

I go back to the year 1999 when I was collecting data for my Ph D work at a school which then called itself ‘inclusive’, for, in that decade, it was deemed so if schools had a separate building for educating children with disabilities within the precincts of a regular school. During lunch and playtime, I watched non-disabled siblings and friends of children with disabilities standing outside the gates of this wing, waiting to embrace their siblings and gleefully clasp their hands and run towards the playground. While many struggled to run, what stood out was laughter, screams of joy, camaraderie, warmth, and empathy. When it was time to return after recess or play, it was a sad sight to watch. Children with disabilities never wanted to return to their classes. Their siblings would sit for a while to placate them. Teachers would offer comforting words. Many children asked their teachers, ‘When can I go to ‘that’ school (pointing to the building where their non-disabled siblings studied)?’. Disquiet prevailed. Many questions came to my mind day after day: Will children with and without disabilities ever study and play together? Will it always be the children who would have to make the accommodations and adaptations? Will school and community settings ever take the onus for children and align themselves to the everyday lives of ‘all’ children? It is more than two decades now and there seems to be light at the end of the tunnel towards realising the vision of inclusiveness.

The wellness of young children is a critical building block for imagining an inclusive and peaceful society. Family, peers, school, media and internet, communities and government policies play a critical role in the physical, cognitive, socio-emotional and moral development of children. Varying contexts of development have led to a diversity of experiences among children. The basics of health, nutrition, safety and care have been compromised for several young children. Exclusion and violence have pushed them to the margins, even as some emerge agentic and resilient. In response to the diverse childhood experiences, the last three decades have seen a host of children-related policies and initiatives. The

principles of universality, equality and obligation of the state, embedded in the Child Rights approach, with its many debates and contestations have been an important point of reference in articulating care, protection, survival and participation of children. Along with health and education, play has been recognised as a right for all children for it is in this ludic activity that children discover the depths of shared humanity, empathy, agency and freedom. Despite facilitative policy contexts that aim to promote the social inclusion of children, many continue to be deprived of play.

This article will discuss the significance of play, with specific reference to the inclusion of children with disabilities. The first section will examine the benefits and barriers to inclusive play in school and community spaces. The second section will briefly outline the policy contexts in India and examine some of the efforts towards inclusive play in community playgrounds in India. Finally, the essay will draw out some broad principles to nurture inclusive play in school settings in India and call for collective action among the actors associated with the lives of children with disabilities. The article will use the definition of disability as proposed by the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPWD), (GoI 2016): Person with disability means a person with long term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment which, in interaction with barriers, hinders their full and effective participation in society equally with others.

What is inclusive play?

Play is a valuable and enjoyable activity. It should be fun, passionate, spontaneous, self-initiated and purposeless and a process through which children learn without being taught (Piaget, 2007). This articulation renders a view of play for the ‘sake of play’ which is usually the reason why children engage in play. Referring to play as an explanation of childhood, Besio (2017) observes, ‘The time a child devotes to it, the intensity of his or her concentration while playing, the absoluteness of the emotions that this activity visibly stimulates,

the flexibility it demonstrates in changing according to the variation in ages, environmental conditions, companions and constraints, the stability with which it occurs in every geographical area, in every era and every culture, all these features have given play a special status in this unique period of human life called childhood (emphasis in original).’ Play is thus seen as co-evolving with the child and shaped by the child’s ecologies of development, including the geographies, histories and culture within which the child is located. Play also unfolds a series of developmental changes that favour the health and well-being of children. From being a source of pleasure and exploration beginning within the walls of the family to community playgrounds or parks, play also finds its way as a mediating tool for learning in educational and developmental intervention settings, to achieve certain purposes.

