Realising the 'right to play' in the special school playground.

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Abstract

In this paper I mobilise a multimodal ethnographic data fragment depicting a moment of play in a UK 'special school' playground to unpack the complexity and challenges of realising the 'right to play' (Article 31, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child) in a non-inclusive play space. I show that play (im)possibilities were delineated by the physical boundaries of the play environment, the absence of non-disabled peers and a lack of symbol-based resources to support playful meaning-making. Nevertheless, the children execute a short play event through non-verbal multimodal embodied communication which encompassed pleasure, frustration, invitations, rejections, acceptances, and negotiation over resource sharing. I argue that this brief play event instantiates broader debates around the Article 31 'right to play': specifically, to what extent this right can ever be realised in a non-inclusive playground, whether autistic children require play 'training' in order to exercise their right to play, and how diverse forms of play can be scaffolded by staff in the absence of non-disabled children.

Keywords: *play, autism, disability, inclusion, segregation.*

Introduction

The concept of 'play' is both poorly defined (Davey & Lundy, 2011) and a subject of debate with competing discourses around its intrinsic or instrumental value (John & Wheway, 2004), the appropriateness of adult-led interventions to improve play skills (Lester & Russell, 2010), and the increasing 'pedagogization' of play (Rogers, 2010). Such debates assume a particular intensity in the case of children with autism, since impairment in play skills is viewed as both a core deficit for diagnostic purposes (APA, 2013) and a critical site of remedial intervention (Paptheodoru, 2006). Conversely, this position is often resisted by autistic self-advocates who argue for the child's right to engage in non-normative play (Magro, 2016).

In this paper I explore the tension between these competing narratives by mobilising a small fragment of multimodal ethnographic data from a special school playground. Like Thomson et al. (2010), I believe that there is value in 'looking to the micro-level of transactions in order to reveal the power geometries of contemporary policy at work' (p.654). Here, fine-grained analysis of a brief playground interaction between children in a UK special school serves as a springboard for exploring broader questions of international significance in special education. These are the implementation of Article 31 of the UNCRC (the 'right to play'), the nexus between the right to play and inclusive/segregated education provision, the role of special education pedagogies (particularly Alternative & Augmentative Communication, or AAC) in supporting peer interaction, and the demarcation and scrutiny of inclusive and segregated play spaces. I will argue that since international, national and institutional adult-driven policy agendas permeate every aspect of school life including the playground, it is crucial for practitioners and policy-makers to reflect critically on the types of play which are made possible for children in general but most particularly for disabled children.

The Right to Play?

The right of children to 'engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to [their] age' is enshrined in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989). Specifically in relation to the play of disabled children, the UN later explained:

> Play has been recognized as the best source of learning various skills, including social skills. The attainment of full inclusion of children with disabilities in the society is realized when children are given the opportunity, places, and time to play with each other (children with disabilities and no disabilities). Training for recreation, leisure and play should be included for school-aged children with disabilities. (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006).

This UN conceptualisation of 'play' appears to be underpinned by three premises. Firstly, there is the claim that the right to play is best realised in an inclusive setting with disabled and non-disabled peers. Secondly, it is suggested that play is *instrumentally* valuable for its potential learning outcomes such as 'social skills'. Thirdly, 'training' on play is posited as necessary for disabled children. Each of these premises are unpacked below, followed by discussion of the field of multimodality and its relationship to the study of 'disordered' play.

The 'right to play' in a segregated playground?

From the above, it is clear that the UNCRC envisages the right to play being realised in an inclusive playground including peers 'with disabilities and no disabilities'. This appears consistent with the international policy shift towards inclusive education: for instance, signatories to the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) affirmed that 'a child with a disability should attend the neighbourhood school, that is, the school that would be attended if the child did not have a disability' (p.17), whilst the 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) calls upon States to ensure that 'persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system' (Art.24). However, the progress towards inclusive education made by the various government signatories to the Salamanca Statement since 1994 has been variable. For instance, Australia has seen an increase in the proportion of students attending special schools since 2010 (Anderson & Boyle, 2019); Greece has been accused of proclaiming an inclusive rhetoric whilst remaining wedded to the practices of traditional special education (Nteropoulou-Nterou & Slee, 2019); whilst Italy has been lauded for achieving the education system 'most closely approximating full inclusion' (Anastasiou et al., 2015, p.429) yet not following up with the necessary support and training for classroom practitioners.

In the case of England, where the data for this study was generated, the playground continues to be a site of segregation rather than inclusion for some disabled children. In 2010, a change in government led to an explicit policy shift towards reaffirming the continuing role of special schools within the UK education system (Runswick-Cole, 2011), and since then the proportion of disabled children educated in state-funded and independent special schools combined has steadily climbed to the current figure of 16.1% (DfE, 2019). It is therefore important on an international level to understand how disabled children enact 'play' in a segregated setting without access to typically developing peers, and to fully consider the implications of such segregated play for policy and practice.

As Von Benzon (2015) notes, children in special schools not only lose the opportunity to play with non-disabled peers in the school playground but also outside of school since they and their families are socially segregated from the network of children attending local neighbourhood provision. Additionally, she notes that even within the special school there may be secondary segregation in the form of classes grouped by dis/ability, which results in children with autism having access only to playmates with relatively heterogeneous social and communication profiles. The potential impact of such segregation on their play is substantial. Drawing on a Vygotskian perspective, Chalaye & Male (2011) argue that in an inclusive setting peers can function as More Knowledgeable Others (MKOs) for disabled children, scaffolding playground interactions with more complex communication and social interaction. Similarly, Odom (2005) argues that disabled children need the 'rich and essential learning experiences' (p.1) that come from observing and interacting with socially competent peers. Bauminger et al. (2008) note that children with autism demonstrate more sophisticated play and communication when they have access to typically developing children. Hess (2006) goes further in suggesting that a segregated social context may account for or at least contribute to the perceived 'deficits' of autistic play:

The more children with ASD [Autism Spectrum Disorder] are isolated from their peers the more likely they are to develop rigid play routines that lack pretence or social interaction. They need their peers to serve as models in the playground. (p.27).

Taken together, these concerns suggest that countries where segregated education systems persist should take seriously not only the academic implications of segregation but also the repercussions for play, relationships and social interaction.

