed by these parents. Whether or not children with disabilities can gain access to peer play in a playground is determined by the dual factors of physical access and social inclusion. Gaining access is important because if play equipment is not *accessible*, children will not be able to gain entry to the play environment to be included in play. However, 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. Social inclusion has a psychological element which is dependent on how the environment makes a person feel. This is expressed by Napolitano:

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).

In addition to physical accessibility, therefore, psychosocial factors concerning the quality of play as well as feeling socially included in play are significant in determining accessibility in playgrounds.

Promoting access for all

Adults with disabilities in this research put forward the notion that children without disabilities should be given the opportunity to access the Liberty Swing and experience what it has to offer. They saw it as an educative opportunity to promote in children an understanding 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)

One participant also iterated the importance of people with and without disabilities to work together to provide inclusive environments. She saw this as a way of promoting understanding of disability, particularly for people who are not disabled.

And the only way to break it [discrimination towards people with disabilities] down is to get the two groups working together. [That is] the only way for them to learn from it. (Adult with disability)

Adults with disabilities advanced the idea of using the Liberty Swing to promote understanding of disability as well as providing opportunities for social inclusion.

Welcome and wanted

Adult participants with disabilities and parents of children with disabilities in this research, agreed that having the Liberty Swing in the playground helped them feel that they were welcome and wanted, not only at the playground but also in the community. As a group they agreed that because equipment was designed so that they could use it, their feelings of being welcome were enhanced. The addition of the swing to the playground in 2003 gave them the opportunity to access the playground environment where previously they couldn't. They indicated that they valued community efforts that resulted in the provision of this swing. Some of these research participants indicated that prior to 2003 they had avoided playgrounds because they found playgrounds to be hostile environments where they felt excluded and marginalised. One carer of adults with a disability expressed her reasons for thinking that this particular swing was so important to adults with disabilities:

I think that for many, many years a lot of these people haven't been allowed to use a lot of the equipment out there. In today's world that just frustrates them. There is still a whole group of people who get excluded by not having a Liberty Swing that still can't use a [conventional] swing. (Carer of adults with disability)

Adults with disabilities and parents of children with disabilities also said that they value the Liberty Swing because of the opportunity it offers for people with disabilities to be visible, included and accepted in the community. They saw recreational facilities as an important places which facilitated social inclusion:

Just being out in the community ... helps other people not be afraid because other kids don't see them [children with disabilities] as strange... 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 disability)

Children's perceptions of accessibility

The Liberty Swing, as mentioned earlier, is a purpose designed swing which enables a person to swing while seated in a wheelchair. But how accessible is the Liberty Swing in the Ballarat Community Playground? There is a view sometimes espoused by playground providers, that a Liberty Swing is not very accessible at all because as a specialised piece of play equipment, only people who use wheelchairs can use it. On the contrary, the swing has a moulded plastic seat that can be folded down so that it can be used without a wheelchair. The swing, therefore, has been designed for use by all children, including those who are unable to use a conventional swing as well as those who can. Interestingly, this research found that this fact is not well known to playground users, including adult Liberty Swing users.

Children without physical disabilities give a different perspective to the one offered by the adult Liberty Swing users and the parents and carers of adults and children with disabilities. Despite having provision for physical access by all playground users the children who completed the photographic project in this research revealed insights into how *inaccessible* the Liberty Swing was to them. Some of these children had disabilities (autism spectrum disorders, intellectual impairments, physical impairments and/or conduct disorders) but none of them were wheelchair users. Of the children who chose to photograph the Liberty Swing, they selected it under the categories listed in table A:

<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

Table A: Number of children who photographed the Liberty Swing, in relation to chosen category.

Most of the children who photographed the Liberty Swing chose it as '*somewhere that they have never played but would like to*'. Comments made by the children in their scrapbooks about why they would like to play on the swing are reproduced here:

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.

For these children their motivation to use the swing was high, but clearly they believed that it was somewhere that they were not allowed to go. For these children, who were not wheelchair users, their perceptions of reality suggest that they believed they were physically excluded from using the swing and were not welcome to use it.

Further comments made by the children about the swing:

One child expressed curiosity about disability:

I'd like to know what it's like in wheelchair.

One child identified the swing as 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:

This place makes me feel like this 😞 because I don't like the electric 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 swing. It's big. It's too high and I can slip out.

...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 the 14 who children included the Liberty Swing in their photographic project, 13 of them associated it with sad feelings 😞, and 1 child chose the happy feeling stamp 😊. As well as motivation to use the swing, these children demonstrate perceptions of being excluded, feelings of curiosity, fear of injury or punishment and even ignorance about what the swing was or how it worked. In some cases they have constructed a negative view of disability. These comments illustrate that barriers to access for children without physical disabilities serve to reinforce negative attitudes about people for whom this swing is meant to be a real liberation. These attitudes and feelings seem to result from the notion that the swing is somewhere that they are not allowed to play, the category under which most children chose to photograph the swing.

Children's feelings of exclusion seem to be created by physical barriers which are created by the way the swing is built into the playground. These barriers create the impression for children that access to the swing is denied to them. Children who do not have disabilities are actively, and in some cases deliberately, discouraged from using the swing by the existence of the following physical barriers:

- Key access and availability (fig. 1). To operate the swing a universal M. L. A. K. key is needed to release the seatbelt, the ramp and the swing mechanism. This key can be borrowed from a building in the nearby botanical gardens, however this is 300 metres away and there are no signs which advise people where they can obtain the key. People with disabilities can purchase their own key, which in addition to operating any Liberty Swing, provides access to some other specialised facilities which have been designed for use by people with disabilities.
- Sign on gate advising of restricted access (fig. 2). This sign has been provided as a deliberate deterrent to those who do not have disabilities.
- Location of the swing on the edge of the playground (fig. 3). The entrance to the swing is located close to the car park, on the external boundary to the playground. Users do not need to enter the playground to gain access to the swing. This tends to physically isolate the swing from the other play equipment, and socially isolate the users.
- High picket fence with childproof lock on gate (fig. 4). The high picket fence creates a physical barrier to children, as does the childproof lock.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

So it could be said, that the swing in Ballarat is physically inaccessible to children who do not have disabilities, not due to the design of the actual apparatus, but due to the creation of additional barriers, some physical, and some psychological, which discourage children from attempting to access it. This is an example of how purpose built equipment, designed to provide access to people with disabilities can actually exclude others and potentially create divisions and negative attitudes to disability. Wider implications of installation need to be considered. Napolitano (2004) expresses this thus:

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).

It is acknowledged that some of the measures (discussed earlier) that have been put in place are, in part, a response to requirements of safety standards. For this swing, safety regulations require that the area at the front and back of the swing can be kept clear of bystanders to protect them from the weight and momentum of the swing and the head crush risk at the front of the swing when it is in use; hence the fence around the swing. However other barriers, such as the height and composition of the fence, the restricted access policy to users and carers, and the lack of information about how to obtain a key, may be an attempt to manage perceived risk to users by limiting Liberty Swing use only to people with disabilities. Moore (2003) uses the term "liability paranoia" to describe a situation where playground providers put in place over-zealous restrictions on the design and provision of play equipment in response to fear of litigation. Care must be taken to ensure that risk management measures

that are taken respond to confirmed risks. There exists a dilemma between providing environments where children are protected from physical harm and providing them environment which provide opportunities for physical, social and emotional development. By using active measures to limit access to everyone except wheelchair users, the Liberty Swing denies access by children to inclusive play and in the eyes of children without physical impairments creates stigma for a potentially accessible piece of play equipment and its users. The potential divisions that poor psychological access can cause in relation to limiting social inclusion and in promoting negative attitudes towards people with disabilities can cause harm of a non-physical sort to those with physical impairments. This type of harm seems to have a low priority when it comes to providing for safe playground environments, possibly because it is more difficult to measure and more difficult to demonstrate.

Some of the following suggestions require careful consideration. They are put forward as examples of modifications which could be made to the Liberty Swing in the Ballarat Community Playground and elsewhere. These modifications would be compatible with safety guidelines and at the same time minimise the marginalisation and exclusion of playground users.

- 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 care needs to be taken when the swing is in use.
- Use a system where key access is more readily available 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.

Pleasure and fun

To conclude this paper, the description provided by a research participant who was the mother of a child with a physical impairment, adds a further perspective to this discussion. This mother viewed using the Liberty Swing as providing a mainstream experience that her son could take part in:

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. (Parent of child with disability)

Discussions regarding accessibility in playgrounds should not disregard what is arguably the most important benefit of the Liberty Swing and that is the pleasure and joy that it provides to users. Pleasure and fun are perhaps of greatest significance to those children who are otherwise excluded from such by being unable to use conventional play equipment. While fun and pleasure are difficult to measure, the mother's description of the delight displayed by her son when he uses the Liberty Swing communicates this sense to us. Pleasure and fun need not be restricted to

those who use wheelchairs. Barriers to access to the Liberty Swing in the Ballarat Community Playground, however, tend to place restrictions on who can and who can't experience this fun on this swing. Careful consideration needs to be given to ensure that playground environments are physically accessible to all users to provide opportunities for inclusive play. In addition, the potentially disabling effects created by psychological barriers to access must be considered alongside those disabling effects created by physical barriers. In doing so, consideration of potential psychological barriers, in terms of what social messages may be communicated to all children and adults about disability must be an important priority for all involved in playground development and provision.

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