Like all children, children with disabilities share their feelings, intentions, desires and views and enjoy playing. Research confirms that for children with disabilities, play is an important way in which they make friends (Jeanes and Maggie, 2012). For many of these children in India, their home- or school-based play are the only contexts for play. There are very few parks and playgrounds where children with disabilities can be found playing. Most schools and community play spaces (parks and public playgrounds) are often designed from the perspective of those without disabilities. Inaccessible structures of playgrounds, lack of trained staff to oversee the play, absence of allocation of free play time for children, resistance from children themselves and substitution of therapy sessions in place of play are some of the common challenges in special schools that render almost no access to play spaces for children with disability.

These limitations to children’s play seem to be rooted in several reasons: First, environment-related factors: design of spaces, toys, materials, play equipment may not be accessible or inclusive. Second, societal factors that include assumptions and beliefs of parents, other significant adults, teachers, peers and policymakers about what children with disability can or cannot do in general, and specifically, at play. Third, children-related factors, which may include the inability to play on their own or initiate play, fatigue, difficulties

in communicating with peers, among others, may emerge from impairments to the body structures and functions. Finally, the competence and abilities of parents, teachers and other non-teaching staff in schools to engage with children with disabilities. In other words, accessibility to play does not seem to be a function of mere design or layout but lies in the complex matrix of social interplay and relationships that exist among the various participants associated with the play of young ones. Given that there are a variety of disabilities and associated subjective experiences, it may be challenging to develop a truly inclusive play space. Reaching that level requires tremendous work but given the positive effects of inclusive play, all efforts need to be made towards it.

Inclusive play may be defined as play amongst children with varied abilities. It is about creating places where individuals with and without disability are able to engage in play together allowing barriers to be bridged and contact and social acceptance to be established (Jeanes and Magee, 2012). Three important characterisations emerge: First, it refers to processes of emerging social relationships embedded in particular settings (educational or community or family) based on the philosophical belief that all children with and without disabilities, have the right and need to play together. Second, it places responsibility on the societal actors to create spaces for interaction to ensure that the play settings embrace children of varied backgrounds and abilities, where children are also invited to participate fully in the proceedings of the play spaces. Third, it brings to the fore outcomes of such a social relationship. It signals the benefit of communication and connectedness which are the building blocks of democratic spaces and social inclusion, aimed at the well-being of children.

Casey (2010) argues for inclusive play spaces as it influences children, families, schools and community at large in positive ways. For children, it conveys a message that there are similarities and differences among people, and a sense of being included and supported (peers are a particular source of motivation, inspiration curiosity and stimulation). For families, an acceptance of multiple perspectives and improving the quality of life through communicating with other families. For schools and the community, a sense of cohesion

and connectedness. In fact, through such a process of social inclusion of children with disabilities, play can be viewed for its own sake or playfulness rather than effective means to reach educational, behavioural, developmental objectives (Besio, 2017), which is often the focus for children with disabilities.

Efforts towards inclusive play

Policy interventions

According to the 2011 Census, there are 26, 810, 557 persons with disabilities in India constituting 2.21 percent of the country's population. The total number of children with disabilities (in the 0-19 years age group) is 7,864,636. Further, only 61 percent of children with disabilities aged between 5 and 19 years were attending an educational institution (Census of India, 2011). Including children with disabilities in education and other spheres of life has been a topic of recurring importance in policies and legal frameworks in India. International policies have also informed the formulation of nation-level efforts in the last three decades. The Convention on the Rights of the Child recognise the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life (Article 31; United Nations, 1989). The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities emphasised that children with disabilities have equal access with other children to participate in play, recreation, leisure and sporting activities, including those activities in the school system. (Article 30, clause 5d; United Nations, 2006). Both these have been ratified by India.