The value of play: intrinsic or instrumental?
The second underlying premise of the UN Committee's conceptualisation of play was a perception of its instrumental value in terms of developing 'social skills'. This points to a pivotal question about the nature of 'play': that is, whether we understand it to be primarily of *intrinsic* value to the child/ren concerned or whether it must additionally carry some form of perceived *instrumental* value such as education or social development (Lester & Russell, 2010). John & Wheway (2004) insist that 'play' must be understood as *freely chosen*, *personally directed* and *intrinsically motivated* activity: that is, it must be done for its own sake and not for any particular outcome or reward other than those that might be decided upon by the children involved. Similarly, Hodgkin & Newell (2007) argue that 'children are just as entitled as adults to forms of play and recreation which appear purposeless to others' (p.470).

However, adult expectations of some form of instrumental gain from time spent on play (and subsequent adult involvement in shaping children's play to such ends) are not new. For instance, according to the 'progress rhetoric' of play identified by Sutton-Smith (2009) it is primarily a vehicle for accelerating progress across normative developmental trajectories. Such a rhetoric may draw upon (for example) Vygotskian ideas around the emergence of willpower and self-regulation as a result of engagement in make-believe play (Vygotsky, 1967). For this reason, as Bodrova et al. (2013) note, Vygotsky saw the adult as playing a critical role both in engaging children in play and scaffolding the direction of the play. Traces of this instrumental view of play can also be seen in government policy in England, where the Early Years Statutory Framework (DfE, 2017) states:

> Each area of learning and development must be implemented through planned, purposeful play and through a mix of adult-led and child-initiated activity … Children learn by leading their own play, and by taking part in play which is guided by adults. There is an ongoing judgement to be made by practitioners about the balance … (p.9)

The trend towards expecting and managing instrumental outcomes of play continues to intensify: for instance, Rogers (2010) notes what she terms the 'pedagogization of play' (p.5) which positions play as an instrument of learning future competencies. Wood (2014) similarly argues:

> Educational effectiveness research … has aligned with international discourses of quality, standards, accountability and performativity, and has produced a technicist version of play as a means of delivering curriculum goals. (p.147).

It is therefore important for policy-makers in UNCRC signatory states to critically reflect on whether the 'right to play' is understood to mean the right to scaffolded play with intended (and presumably measurable) learning outcomes or whether it is a right to child-led play for its own sake. Davey & Lundy (2011) have argued that a rights-based perspective to play can straddle both intrinsic and instrumental views of play because play is both a right in itself but also a means of realising other related rights such as health, development and education. This question assumes particular intensity in the context of children with perceived 'play deficits' as part of their diagnosis.

Autistic play: in need of fixing?

As discussed previously, a third premise of the UN Committee's position on play is that 'training' is necessary for school-aged children with disabilities. This suggests a premise that their existing play skills will be lacking relative to neuronormative peers and some form of additional intervention will be required. To unpack this position it is firstly necessary to locate the discussion within claims from child development literature about the posited features of neuronormative or age-appropriate play trajectories. This allows us to then examine the posited play 'deficits' associated with a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder and the range of 'interventions' which have been proposed to address them. Finally I consider the counter-narratives from autistic self-advocates, sociocultural theorists and critical disability theorists defending the autistic child's right to non-normative play.

Developmental theorists have made many attempts to order their observations of child play into universal developmental sequences or taxonomies. For instance, the early work of Parten (1932) identifies six degrees of social engagement in typically developing children: lower levels of peer engagement may take the forms of unoccupied periods, solitary play or onlooker play, moving towards the development of more social forms of play such as parallel, associative and cooperative. The work of Parten continues to be influential: Fleer (2009) observes that it is a widely known and used framework amongst early years professionals in most European heritage countries. However, it has also been subject to criticism: Coplan & Arbeau (2011) find it to be an oversimplified framework which does not reflect the complex emergence of childhood intersubjectivity, whilst Howes & Matheson (1992) argue that shifts between the stages posited by Parten can simply be a phenomenon of increasing engagement within a single play episode.

An alternative categorical dimension for understanding play is based on the nature of activity. For example, Smilansky (1968) sets out four broad categories of *functional play, constructive play, dramatic or symbolic play,* and finally *games with rules.* More recent typologies of play have since been proposed (for a useful overview see Marsh et al., 2016). One particularly detailed play taxonomy is provided by Hughes (2002) with sixteen proposed forms of play. At the more physical and embodied end of the taxonomy these include *rough and tumble play*, *locomotor play*, *exploratory (sensory) play* and *object play*; whilst more sophisticated play forms involve *socio-dramatic play*, *creative play*, *fantasy play* and *imaginative play*. Advancement to these more sophisticated forms of play involving language, pretence and imagination has been variously associated with developmental gains including semantic organisation and narrative skills (Stagnitti & Lewis, 2015), the development of metacognition and self-regulation (Whitebread & O'Sullivan, 2012) and literacy development (de Haan, 2005).

This discussion of normative taxonomies leads to the question of 'autistic play'. The perceived adequacy of an autistic child's play is first placed under scrutiny as part of the initial diagnostic process for Autism Spectrum Disorder: for instance, according to diagnostic criteria DSM-5, one characteristic of autism is 'deficits in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships, ranging, for example, from difficulties adjusting behavior to suit various social contexts; to difficulties in sharing imaginative play or in making friends; to absence of interest in peers' (APA, 2013). Similarly, Couper et al. (2013) note:

> Impairment in play skills such as symbolic, sociodramatic play including imitation and pretend play is a well-documented feature of ASD … from a very young age children with ASD may demonstrate limited appropriate use of toys and rarely engage in creative, spontaneous or pretend play… Instead they tend to engage in repetitive and ritualistic actions with toys. They may line up toys by shape or colour rather than sharing the action with someone else … (p.27)

It is perhaps because of the close association between diagnosing autism and problematising play that both academic and practitioner literature abound with (often commercialised) strategies for improving the play skills of children with autism through adult intervention. Such literature seems to rest on the premise that play is instrumental in skill acquisition, and therefore play which is non-normative or not considered age-appropriate must be scaffolded by adults to ensure a more satisfactory developmental trajectory. The plethora of suggested strategies to improve the play skills of children with autism include video modelling (Dauphin et al., 2004), social stories (Barry & Burlew, 2004), naturalistic behavioural interventions (Ingersoll and Schreibman, 2006), robot assisted play (Robins et al., 2009), activity picture schedules (Morrison et al., 2002), roleplaying with an adult (Hess, 2006), Individual Play Plans (Paptheodoru, 2006) and tactile prompting (Shabani et al., 2002). Taken together, the proliferation of remedial approaches to play in the case of autism seem to elevate what Rogers (2010) termed the 'pedagogization of play' to a new level of interventionist scrutiny which might be termed the 'pathologisation of play' (Goodley & Runswick Cole, 2010, p.499).

