Understanding the play experiences of children with protected characteristics

Abridged report

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LUDICOOLOGY

advice, research and training for all concerned with children’s play
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Introduction

This abridged research report looks at the findings from a small-scale research project investigating the play experiences of children with particular protected characteristics in Merthyr Tydfil, Wales. The research was commissioned as a part of Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council’s commitment to developing their understanding of the sufficiency of opportunities for play amongst various groups of children, so that their response to all children’s right to play can be more effective. The confident, wise and often brave contributions of the children that gave their time and knowledge, provide joyful examples of that which we would want for all children, as well as upsetting examples of that which we would wish for no one.

The Welsh Play Sufficiency Duty (Welsh Government, 2014)\(^1\) recognises that certain groups of children may experience different challenges in accessing their right to play as a result of their particular protected characteristics. Matter B of the Welsh Play Sufficiency Duty requires local authorities to develop an understanding of how they might best provide for a diverse range of children and childhood experiences. This research project was designed to capture examples of experiences above and beyond the general experiences of children captured in Merthyr Tydfil’s previous play sufficiency research and to address the lack of research evidence about the play needs and preferences, opportunities and experiences of particular groups of children.

Due to multiple constraining parameters, it was not possible to include children spanning all the various identified protected characteristics. This research investigated the play experiences of:

- Children engaged in Barnardos’ service for Young Carers
- Children from the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) communities who all attended the same secondary school
- Children for whom English is an additional language (EAL), who were being supported by the local authority’s EAL service
- Children attending the local authority’s pupil referral unit
- Children living in a rurally isolated community

This research took a qualitative approach working with small groups consisting of the right participants, ensuring an intensity of detail and generating examples that accumulate across the research project. Each group’s contribution develops and extends understandings of issues specific to them and, taken together, more generally to those with protected characteristics.

Groups of children with specific characteristics were identified for participation by the local authority. Where possible, for purposes of comparability, those participating were from years five to seven in school (approximately 9 to 12 years of age), similar to those who participated in Merthyr Tydfil’s previous play sufficiency assessments, however there were anomalies. Children from the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities and two of the group of children educated other than at school were older.

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We used the same ecological systems approach as we had in Merthyr Tydfil’s 2019 Play Sufficiency Assessment, considering the affordances for play presented by the home/family environment, and the child’s local neighbourhood, and opportunities available more widely across the county borough (although the latter are not a feature of this paper). At each level of analysis, the following three lines of enquiry were investigated to establish how physical and social factors coalesced to affect children’s day-to-day play experiences:

- Time - how often and how much time children spend playing
- Space - within children’s locality, its accessibility for children and the ‘play value’ of that space
- Attitudes - of children, parents, other residents and people whose work impacts on children

These lines of enquiry were explored using an adapted version of Kyttä’s (2004)² fields of action model to consider how different conditions affect children’s ability to actualise (make real use of) potential possibilities for play. A constrained field (red) refers to time, space or attitudes that prevent children from accessing opportunities for self-directed action (i.e., play); promoted fields (amber) are those that regulate children’s action (they promote particular forms of behaviour), and free fields (green) are those that allow for children’s free action (play).

A range of creative mapping techniques was used in small group workshops alongside discussions to explore children’s opportunities for and experiences of play, and issues affecting opportunities to play. Finally, we interviewed the deputy director of Play Wales and a lead practitioner for each group of children. The expertise, close working relationships, embodied knowledge and contextual understanding of these practitioners compliment the rich evidence provided by the children.

This research was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Data for four out of five of the groups were gathered before the UK Lockdown late in March 2020. Children who are also young carers completed their participation in the autumn of 2020 when these children took part in an online focus group rather than the face-to-face workshop. These children had experienced playing out over the summer of 2020, but it is impossible to know what effect the prolonged restrictions earlier in the year have on the data. However, this group of children were no less forthcoming in their contributions and no less clear in their recollections than had been any of the other groups.