A game-changer was the Right to Free and Compulsory Education (Amendment) Act (Gol 2012), which brought all categories of children with disabilities into the folds of the regular schools by ensuring free and compulsory education. The RPWD Act clearly directs the state governments to make schools accessible and offer inclusive participation in sports and recreational activities. Further, Chapter 1 (Section 2 (ze)) emphasises the idea of universal design. It states: the design of products, environments, programmes and services to be usable by all people to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialisation. *Universal Design Learning* (UDL) principles have been used in several countries for inclusive pedagogical practices and for designing inclusive

play spaces for children. The *Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan*, initiated in 2018, clearly specifies inclusion as a guiding principle. Chapter 4 of the Framework document, *Inclusion of Children with Special Needs in Education*, states the need to: 'to enable all children and young persons with disabilities to have access to inclusive education and improve their enrolment, retention and achievement in the general education system' (Gol, 2018, p. 61). Another objective states the removal of architectural barriers in schools so that students with disabilities have access to classrooms, laboratories, libraries and toilets in the school. But playgrounds have not been included and play does not find a mention in this chapter. Even in the recent comprehensive UNESCO (2018) Report on the State of Disabilities in India, there is neither a mention of sports or recreation nor of play or playgrounds in the important chapters on barriers to inclusive education and the recommendations nor has play been deliberated as a strategy for inclusive education, given the growing recognition in research on the importance of play in education in the pre-school and primary years.

Such contradictions seem to be common in many policy documents. Play as one of the strategies for classroom practice in foundational and preparatory stages has been suggested in the National Policy on Education (2020). In para 6.10, it states, 'Children with disabilities will be enabled to fully participate in the regular schooling process from the foundational stage to higher education'. In accordance with the NEP (2020), SARTHAQ (Students' and Teachers' Holistic Advancement through Quality Education), the implementation framework states that all states/UTs will undertake mapping of requirements of students with disabilities for participating fully in school education and this will include mapping of arts, sports and vocational education. It also highlights the strengthening of the existing *bal-bhavans* for play-related activities and integrating them into the school cluster. If implemented well, this is an excellent opportunity for bringing children with and without disabilities together. Play and education are closely related, and since children's rights are interdependent and indivisible, more concerted efforts at the provisioning of play for all will need to assume high importance.

Interventions led by civil society

Alongside these policy interventions, India has a long history of civil society organisations working towards the inclusion of children with disabilities in public places. Parents associations have

spearheaded many movements and initiatives. One such pioneering effort is by *Kilikili*, an NGO based in Bengaluru. *Kilikili* aims at developing inclusive public play spaces in Bengaluru, that would enable children with disabilities to secure their right to play alongside children without disabilities in these spaces. To accomplish this task, *Kilikili* brings together two sets of stakeholders – the local municipal corporation as one and parents, volunteers, disability rights organisations, citizen's groups, resident's associations, special and regular schools as the other. They have so far created eight inclusive play spaces in six cities, of which three are in Bengaluru. These inclusive play spaces have been used to organise weekly events by volunteer groups that bring together children with and without disabilities. They have developed a set of guidelines to be followed while developing an inclusive play space. They have designed a fairly exhaustive manual that highlights the developmental importance of each play equipment along with the specification for the development of the product. The manual was developed in consultation with children and their parents about their view of play spaces. One of the most heartening aspects of the work, according to Mrs Kavitha Krishnamoorthy (in a telephonic conversation with the author), has been the shift in the attitudes of the government officials with whom they work in different districts. Government functionaries are keen to promote more inclusive spaces and they reach out on their own to the *Kilikili* group, without any persuasion. In a country where attitudes of infantilising, medicalising, pathologising, paternalising and remediation of children with disabilities are widespread, an explicit social acceptance of the state actors associated with the lives of children is indeed an indicator of slight progress towards social inclusion.

Given the mandates of inclusive schooling, existing schools may need to re-design their school playgrounds and classroom play settings in order to ensure the full participation of all children. New schools will need to be designed for inclusion at the initial stages itself. A preliminary analysis of the guidelines and manual developed by *Kilikili* for public playgrounds offers several lessons for creating inclusive play in the school settings. These include: First, having a shared vision of the values embedded in inclusion – reaffirming equity, access for varied abilities to thrive, develop capacities of independence and promote trust, empathy and

compassion amongst 'all' in the school, which is a child-adult collective. Second, school principals and teachers need to understand the importance of socio-spatial inclusion and re-organise their school practices to improve the social and educational experiences of all children. Third, schools may use the UDL framework, which rests on the principles of planning for multiple means of engagement, action and expression, and of representation to ensure all learners learn within their socio-economic and cultural contexts. Fourth, schools to institutionalise accessibility and inclusiveness in all processes related to play. Fifth, encourage collaboration with community members and parents to nurture positive attitudes and sustain the vision of inclusion. Finally, schools need to include the voices and participation of children in designing the spaces that matter to them the most.

Looking ahead

India has come a long way in its pursuit of ensuring quality life and participation of children with disabilities. Inclusion as an educational practice is not formulaic. It responds to the contexts, culture and constraints of a particular setting. It is only in the willingness and persistence of collective action that inclusion can move out of the cloistered spaces of rhetoric. Some suggestions are offered at the level of policy, public awareness and engagement, schools, research, children and parent associations. In most schools in India, designing a playground is an after-thought and a box to tick on the infrastructure parameters. However, it is clear from the preceding analysis that play spaces involve an interplay between the space, material, affect and social relationships. Hence, there is a need to develop guidelines for setting up inclusive play spaces aimed at socio-spatial inclusion. There are guidelines provided by the Government of India for setting up exclusive sporting centres for people with disabilities. A checklist, *Making Schools Accessible to Children with Disabilities*, has also been prepared jointly by UNICEF, *Samarthyam* and the Accessible India Campaign in 2016. Partnerships with organisations, such as *Kilikili* and *Gudgudee* that have the experience in setting up inclusive play spaces, could facilitate current and new schools in designing these. These organisations can also be engaged to train concerned state government officials in setting up such play spaces. Dissemination of the work of these organisations will also help replicate the work.

Public awareness and engagement about inclusion and inclusive play are imperative for bringing about changes in the attitudes of people. There are widespread assumptions that children with disabilities cannot play and need one-on-one support. These stereotypes are barriers to inclusion. In this context, print and digital media can present realistic portrayals of interactions between children with and without disabilities in play and school spaces and narrow the barriers to social participation through such efforts.

Participation of children in the design of inclusive play spaces is also critical. All actors associated with the design of inclusive play spaces must ensure that children's perspectives inform the design of their programmes and policies. Children with and without disabilities must also be encouraged to participate in awareness-raising campaigns. Children must play a significant role in the development of a strategy for inclusive play spaces in and around the school. Importantly, pre-service and in-service teachers, school principals and government functionaries associated with the school system need to be

educated about the importance of play in child development, education and the significance of inclusive play in education and social transformation. In many schools, play is taken out of the timetable and substituted for a school subject in order to 'complete syllabus'. For children with disabilities, free play time is often taken away for therapy or rehabilitation. Attitudes towards playtime as a pastime or a waste of time requires re-examination in school contexts. Research on the above-mentioned issues is also critical.

Collective action for advancing commitment towards an inclusive and peaceful society needs to be done with a sense of urgency. A befitting remark by Gulzar, poet-lyricist in the book *Ek Koshish: The Story of Arushi* (Mehta, 2020) encapsulates the determination required. The book captures the thirty-year journey of Arushi, a Bhopal-based organisation that works with children with disabilities. Gulzar observes, '*Do it now, while it is in your hands, for if it does not happen now, it may not happen for the next fifty years; every person who comes after, will think back, wonder why you did not do it and hesitate to take a decision; it will become a contentious issue.*' (p61) It is in the here and now that play for all can be realised.

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Rajashree Srinivasan is Professor, School of Education, Azim Premji University, Bengaluru. Her interests lie in teacher education and child development. She may be contacted at rajashree@apu.edu.in