Despite the predominance of remedial and interventionist literature on autism and play, there are also arguments for respecting the need of autistic children to 'play differently'. Autistic self-advocates such as Willey (1999) recall from childhood 'an overwhelming desire to be away from my peers' (p.18) and a preference for imaginary friends, although she did eventually enjoy friendship with one other girl. Simone (2010) offers nuanced reflections on the conflicting desires for fun and solitude, noting that 'we love our alone time … but at the same time, most of us also crave companionship and fun. It's complicated …' Magro (2016) remembers the benefits of being able to pursue his interest of lining up his toys in height order, explaining that it gave him a comforting sense of routine and order and that he often preferred this activity to interactions with human beings. His subsequent advice is to not prevent children from engaging in 'autistic' activities such as lining up toys, although it might be possible for adults to sensitively develop the activity by (for example) developing stories about the lined-up characters. An important caveat here is that we do not know for certain the extent to which the expressed experiences of autistic individuals who are able to mediate their experiences through language can be assumed to apply to those who do not. However, these experiences do appear concordant with findings of Corbett et al. (2010) which suggest that children with autism may experience elevated cortisol levels (indicating stress responsivity) when engaging with peers during play time, pointing to the need for caution in promoting constant peer interaction as a normative expectation of the playground.

Conn (2014), writing about autistic play from a sociocultural perspective, argues:

> Behavioural interventions that involve an adult imparting play skills to a child and setting play goals could not be seen as proper play … The right of children with autism to play in ways that are differential but nevertheless described by those with the condition as playful and enjoyable must be taken seriously. (p.148).

Similarly, Goodley & Runswick-Cole (2010) contend:

> For disabled children the link between play and learning has been magnified and read in particular ways. Play provides a mechanism for assessment, diagnosis and therapeutic intervention for atypically developing children … Disabled children's play has been colonised by adults seeking to support their learning and development at the expense of its intrinsic value. (p.500).

Goodley & Runswick-Cole go on to make the case for 'repositioning play outside the grand narrative of developmental psychology' (p.509) and 'undo[ing] the tying of the disabled child's playing body to

the expectations of a normative ideal' (p.509). Disabled children, they argue, should be free to engage in hand flapping, rocking back and forth, or any other freely chosen form of 'non-normative' play. They go on to express the hope that by severing the link between play and normalisation this will 'allow disabled children and their families to repossess play' (p.510).

Multimodality, Disability & Play

The term 'multimodality' describes research which systematically foregrounds the interplay of diverse modes such as eye gaze, facial expression, speech, posture, proxemics, haptics and object manipulation within interaction. Whilst the field encompasses researchers who deploy a broad range of specific analytic frameworks including multimodal conversation analysis, multimodal ethnography, social semiotics and others, Jewitt et al. (2016) argue that three unifying core features can be identified in 'multimodal' scholarship. Firstly, there is a shared recognition that human interaction is undertaken through a range of semiotic resources which play different roles in a multimodal ensemble through the inherent affordances and constraints of their materiality. Secondly, it is asserted that language should not be automatically privileged in analysis over other modes and so-called 'non-verbal' modes should not be relegated to an automatically supporting or secondary role until analysis has established this to be the case in the given interaction. Thirdly, there is a shared commitment to the analysis of how communicators select and orchestrate modes to produce what Jewitt et al. (2016) term a 'multimodal whole'.

It is not difficult to draw out the relevance of multimodality to discussions of 'disordered' communication, interaction and play in the case of disabled children (Doak, 2018). Faced with minimally verbal participants, a research framework which primarily seeks to foreground and analyse spoken language will tend to align with a medicalised understanding of autistic 'deficit', whilst a multimodal approach will be more likely to foreground alternative multimodal communicative competence through other modes and recognise participants as 'differently voiced' (Ashby, 2011). This in turn has some alignment with the social model of disability, which privileges analysis of the environment and its responsiveness to difference (Oliver, 1996). For instance, in their case study of a young disabled child which is explicitly framed by the social model of disability, Flewitt et al. (2009) argue that staff responsiveness to the child's embodied responses to storytime such as rocking excitedly in her chair acknowledged her as 'a symbolic being, able to express precise meanings albeit in non-linguistic and non-conventional modes' (p.230). Here, sensitivity to multimodal expression in the classroom without expectation of language is seen as an environmental adaptation consistent with social model thinking on disability.

The implications of this intersection between multimodality and disability are significant for the purposes of this study on play. Play as understood through a neuronormative lens will almost inevitably be language-focused, with an expectation that 6-8 year olds like the participants in this study will negotiate complex imaginative play scenes through extensive verbal elaboration alongside embodied action. This language permits access to the higher levels of play such as socio-dramatic play, creative play, fantasy play and imaginative play described previously (Hughes, 2002) and its absence almost inevitably problematises the play of children whose play is mediated through other modes. By way of contrast, a multimodal approach to analysis has different ontological implications for the construction of 'disability' and 'play': by refusing to privilege analysis of language, space is created to foreground the play which *is* made possible through the modes available to the child rather than 'pathologizing the absence of talk' (Flewitt, 2006, p.47).

From the above, I would argue that the play of autistic children is located within multiple competing discourses: remediation versus respect for neurodiverse lived experience, inclusive versus 'special' education, and intrinsic versus performative conceptualisations of the value of play. It is within this contested discursive landscape that the events of the following data fragment unfold.

Methodology

The Setting

Here I draw on ethnographic classroom research undertaken over a period of six weeks in a special school in the Midlands of England. The focus of the study was the multimodal communication practices of the children with autism with their peers and with adults. The class had a total of five students who ranged from five to seven years old. All the children had diagnoses of ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) and all were minimally verbal, ranging from a few words to no spoken language. The classroom was staffed by one teacher and two teaching assistants.