What was most striking and on regular occasions emotive, was each group’s story and their collective expression of experience. Maintaining each group’s narrative and the intensity of their individual and collective examples is important to us. Rather than discussing each group’s experiences together against aspects they had in common, we will instead present each group’s experiences as a whole, organised around those common aspects. We hope presenting the research in this way best honours their contribution.

There were significant differences in the experiences of play across the different groups. One group in particular, evidencing what can only be described as the best example of play sufficiency we have ever found in our research. As such the findings from that group are presented first to give the reader an appreciation of what play sufficiency might be and, by way of an exemplar, to which the following groups' experiences can be compared.

Play in school

Boys identified break and lunchtime in school as green (a field of free action supportive of their play), whereas the majority of girls identified them as red or amber (fields of action either where many choices are constrained or where particular choices are promoted). Break times for this group of children appear to present significantly improved opportunities for boy’s play in comparison to girls, a finding recurrent in much research on school playtimes.

The majority of children from this, and the following four groups, identify lesson time as red. There are exceptions and for the ruraly isolated children, these included P.E., routinely identified as amber, and ‘Funky Friday’, a time given over to children’s choice of activity, again described as amber because children still identified there were constraints on what they could do. These examples illustrate how small attitudinal shifts and the relaxing of particular constraints by adults is recognised and valued by children and does contribute to their overall experience of play sufficiency.

Playing close to home and in the local area

All the children in this group had the freedom of movement to access multiple spaces for play either close to home or in their local area. The spaces they played were a mixture of formally designated spaces, streets, other public places and natural wilderness areas. The majority of children could identify at least ten different places by name, with the highest number of spaces identified being 16. Some of the spaces children identified included: the rec, bottom park, top
park, top shop, top of the village, bog’s pond, Taff’s field, the cricket field, the footy pitch, the haunted house, the steps, the bars, lion’s rock, the forest, sandy bay and the river. The children’s ability to name the areas they play suggests a strong and long-lived community play culture, where even simple features like some steps with handrails hold significant cultural value as places for meeting up and playing.

The strength of this play culture was born out in conversations with teachers who could also name the places children played and many of whom could recall having played there themselves. Teachers told us that many people here know one another and look out for each other, children play out from an early age so come to know their community and the people in it well.

Only one child told us they couldn’t play independently in all the places they would like. This child was fond of playing at a farm but could only go accompanied by an adult and this just wasn’t always possible. All the other children reported being allowed to play in all the places they liked to. Both boys and girls appeared to be playing in a similar number of spaces and enjoying similar levels of freedom of movement, outside of school.

One child identified three spaces in the local area where they played with adult accompaniment. This child wasn’t suggesting they would like to play in these places independently but couldn’t, rather they were new to the community and were not yet confident to go unaccompanied. Equally this child anticipated that in the not-too-distant future they would be using these spaces independently and with friends.

References to playing at home were limited to individual mentions of homes and garden (if available), in sharp contrast to some of the following groups that often-listed multiple spaces within their homes and gardens when asked about where they play. Furthermore, no children in this group when asked about where they play, identified screen-based activity, again in significant contrast to some of the following groups discussed. Finally, it is interesting to note that only one child identified playing at a friend’s house, perhaps this is another reflection of a strong culture of playing out and again, is in contrast to the experiences of some of the other groups discussed throughout the report.

**Time for play**

Children in this group played out regularly, as a minimum, three days a week, with the majority reporting five to seven times a week. All children played out at the weekends and had mostly free (green) time. Out of school sport activities (most often rugby) were identified as amber (so not the same as playing out) and chores were carried out by the majority of children, mostly twice a week, but these happen alongside playing out. Only in one case were these activities substantial enough in duration and number to significantly reduce time for playing out. One child attended eight structured activities across five weekdays plus a rugby game on Sundays, this child told us they struggled integrating with other children outside of school.

All of these children identified watching TV, YouTube, playing on phones or computer games most days but this was usually in addition to playing out with friends, not instead of. Whilst these children did spend some of their time everyday playing on electronic devices, they did not identify them when asked about where they play. Playing out represents a significant proportion of these children’s everyday lives.
People’s attitudes and associated issues influencing play

This group could both identify a range of different people and issues influencing their play and describe how. Boys reported that teachers encouraged playing out. However, both girls and boys also reported that teachers can constrain play by banning games or preventing access to space in school. Girls and boys also identified a lack of sufficient space in school, which meant football often dominated the space available.

Children did report sometimes not being allowed out to play by parents but more generally talked about their parents encouraging playing out. Neither boys nor girls identified any problems with older children/teenagers, strangers or ‘druggies’ - children knew who these people were but were able to avoid them. Any other constraints imposed by other people were occasional and had no perceived detrimental effect on their opportunities for play. However, playing was not without its challenges. Girls from this group reported experiencing issues with other children, particularly in terms of falling out with friends and harassment via social media/phones. Boys did not report such concerns, but they did identify the speed of traffic as a problem and traffic calming measures as a potential improvement. Litter, broken glass, dog poo, overgrown brambles, as well as old and rusty play equipment were identified as significant problems by both girls and boys. The girls also asked for a greater range of equipment in their local play areas, shelter from the rain, a tree swing and more paths through ‘the forest’.
Play in the PRU

Unfortunately, by quirk of circumstance the group of children at the PRU consisted of only boys, so no comparison between boys’ and girls’ experiences of play is possible. Furthermore, as identified before, this group of children consists of those attending primary and secondary PRUs. Lessons in the PRU were always identified as red. There are comparisons with children living in a rural isolated community on the subject of school breaks and lunchtimes. Break times were more often green or amber and dinner times more often amber or red. Interestingly, children from this group reported that they had to earn points in lesson time to be rewarded with play time. This may in some way explain the diversity of experience and perception of break times. For this group, break times were often limited to singular activities, including playing cards, air hockey or using an iPad; activities offering little real dynamism or change from the sedentary classroom experience. The children we worked with didn’t take part in any formal out of school activities.

The lead practitioner recognised that the interconnected and complex issues often present with children attending PRU’s means they can benefit from play, its turn taking, negotiation, compromise, sequencing and so on, and confirmed that PRU staff often use play and games to work with these children.

Whilst play is valued for children attending the PRU, the play offer (in terms of spaces and resources) at the primary and secondary PRU was not comparable with that which children would get at many traditional schools. Furthermore, the outside space at the secondary PRU is in close proximity to neighbouring housing, which causes tensions with neighbours (from noise, balls going...
over the fence etc). Additionally, the limited space increases tensions between younger secondary children, whose play may be more akin to that of primary aged children, and older secondary children who want to use space differently. These groups are then competing over limited space and resource.

Finally, in many cases these children are educated outside of the community in which they live, their friendship networks are largely based in school. When these children return to their homes it is often in communities with which they have little contact. As the lead practitioner suggested, school therefore “is the place where this (play) can really happen for them”.

**Playing close to home and in the local area**

Most of the children reported having the freedom of movement enabling access to four or five spaces to play, far fewer than children from the rurally isolated community. A few of the children accessed multiple formal spaces for play, these children either lived in close proximity to the spaces they played or had a freedom of movement that created a very extended ‘local area’. Mostly, these children identified only one space formally designated for play that they were accessing regularly. Other spaces children identified were predominantly a mix of streets, shops, the town centre, a retail park, areas of public open space and friends’ houses. There are dissimilarities here with children from the rurally isolated community who, whilst identifying playing in the street and at the shops could also name several formal spaces for play, as well as multiple natural wilderness areas and spaces for leisure and recreation that they used for playing.

A few of the children from this group reported having no spaces they played outside the home, either close to home or in their local area. These children did not play out anywhere independently of adult accompaniment, as such they are experiencing highly constrained opportunities for play. These children reported having been subject to significant issues of bullying in their neighbourhoods, which has resulted in them withdrawing from playing out or being stopped from playing out by their parents/guardians. These children were being supported to some degree by adults, either in the form of support services or by their parents/guardians to access spaces for playing. However, these mostly comprise of ‘pay for play’ venues and/or visits to places outside of their immediate neighbourhoods.

Whilst the majority of children in this group were playing out to some degree, they could also identify particular places that they were not allowed to go as a direct result of particular incidents. Most of the children in this group were experiencing some form of considerable constraint on their opportunities for play.

When asked about the spaces where they played, all these children reported playing at home, with some identifying different rooms within their homes. All children, with the exception of one, reported screen-based activities, including gaming and use of social media platforms, with many of the children identifying multiple platforms, games and consoles/devices. For many of these children, the majority of their play experiences are confined to their homes and/or alternative virtual worlds provided by screen-based activities, and so that is what they draw upon when asked about the places where they play. In contrast, children from the rurally isolated community made no mention of screen-based activity in response to questions about where they played.
Time for play

 Whilst most children in this group identified spaces where they could play, only one child actually identified ‘playing out’ when discussing what they did with their free time, despite all children reporting having mostly free (green) time after school and weekends. Half the children identified no independent playing out through the week at all. Others identified spending some time hanging out in town, riding around streets or going to a youth club when available. Very little of the time these children have for play, in or out of school, actually consists of quality play experiences and these children are heavily reliant on electronic devices for entertainment.

 This reliance on electronic entertainment was confirmed by the lead practitioner who said that there was a big emphasis on electronic devices and gaming amongst children at the PRU, which often spilled over into school:

 “That’s their (virtual) world. They live online, doing little else that is interactive with other children”.

 For some parents of these children, it may be a case of digital babysitting. Some of these children can be quite challenging or may have been involved in incidents that make parents more inclined to keep them in, so if children are at home, engaging in screen-based activities, at least they are not out being seen to cause trouble. There was also a suggestion that these practices may be being encouraged by other support services and as such parents may think they are doing the right thing, being good parents!

 People’s attitudes and associated issues influencing play

 This aspect was a real focus area for children at the PRU. Like the children in the rurally isolated community, children in this group identified that parents sometimes constrained their play in the home environment and there was some acknowledgement that teachers, support workers and youth workers can equally constrain or support play. For children from the rural community these issues were incidental to what was otherwise reported to be very good experiences of play. For children at the PRU, these issues were having a much greater impact on their ability to access and enjoy their play.

 Two children reported problems with their neighbours that had become so serious they felt they couldn’t play out on the street outside their homes. Two children identified another child in the same school setting who significantly constrained their opportunities for play. A further two children identified incidents of bullying so serious that they no longer played out at all. It is also likely that several of these children have had incidents at youth/community provision which mean they are no longer welcome to attend.

 The lead practitioner told us that children attending PRU’s can experience issues with language and communication as well as bullying, each of which can impact their confidence and ability to integrate and find play mates. Developmental capability differences can result in play that may be more aligned with that of younger children, resulting in difficulties when playing with children from their peer group. Through lack of opportunity, children may not have developed effective play skills and may find difficulty in playing with others, resulting in children being reprimanded by staff where play occurs in adult supervised settings.
Children with English as an additional language (EAL)

Play in school

All but one child in this group identified all lessons as red. Half the children identified lunchtime as red or amber, again supporting the notion that lunchtime break is a time contested by other demands. Breaktime in comparison was usually identified as green, except for the ‘daily mile’ or having to stay in to complete work, both of which were correspondingly identified as amber or red time.

This group of children were brought together from various different primary schools, attending the centre on a weekly basis for English language education. It was clear that children valued this time together and insights provided by the lead practitioner suggested this was an important time for their play. As the lead practitioner suggested, all these children are different and when they come together at the centre, that unites them. Many of the inhibitions and defences they may occupy in their individual schools are for a time forgotten. Many of the children have histories that in one way or another have influenced their development, as such they can often be markedly different from their peers against any normative measure of child development. Playing together at the centre, even though the space and resources are seriously limited, provides benefits for their wellbeing but is equally valuable for rest and recuperation from the challenge of learning a new language.

“At the centre they can really flourish because its free from a lot of other issues”
Playing close to home and in the local area

Very few children in this group reported having the freedom of movement to access opportunities independently while playing out. Some of these children were only accessing one space for play, others between two and a maximum of five. The spaces these children play outside the home, mostly when accompanied by an adult, included the shops, playing in the street, a very local park or green space. Where these children were accessing space for play independently of adults, they were very close to home, indicating a much-reduced ranging distance and access to far fewer spaces than children from the rurally isolated community and some of the children attending the PRU. One child, other than playing in the home, reported playing nowhere other than an aunt’s house when on family visits.

The lead practitioner told us it’s very likely these children’s parents do shift work, requiring informal childcare from other family members, resulting in those acting in loco parentis exercising tighter constraints on children’s freedoms (they wouldn’t want anything happening to the child when in their care). Equally, that care may take place in an area where the child/children have little local knowledge and/or few if any friendship networks. Playing out is much less attractive when you don’t know the area and have few friends to play out with.

When asked about where they play, children from this group routinely identified multiple spaces in the home indicating an acute focus on the home environment as a place for play. Children rarely reported spaces close to their home or in their local area that they would like to play but couldn’t, indicating a lack of local knowledge of their immediate environment rather than any constraints applied by parents/guardians. There was little mention of screen-based activity. Despite the predominantly low number of spaces these children accessed independently of adults, it was still apparent that boys identified more spaces they played than did girls.

Time for play

After school, time was mostly reported as green, mostly this group of children have time available to freely choose what they do. However, only one child in this group, when asked about what they did with their time, reported anything associated with playing out through the week. The vast majority of children identified having mostly green time at weekends, but again, rarely did they identify playing out during this time. Very little of the time these children have for play, in or out of school, is used for playing out or anything other than singular playground activities e.g., football.

People’s attitudes and associated issues influencing play

Often children in this group that reported mostly playing inside did so because other children had been mean about the way they play, their language or the way they speak, or their country of origin. The lead practitioner suggested it is likely that parents and carers also believe their children will be subject to such attitudes and behaviours and this may explain the reduced freedoms these children experience. Furthermore, there are cultural variations in respect of parenting and childcare amongst the groups who have English as an additional language. However, it is most likely that any cultural differences affecting the permission and time children have for playing out are exaggerated because of a lack of local knowledge, friendship networks and community attachments.
An important point to note here is that for reasons relating to access within research time constraints, the group of children we were able to research with from the GRT community were all of secondary school age, with boys from years seven and eight and girls from years eight and ten. This makes comparison with other groups slightly more difficult given we would expect freedom of movement to increase with age and children’s play preferences change over time. These children’s experiences still have much to offer though in terms of the insights they provide and contributions from the lead practitioner interview spoke to some degree of the experiences of younger children.

**Play in school**

The majority of this group of children identified all lessons as red, except Thursdays when they attend a session specifically for children from the GRT community which was identified as green/amber. Children recognised and enjoyed the increased choice and freedom of expression they had during these sessions. In contrast to all other groups in this research, a majority of this group identified break times in school as either amber or red. Break times for these children were a time where challenges of integration and marginalisation with/from the school population emerge as well as an absence of anything to do/play.

**Playing close to home and in the local area**

All children in this group had the freedom of movement that enabled them to access multiple spaces for playing and hanging out. Boys, irrespective of age, identified accessing more spaces
than girls, with boys identifying between five and seven spaces, whilst girls reported three to five spaces. Of the spaces children identified for playing, never was more than one a formally designated play space. Despite references to parental constraints on the places children were allowed to play, none of the children identified places they would like to go that they couldn’t or spaces they only go with adult accompaniment.

Children said that they avoided formal playgrounds, only using the ