

# Interventions in Disabled Childhood Studies



*Figure 1. Photo of abstract street art*

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## Chapter 17: 'It's my right to play too!' Play for disabled children in Taiwan and Hong Kong

Angharad E. Beckett\*, Pedro Encarnação\*\*, Chun-Yu Chiu\*\*\* and Simon T.M. Ng\*\*\*\*

\*University of Leeds, UK

\*\* Católica Lisbon School of Business & Economics

\*\*\* National Taiwan Normal University

\*\*\*\* Hong Kong University

There are many knowledge-gaps surrounding disabled childhoods, globally (UNICEF 2013). Whether and how disabled children's experiences of play are affected by cultural constructions of disability and childhood, plus varied social, economic and family structures around the world, is one such lacuna. This contribution has two objectives. First, to summarise findings from a study exploring play for disabled children living in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Second, to invite the reader to join us in considering how a new materialist approach might provide a useful new way to explore the local formations of disabled children's play 'events'.

Disabled children's right to play is enshrined within the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC Article 31) and UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD Article 30). This right is not being realised for all disabled children and they are at more risk of experiencing play-deprivation and exclusion from a full play experience (Hughes 2003).

Impairment-effects (Thomas 2014) may present certain challenges to children in/to their play. These may be overcome, however, if those practicing 'allyship' (families, friends, professionals) use imagination and follow the lead of disabled children, who often navigate impairment-effects creatively. The truly *disabling* barriers lie beyond the minds and bodies of children. The International Play Association (2015: np) has neatly summarised the barriers thus: '(1) inaccessible facilities and environments, negative attitudes and inappropriate social policies and programmes; and (2) the imposition of activities determined by adults' onto disabled children's play.

For a detailed narrative review of research (and useful bibliography) into barriers to play for disabled children within the social environment, we recommend Barron et al. (2017). Here we provide a list of the main disabling barriers identified in international literatures:

- (a) Inaccessible physical environments and exclusionary design e.g. of playgrounds, with insufficient consultation with disabled children and their families;
- (b) A difficult journey to play spaces (e.g. lack of affordable and accessible public transport);
- (c) Noise and overcrowding at playgrounds;
- (d) Insufficient play-space at home and/or late or no adaptations e.g. absence of a stair-lift reducing children's independent mobility;

- (e) Lack of toys suitable for children with different abilities and those matched to children's abilities not being age-appropriate;
- (f) Disabled children being more likely to be bullied by peers;
- (g) Exaggerated perceptions of 'risk' amongst staff at play-sites; some parents and teachers limiting disabled children's opportunities to make choices, take risks, embrace challenges and make friends;
- (h) Adults considering play to be 'frivolous or disposable' if their focus is on making sure that disabled children participate in therapeutic or educative regimes.

One response to (h) has been to make such regimes *playful* or *play-like*, but this has led to much 'play-adulteration' (Else & Sturrock 1998; Hughes 2012) - the contamination of play by adult agendas. Play theorist Sutton-Smith (1997) provided a deconstructive account of major 'play rhetorics' and concluded that the dominant play rhetoric of the 20th Century (clearly continuing into the 21st) was 'play-as-progress', a work-ethic repurposing of play. Whilst not dismissing all work in this vein, he was concerned that the rhetoric is problematic when it serves 'adult needs rather than the needs of children' ( p. 42). Whilst this rhetoric impacts on the play lives of most children (especially in the West), Disability Studies researchers have found that it has been overly present in the lives of disabled children, where it has operated as part of a quest for 'normalisation' of children towards a neoliberal-ableist 'ideal' (Goodley & Runswick-Cole 2010).

Existing research thus shows that disabled children face economic, physical, attitudinal and ideological barriers to free play. A final point is that these barriers are known to operate in assemblage (Feely 2016) and with more enabling factors – resulting in inclusion in, or exclusion from, play. Addressing one type of barrier without addressing all that are in operation in any given play event, is unlikely to ensure disabled children's right to play.

### **Disabled Children's Play: Taiwan and Hong Kong**

In 2018 we conducted an online survey, using Qualtrics®, of parents of disabled children living in Taiwan and Hong Kong. For full discussion of the methodology, sampling technique, response rate and mode of analysis please see Becket et al. (*forthcoming*). We did not consider parents' views to be 'proxies' for those of their children. Parents and disabled children do not always perceive things similarly. Previous studies have revealed that parents often consider the lives of their disabled children more negatively than children themselves (see Connors and Stalker 2003; 2007). As we develop further lines of research we will strive for disabled children's deep level of engagement (Tisdall 2012), to capture their experiences of, and aspirations for, play, and establish if there are any differences between their accounts and those of their parents.

Insights from parents gained via our study revealed the following (NB where we mention only one location, Taiwan or Hong Kong, this is because the finding was particularly noteworthy):

- (1) Most parents believe it is important that their child has the opportunity to play;
- (2) Most parents recognise that play has multiple benefits for their children, including for emotional wellbeing;
- (3) Most parents said they preferred inclusive play-spaces (for children of all abilities), so that their child could have opportunities for inclusion, would not feel stigmatised and because such spaces are less boring;

- (4) Less than a third of parents said that their child enjoys playing in a community playground;
- (5) 38% of Taiwanese parents felt community playgrounds were inaccessible and 63.6% were not satisfied that those playgrounds were safe;
- (6) Only around a third of parents from Hong Kong reported that their child plays with other children 'every day or a few times a week';
- (7) Almost 70% of parents said that the negative attitudes or lack of understanding of other children were a barrier to their child's play;
- (8) 40% of Taiwanese and 54% of Hong Kong parents were not satisfied with space at home for their child's play;
- (9) Over a third of parents stated that their child's other commitments (e.g. educational, rehabilitative, otherwise therapeutic) limited their play time;
- (10) Over half of parents stated that they did not have enough time to support their child's play. Most respondents were mothers. Taiwanese parents identified as impediments: 'housekeeping' (80.8%), 'taking care of other children and family members' (67.4%) and 'work' (48.1%); Hong Kong parents identified work (64.9%) and 'housekeeping' (54.1%);
- (11) 52.3% of Taiwanese parents and 44.3% of Hong Kong parents reported that they were not satisfied with their own level of knowledge/skill regarding how to support their child's play.

In the qualitative responses, Taiwanese parents were more likely to identify developmental 'functions' of play e.g.: '*rehabilitation in games*', '*motivation and development*', '*comprehension and focus*'. There was a suggestion here of the 'play-as-progress' rhetoric (Sutton-Smith 1997) and concern for 'normalisation' through play (Goodley & Runswick-Cole 2010). Taiwan has a well-established, Americanized self-help industry, with books on parenting regularly appearing in the top rankings for sales in this field (Hendriks 2016). Without further discussion with parents we can do no more than speculate that the popular science of parenting may be influencing these parents' perceptions.

Parents also reflected on the impact on children and parents of living in societies that prioritise academic achievement (Shek & Chan 1999). This was a particular concern amongst Hong Kong parents, as their 'free text' responses indicated (quotes from different parents):

*The child has high study pressure. Parents feel troubled. Relationship is affected and so is the child's self-esteem and self-confidence. Through play, children can release some of the pressure. Hope that the government can adjust the aims of education and let children have real time to play.*

*Children of the same age have great study pressure. Other parents have arranged too little play time, therefore it's difficult to find playmates.*

## Discussion

To date we have adopted a rights-based, barrier-mapping and individual-barrier-understanding approach to this study and its findings. We have worked to

develop a nuanced interpretation of these findings in relation to *local context*. Figure 1 provides a flavour of our analysis. We have sought to understand:

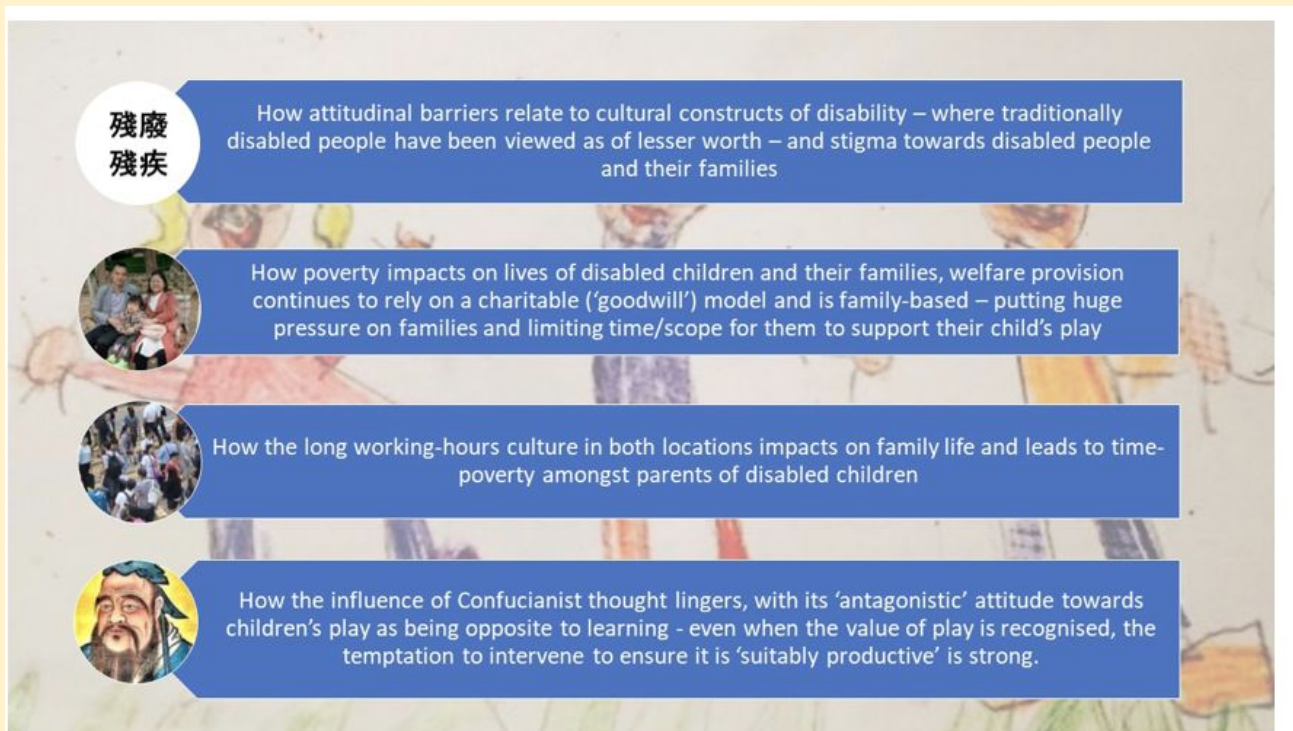


Figure 14. Summary of lines of analysis

Having explored potential explanations for parental responses and the experiences they report, we have outlined implications for further research or policy/practical change in order to realise disabled children's right to play.

Herein, however, we want to invite the reader to join us in considering how a new materialist perspective might allow us to advance/further our analysis. We are inspired by Game Studies research (Taylor 2009) which proposes that the Deleuzo-Guattarian concept of the 'assemblage' offers a helpful (ontological) framework for the study of play, since play comprises 'a number of parts interwoven in complex ways at particular historical moments' (p. 332). Such parts will always include the child, but may also include playmates, artefacts (e.g. toys/objects), the time of/for play, assistive technologies, play-spaces, rules of a game, attitudes and practices of parents or others, relevant institutional, policy/legal structures and cultures. Each part, or component of a given play event has 'properties' (qualities) which emerge from the interactions between the parts.

Is there potential utility to employing Deleuze and Guattari's (1988) sociology of associations in our research? We believe so. Their ontology allows us to consider how 'human bodies and all other material, social and abstract entities' might be viewed as 'relational', gaining 'shape and substance' as they are drawn into 'arrangement' (Fox & Alldred 2017: 17). Assemblages are held together by the capacities of assembled relations to affect or be affected – a force that achieves a change of state or capabilities. Such change may be physical, biological, psychological, social, political or emotional.

Assemblages are like machines that do and produce things. We believe that in order to realise disabled children's right to play, it is important to recognise the complex entanglements of material and non-material factors that produce either *playful* or *non-playful* events, or to put that in a more 'conventional' way: *enable* or *disable* play for disabled children.

To date, what we have done is begin the process of identifying at least *some* of the components 'at play' in disabled children's play events and lives in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Our next steps must be to explore how these components operate together, understand what they produce and then consider how to create new arrangements, assemblages, that allow for the production of playful events. Of course, Deleuze and Guattari also provide us with a wonderful vocabulary with which to describe such events - as occurring when 'power flows', involving an opening of the possibility of 'becoming-different', of disabled children 'becoming otherwise', following their own desires rather than following adult-determined pathways. Exploring play for disabled children in Taiwan and Hong Kong in this way will, we hope, prove fruitful - not only in terms of helping us to refine and develop our recommendations for enhancing access to and inclusion in play for disabled children living in these locations; but also allowing us to develop a methodology that can be applied elsewhere, by other researchers concerned with disabled children's right to play and advancing our understanding of disabled childhoods, globally.

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