The classroom had one exterior-facing wall with windows along the full length of the wall. A door, which was kept locked during lessons, led out to a small tarmac covered play area enclosed with high metal fencing (Figures 1 and 2). This play area typically had a green plastic table, a small trampoline, some decorative items affixed to the fencing such as dinosaur-shaped mirrors, and various smaller toys which would be brought out by staff on a rotation basis.

Behind the play area was the larger grass playground belonging to the school, separated with high fencing from the grounds of an adjacent (mainstream) primary school. The playground where the mainstream children played was further enclosed with a second high fence with an unused buffer area of grass between the two layers of fencing (Figure 3), and as a result the children in the two schools could not interact.

[INSERT FIGURE 1]

[INSERT FIGURE 2]

[INSERT FIGURE 3]

Participants

The five child participants in the study are briefly detailed below. Classes were not grouped primarily by age in this school but rather by perceived heterogeneity in the nature of the children's dis/abilities. Dominic and Luke are the principal characters in the data excerpt presented later, with Anna and Thomas playing a more peripheral role and Albert remaining uninvolved on this occasion.

       'Albert':   aged 8, diagnosed with ASD aged 2.
       'Anna':   aged 7, diagnosed with ASD aged 3.
       'Dominic':   aged 8, diagnosed with ASD aged 3.
       'Luke':   aged 6, Diagnosed with ASD aged 3.
       'Thomas':   aged 7, Diagnosed with ASD aged 3.

Ethics

This study was carried out in line with the British Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA, 2011) and received approval from the author's university Research Ethics Committee. Written consent for the research was obtained from the school headteacher, classroom staff and the children's parents/carers. In the case of the children, who were minimally verbal and could not have given explicit consent even in an adapted format, I followed Nind's (2008) suggestion of proxy consent from parents/carers, teachers and headteacher combined with ongoing inference of the child's 'assent' to the research. 'Assent' was ascertained by ongoing observation of children's

embodied responses to the presence of the researcher, and consulting with classroom staff about the interpretation of embodied responses in cases of ambiguity. This also follows Kellett & Nind (2001) who describe a process of seeking advice on the significance of idiosyncratic non-verbal behaviours from people around the participant who 'cared about them, knew when they were unhappy, distressed or uncomfortable' (p.53). This process of observation and consultation is not necessarily straightforward: for instance, observed resistance to completing a classroom activity might be resistance to the activity itself (making it an interesting piece of data) or resistance to completing the activity whilst being observed and videorecorded (making it ethically problematic). Further, Flewitt (2005) cautions that the desire to pursue one's own research agenda can blind the researcher to subtle embodied suggestions of unease. To address these limitations, I sought initial advice from the class teacher before fieldwork began to identify the children most likely to experience unease with a stranger and to seek advice on how to recognise their embodied manifestation of unease. For students with autism, I was very aware that the presence of a new person in their classroom was a potential source of anxiety, and did not approach any individual child to observe them or undertake video-recording until they were freely approaching me with what appeared to be behavioural indications of curiosity and ease. Staff were further invited to propose discontinuation of a child's participation (either temporarily, as in the withdrawal of the video camera on that occasion, or permanently as in their withdrawal from the study) if in their judgement the research was causing distress or interfering with their classroom experience. In the end this did not prove necessary, perhaps because the children were accustomed to a high degree of scrutiny from classroom staff (who frequently took photographs as evidence of attainment) and from visiting medical and educational professionals, so my presence with a videocamera was quickly accepted without difficulty.

The use of videorecording in a classroom inevitably raises further ethical considerations. In this study, it was relatively easy to ensure non-participating children did not appear on camera, as the class consisted of only five students all of whom were recruited as participants as well as all associated classroom staff. Outdoor videoing was restricted only to the small outdoor area belonging to this particular class and was not conducted on the general playground shared with other classes. Video stills from the footage were converted to line drawings using Sketch Drawer 5.1 software: this meant that analysis of multimodal interaction including proxemics, posture, eye gaze, facial expression and other modes could be undertaken but with a certain degree of anonymity afforded to participants. In order to highlight the partial nature of the anonymity a sample visual transcript was included in the participant information sheet to enable visualisation of their eventual portrayal. The decision was taken to avoid filming in four circumstances: where the children were less than fully clothed (for instance personal care, toileting, swimming); where there was any suggestion that filming was causing distress; where filming appeared to constitute a distraction from their classroom task; and where physically challenging behaviour was occurring. This last decision was difficult as it involved the loss of potentially significant data relating to childhood agency and resistance, but as Flewitt (2005) notes, the use of visual images from the classroom (particularly at sub-optimal moments) can render practitioners 'vulnerable to criticism, anxiety and self-doubt' (p.6).

Data Generation
The data for this study was generated over a period of six weeks (one half-term) spent in the classroom. My role in the classroom fluctuated on a continuum between participant and observer (Blomberg et al., 1993): at times I was videorecording or taking notes, at other times I was actively engaging with students or assisting staff with tasks such as tidying the classroom. I employed ethnographic methods of data generation (Green & Bloome, 2004) including observations, fieldnotes, videorecording of classroom interaction, photographs of classroom artefacts, document collection relating to classroom practices and audio-recorded interviews with staff and parents. I

also kept a reflexive research journal where I reflected on my emergent understandings of classroom practice and my positionality as a researcher in relation to findings.

Data Analysis
Data analysis software NVivo 10 (QSR International Pty Ltd. Version 10) functioned as an initial platform which enabled uploading of the full data set and subsequent identification and collation of data suggesting emergent themes from across the diverse media (photographs, videos, transcriptions, scanned documents). The initial period of data analysis consisted of researcher immersion in the full data set in order to obtain a broad ethnographic overview of interactional patterns, regularities and practices within the classroom. NVivo facilitated this immersive stage of analysis as it allowed the creation of 'nodes' where data could be collated on individual students and also on particular interactional contexts, and I was able to alternate easily between the two sets of nodes in a process of iteration in order to build a multidimensional view of classroom interaction.

The second stage of data analysis was to identify a limited number of short video excerpts which would illustrate the range of children and interactional situations seen in the first stage of analysis. These excerpts would be used to 'zoom in' on the fine-grained detail of classroom interaction. Given that for these participants embodiment, space and material artefacts were fundamental to their enactment of communication and relationships whilst language was almost completely absent, a more visual form of transcription seemed appropriate. Videos were therefore 'transcribed' in the form of a storyboard which draws upon elements of Norris' (2004) annotated video stills and Mavers' (2012) narrative vignettes (Figure 4). The video stills were converted to line drawings using Sketch Drawer 5.1 software: as noted previously, this afforded a certain degree of anonymity without losing the depiction of embodiment necessary for analysis of multimodal interaction. Twelve classroom episodes in total were subjected to visual transcription, four of which depicted play in the outdoor setting.

Findings
The play episode selected here for discussion was named *'Squash Me!'* due to the nature of the play. It was selected as a particularly rich instantiation of multiple dimensions of 'play' which require further unpacking in the case of disabled children: the sharing and negotiation of resources, the expression of invitations, refusals, frustration, and eventual resolution of play-based disagreements. Further, *'Squash Me!'* was also the most diverse play episode in terms of participants, with only one of the five children (Albert) remaining entirely uninvolved. The transcribed excerpt (Figure 4), which is 90 seconds long, took place in the classroom outdoor play area during morning break time. In this video the focal point is the green plastic table and the movement of the children (primarily Dominic and Luke) as they negotiate its usage, climb on it, stamp on it, and use it as a platform for jumping onto other students. 'Lizzie' (Class Teacher) and 'Jane' (Teaching Assistant) were supervising the children and the storyboard shows their occasional comments on the unfolding action.

[INSERT FIGURE 4]

As noted previously, a multimodal approach to analysing interaction insists that we must resist the temptation to automatically privilege language, instead giving equal analytical attention to a range of modes such as eye gaze, posture, gesture, haptics, proxemics, and facial expression. Only through analysis of a given interaction, it is argued, can we reach a conclusion about the relative importance of individual modes therein (Jewitt et al., 2016). Epistemologically, this perspective sits well with the type of data generated here, where language certainly does not occupy a pivotal role in communication. A multimodal perspective on *'Squash Me!',* therefore avoids 'pathologizing the

absence of talk' (Flewitt, 2006, p.47) by refocusing the analytic lens on modes which *are* present and the interactional achievements which are realised as a result.

In this exchange the students orchestrate a range of modes to enact their game. For instance, in the opening moments (images 1-4) Luke's reduction of the proxemic space between himself and Dominic by approaching the edge of the table appears to function as an invitation to interact, with Dominic's twice-repeated gesture of outstretched arms constituting an invitation to jump. In images 5-12 Luke's assent to Dominic sitting on his back is conveyed through facial expression (smiling), vocalisation and posture (lying down with legs gently moving up and down behind Dominic), and he successfully conveys when he eventually wants Dominic to climb of him through a combination of head rotation, eye gaze and postural change pushing up from the ground (images 13-14). Once again in image 20 Luke uses the same multimodal orchestration to attempt a second iteration of the game (closing of proxemic distance by moving to edge of table, eye gaze, outstretched arms) but Dominic's continuing movement around the pole and refusal to shorten the proxemic distance from his end suggest resistance. Luke conveys frustration at this lack of co-operation through a foot stamp and an angry sounding vocalisation. It could therefore be argued that refocusing the analytic lens on multiple modes rather than an expectation of language elucidates the complexity of non-verbal play, with invitations to play, acceptance, resistance, co-operation, frustration and pleasure all evident in this very short episode.

The play depicted in this extract might also be categorised according to the various taxonomies of play outlined previously. For example, according to Parten (1932) Dominic and Luke (and Thomas to a lesser extent) might be said to be performing 'associative play' associated with age five years and upwards (there is a substantial amount of interaction although perhaps without the clearly assigned roles associated with the next stage of 'co-operative play'). Anna, meanwhile, is perhaps somewhere between 'solitary play' and 'onlooker' throughout the episode: she does maintain constant awareness of the location of the main actors in the exchange, although her observations may be focused on regaining her ownership of the green table rather than an intrinsic interest in their game. Albert, the fifth class member who does not feature in Figure 4, is engaged in 'solitary play' in a far corner of the enclosed space.

The play of Dominic and Luke might alternatively be understood in terms of Hughes' (2002) taxonomy of play types as 'rough and tumble play' (as a result of the desire for physical contact), or 'exploratory play' (in terms of assessing the properties and possibilities of the table as a platform for jumping and stamping). However it is difficult to imagine a situation where minimally verbal children could display many of the other forms of play described within the taxonomy, since play which is (for example) 'socio-dramatic', 'fantasy', 'imaginative' or 'recapitulative' seems to presuppose the use of language.

The incident depicted in *'Squash Me!'* was largely typical of the peer interactions I observed in the outdoor area: embodied action featured prominently in negotiating space, resources and simple games such as jumping or chase, there was almost no use of spoken language or other forms of symbolic communication and there was minimal intervention from supervising staff unless physical contact between students was of concern. However, there were also very infrequent instances of staff using outdoor play as an opportunity to implement communication practices which were more typically associated with the indoor classroom. For instance, in the classroom the children were encouraged to use Makaton (a simplified sign language system for people with learning disabilities) and/or Picture Exchange Communication System or PECS (symbol cards which could be presented to an interactional partner to indicate intended meaning). In one recorded outdoor episode a Teaching Assistant engaged Albert in a sustained joint enactment of the song *'If You're Happy and You Know It'* with the TA modelling Makaton signs for the lyrics and Albert sometimes copying them.

[INSERT FIGURE 5]

There were also two play-related PECS symbol cards affixed to the inside of the classroom door which opened onto the outdoor enclosure, although I never observed them in use. They were often not accessible as the door was typically closed with supervising adults standing outside preventing re-entry to the classroom.

[INSERT FIGURE 6]

Staff expressed doubt that students would be interested in communicating with each other via PECS during play time in any case:

> *[For Thomas] using his body language works so well at that chasing game … there is no point because people respond that way so I am not going to bother using the PECS … It is more functional to him I suppose, better outcome from less input. (Frances, Teaching Assistant)*

Discussion

This small fragment of data from a special school playground in England raises some important questions about the realisation of the 'right to play' in special schools with segregated playgrounds. Firstly, it is interesting to reflect on how freedom and surveillance in play are enacted in the context of disabled children. It could be argued that the play depicted in *'Squash Me!'* satisfies the definition of play as freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated activity (John & Wheway, 2004). For instance Dominic is free to assent to Luke jumping on him (Figure 4, Image 3) or to later resist (Figure 4, Images 23-24), the boys are not prevented from pursuing their physical play despite staff concern (Figure 4, Image 6), Anna and Thomas are free to undertake their more peripheral engagement with the central Dominic-Luke dyad, and Albert is free to continue in solitary play. The green table and the nature of the jumping/squashing game has apparently been freely chosen as a focal point for play, when other toys were available. Nevertheless, a deeper reading of *'Squash Me!'*, particularly in light of the segregation described above, raises questions of how 'free' freely chosen activities can ever be. The play which is made possible here is inevitably shaped by the children's double segregation both from the adjacent mainstream children and from their more verbal disabled peers within the same school, which is not an accident but a direct result of non-inclusive policy-making. Further, the agency of children to choose any course of action is invariably shaped by available artefacts and the material environment (Ogilvie-Whyte, 2003): in this case, the availability of the green table and other toys, the high fencing separating Purple Class from other children, the inaccessibility of the classroom with its associated communication symbols, and the small available space inevitably facilitated some play choices and curtailed others. On this basis, I would argue that adults are never neutral bystanders who facilitate 'freely chosen' play: rather, the play which unfolds in a data fragment such as *'Squash Me!'* bears the traces of adult decision-making throughout. Whilst staff may have resisted the temptation to intervene directly in the play (Figure 4, images 5-7), the play in *'Squash Me!'* is shaped by adult decision-making at international, national and local policy levels which render some forms of play more or less possible in this context.

Despite their apparent freedoms within the *Squash Me!* game at the micro level of interaction, it could also be said that Luke and his peers are subject to a relatively high degree of adult scrutiny and surveillance. The play unfolds in the small classroom play area enclosed with high fencing, where every corner is fully visible both from within the classroom and without (Figures 1-3). This could be said to facilitate the panoptic gaze of staff, who were always aware of the minutiae of interaction and ready to intervene at a moment's notice: in *'Squash Me!'* this can be seen in transcribed staff commentary on the play in Images 5, 6 and 23 (Figure 4). I had sympathy for staff prioritisation of

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student safety: staff are conscious of their responsibilities *in loco parentis* for children with learning disabilities who can be at risk of wandering off, getting lost or injuring a peer through physical aggression if an interaction becomes stressful or overwhelming. This concern is not unique to this setting: Von Benzon (2015) notes that learning disabled children are positioned as particularly vulnerable and outdoor play spaces as particularly dangerous, leading to a paternalistic and protectionist stance from practitioners. Similarly, Lester & Russell (2010) note the 'constant adult surveillance and attendance' which impede the disabled child's right to 'develop clandestine use of space' (p.34). There do not seem to be any easy answers to the conundrum of balancing safety and freedom, although the concept of 'positive risk-taking' (Seale et al., 2012) may provide a direction for further research in the play of disabled children.

The question of surveillance is closely related to the question of segregation, raising the related question of whether the 'right to play' can be enacted in a highly segregated space such as that depicted in *'Squash Me!'* In this episode, students were not only physically separated from the adjacent mainstream primary school by multiple layers of fencing and a 'buffer zone' between the playgrounds (Figure 3) but also further segregated within the specialist setting according to perceived heterogeneity in their dis/abilities. This sometimes elicited a feeling of sadness within me as I reflected on the apparent impermeability of the multi-layered fencing and buffer zone which seemed to function as a metaphor for segregated education.

This backdrop of segregated education in *'Squash Me!'* raises important questions about the impact of segregated playgrounds on the nature of play that can and does unfold therein. On the one hand, the play sequence *'Squash Me!'* depicted above suggests that in this particular grouping students can demonstrate only simple responses such as foot stamping (Figure 4, Image 23) to indicate general displeasure rather than articulating their feelings or verbally renegotiating the terms of the play to ensure its continuation. Ultimately this results in a disappointing end to the play that Luke does not manage to resolve or redirect (Figure 4, Image 24). It could be argued that this is as much a product of the grouping as it is of any individual communication 'deficit' on Luke's part: the availability of only four potential playmates, all of whom have minimal or no speech as well as the social interaction difficulties associated with autism, places significant limitations on the range and complexity of play which can be enacted. It also means that Luke (and the other individual children in *'Squash Me!'*) cannot draw upon non-disabled peers as More Knowledgeable Others in the Vygotskian sense (Chalaye & Male, 2011) to scaffold more sophisticated play or to redirect unsatisfactory play sequences. Luke's frustrated foot stamping in *'Squash Me!'* stands in contrast to the rich and complex playful language documented in studies of children of similar age in mainstream playgrounds, such as the re-enactment of reality television shows (Marsh & Bishop, 2014), fantasy play and verbal games (Blatchford et al., 2003) and a 'rich and varied range of games, songs and rhymes … media-references and play based on media' (Marsh, 2012).

Luke's evident frustration in this instance does not necessarily warrant a wider conclusion that his play is more or less subjectively satisfying to him in general than these verbally sophisticated forms of play are to mainstream peers: subjective perceptions of enjoyment are difficult to judge from observation, and children who engage in complex verbal play also experience frustration, disagreements and mismatched expectations. However, I would argue that segregated settings place certain parameters on the realisation and elaboration of play such as *'Squash Me!'* which remains at the level of 'rough-and-tumble play' or 'exploratory play' (Hughes 2002). Whilst we do not know whether this level is subjectively satisfactory to Luke and his friends, we do know that the current provision does not afford them 'the opportunity places and time to play with … children with disabilities and no disabilities' (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006). We cannot know from this data whether access to typically developing playmates would have resulted in more sophisticated forms of play than that depicted in *'Squash Me!'* (Bauminger et al., 2008), although it

might be tentatively argued that the degree of play which *was* achieved here through multimodal embodied competence does indicate a desire to interact and a potential to engage in further elaborations of scaffolded play.

The degree of 'multimodal competence' demonstrated in *'Squash Me!'* leads to the question of whether play without language is inherently deficient or merely 'differently voiced' (Ashby, 2011). As I argued previously, a multimodal reading of the interaction foregrounds interactional features within *'Squash Me!'* which are also common to the mainstream playground: pleasure and fun, invitations to play being met with both acceptance and rejection, frustration arising from rejection, exploration of the affordances of available items, physical play and negotiations over shared resources. This echoes the claim of Conn (2014) that children with autism are 'both different and the same' (p.14) as neurotypical children: that is, whilst their play may be different in form with increased emphasis on the physical and the sensory, there are nevertheless shared human experiences of mutual enjoyment, social connection and fun deriving from intrinsically motivated activities. Such a multimodal reading might suggest therefore that the play depicted here is not inherently problematic but becomes so only when seen through the lens of neuronormative expectations including language.

On the other hand, it might be argued that it is important not to underplay the developmental divergence between the play in *'Squash Me!'* and the activities of 6-8 year olds in the typical mainstream playground. Not only is language almost completely absent here, but the degree of direct social interaction with peers appears significantly lower than might be expected. Dominic and Luke form the central dyad in this exchange with interaction that Parten (1932) might describe as 'associative play'. Anna is more peripherally engaged, and I suggested that her engagement seems to be directed towards regaining control of the coveted green table rather than a desire to interact with the boys. Thomas' engagement is also peripheral although does appear motivated by direct involvement in the physical play, whilst Albert remains engaged in solitary play. Here it feels important to situate this excerpt within my broader ethnographic observations from the complete data corpus and to acknowledge that solitary play was a very frequent observation for all five children in this class. Morning breaktime observations were often characterised by relatively extended periods of solitary play, onlooker play or interaction with adults, which were occasionally interspersed with short bursts of peer interaction such as *'Squash Me!'*. Parten (1932) argued that solitary and onlooker stages of play were more typically associated with age three years and under and that children tend to move more towards associative and co-operative play as they approach school age. Supporting this, in their study of the mainstream playground experiences of seven and eight year olds Blatchford et al. (2003) found that only 11% of time was spent in solitary, parallel, onlooker or unoccupied status, with 89% of playground time spent in direct peer interaction through physical play, organised games and conversations.

These reflections raise two related questions regarding adult intervention and support in play in settings where there are no typically developing peers to provide scaffolding. As noted previously, both the UN Committee's conceptualisation of play 'training' as well as academic literature appear to presuppose an inclusive setting, where 'interventions' can draw upon the play scaffolding provided by non-disabled peers (Banda et al., 2010; Harjusola-Webb et al., 2012; Watkins et al., 2015). However, inclusive classrooms and playgrounds are not (yet) the experience of many children living in the various signatory states to the 1994 Salamanca Statement despite the commitment to inclusive education contained therein. It therefore seems important to explore whether play could and should be better supported by adults within segregated settings, specifically whether the two key areas of divergence noted above (low peer engagement and low/absent language use) could be supported by adults.

On the question of peer engagement levels, it is important to remember the claim of autistic adults that solitary play can be important for wellbeing (Simone, 2010; Willey, 1999). It is entirely plausible that at least some of the children are happy to be free from the classroom demands of interpersonal interaction and to pursue their own interests as Albert (and Anna, to an extent) do here. It is therefore important to remain critical of automatic pathologization of a desire for solitary play and the imposition of unwanted attempts at remediation. At the same time, the previous argument regarding the limitations of 'freedom' in 'freely chosen play' is applicable here to analysis of peer engagement: would Albert, Anna or any of the other children have been more or less engaged with peers were a wider range of potential child interactants available to them? Would the presence of structured play opportunities or play-related symbol resources have changed the parameters of interaction? As the sole girl in this class, was there a gender-based explanation for Anna's peripheral engagement with the boys? We do not know the answer to these questions but the point remains that the 'freedom' to choose one's frequency, duration and depth of peer interaction is never a matter of absolute agency but rather is constrained by factors including non-inclusive education policy which determines the range of available playmates.

On the second question of adult support for playground language use, I have explored elsewhere how the teaching of Augmentative & Alternative Communication (AAC) strategies in special education often does not support emergent play skills. This is due to the predominance of vocabulary and speech functions pertaining to transactional requesting from adults (Doak, 2018). The children in this study were taught two forms of what is termed 'Augmentative and Alternative Communication' or AAC: they learned in the classroom to hand over symbol cards to adults in exchange for desired items, and they also learned some Makaton signs (a simplified manual signing system) to communicate. However, these skills appeared to centre heavily on the presumption of an adult-child dyad, with the child using their symbol card or Makaton to (for example) request desired items at snack time or to request access to the toilet. It was interesting that these AAC practices were rarely seen to travel into the outdoor space: for instance, as illustrated previously (Figure 6) the two symbol cards relating to play were inaccessible and I did not see them being used during fieldwork. Makaton was possible for most of the children only with a high degree of adult scaffolding (see Figure 5): only Albert and Luke were occasionally seen to spontaneously recall and use the Makaton sign for 'more' addressed to an adult outdoors. The PECS and Makaton vocabulary taught within the classroom seemed to reflect the assumption of an adult interactant, with a predominance of request-related words such as 'drink', 'banana', 'help', 'thank-you'. This meant that even if memorised to the point of spontaneous recall, the signs would have limited relevance in a peer interaction (Doak, 2018). It is interesting to reflect on whether an increased focus on teaching play-related AAC vocabulary and encouraging its use between peers would have allowed children to interact with peers in more varied ways: it might, for example, have allowed Dominic and Luke to re-negotiate their game at the end of *'Squash Me!'* rather than giving up due to frustration over mismatched expectations. It is encouraging to note the emergence of durable and tactile symbol-based signage with play-related vocabulary embedded into inclusive playground design (Exeter & District Mencap Society, 2018), although much more research is needed to establish how children interact with such displays and the implications for their play and peer interaction.

Conclusion

This study mobilised a small ethnographic fragment of data from an English special school playground as a springboard for reflection on the 'right to play' set out in Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. It was argued that the events which unfolded in the play sequence *'Squash Me!'* instantiated multiple and intersecting complex debates around the realisation of this 'right to play' at international level. These include the persistence of physical and institutional segregation despite the aspiration for inclusive education systems contained in the 1994 Salamanca Statement, the tensions between the call to accept non-normative or 'autistic' play

preferences and the perceived need for 'training' in more normative forms of play, and the related struggle to balance celebration of existing multimodal embodied communicative competence and potentially helpful symbol-based scaffolding to permit more extended meaning-making.

The findings suggest that practitioners might aim to protect the right of autistic children to 'freely chosen' activities including solitary and 'non-normative' play which may help them to rebound from the interactional expectations of the classroom (Simone, 2010; Willey, 1999). At the same time, practitioners should acknowledge that the concept of play as 'freely chosen' activity is to some extent illusory since children's playground choices are inevitably shaped by more distal adult decision-making, from segregated schooling arrangements to material outdoor provision to classroom teaching which may or may not privilege the skills and vocabulary needed to interact with peers. To this end, practitioners could reflect critically on whether increased access to inclusive play experiences with neurotypical children combined with a renewed focus on peer interaction in the teaching of AAC might then enable children to exercise their 'right to play' through a wider range of playground experiences.

Acknowledgements

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Figure 1: Class Enclosed Outdoor Play Area (View 1, main playground in background)
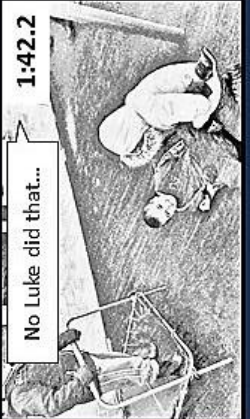

Figure 2: Class Enclosed Outdoor Play Area (View 2, classroom in background)

Figure 3: Class Enclosed Outdoor Play Area (View 3, mainstream primary school playground in far background)

Figure 4: 'Squash Me!'

1:33.5

1:34.1

1:35.3

1:36.8

1. Luke stamps on the table, moving closer to Dominic who is standing at edge of table. Anna watches from the side.

2. Dominic raises arms towards Luke. Luke jumps up and down three times on the table.

3. Dominic lowers his arms, then extends them a second time towards Luke.

4. Luke wraps his arms around Dominic's head and jumps on him. Dominic catches Luke's left leg.

1:39.0

1:42.2

1:44.7

1:51.0

Oh!

No Luke did that...

It's like WWE now...

5. The boys land on the ground, Dominic on top of Luke who is smiling. Staff discuss situation in background.

6. Dominic lifts Luke's left leg off the ground. Luke is still smiling.

7. Luke flips over onto his stomach. Dominic throws one leg over to sit astride his back. Staff approach them.

8. Dominic sits on Luke's back. Thomas comes along and gently pushes Luke's head to the ground.

1:54.5

1:57.3

1:59.1

2:13.8

9. Dominic, still sitting on Luke, gently taps Luke's back several times with the back of his hand. Anna climbs on table.

10. Leaning on Luke's upper back with his hands, Dominic shifts his whole body further forwards. Anna jumps on table.

11. Dominic rocks gently left and right on Luke's back. Luke makes a vocalisation which sounds happy.

12. Dominic sits still and Luke lies smiling and gently kicking legs up and down.

24

2:23.2

13. Luke raises his head from the ground and looks backwards towards Dominic.

2:24.5

14. Luke starts to rise, pushing upwards from ground with elbows and knees.

2:25.4

15. Dominic climbs off his back and walks away.

2:27.7

16. Luke climbs to his feet, moving towards the table again.

2:33.2

17. Luke climbs onto the table where Anna is now standing. He edges around her.

2:36.0

18. Anna jumps down from the table and Luke turns around in a circle on the table. Dominic leans on a pole, watching.

2:41.7

19. Luke sits down briefly on the table and then stands again. Dominic is still watching.

2:44.4

20. Luke reaches his arm out to Dominic but Dominic starts twirling around the pole and doesn't interact with him.

2:49.2

21. While Dominic twirls around the pole, Luke jumps in a circle again on the table.

2:55.5

22. Dominic pauses, standing still looking up at Luke. Luke leans his body towards him as though ready to jump.

2:57.0

[Laughing] he's not going to stand under you so you can jump on him is he?

23. Dominic starts to twirl around the pole again. Luke stamps his foot on the table, giving an angry shout.

3:03.7

24. Luke reaches out towards Dominic but he continues to twirl around the pole.
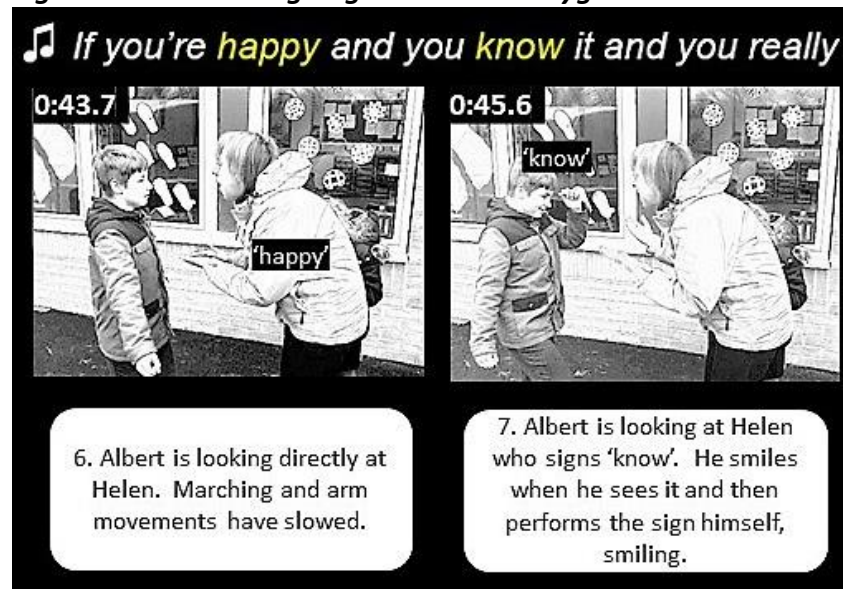
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Figure 5. Makaton Signing in Outdoor Playground

Figure 6. PECS resources on the door leading outdoors.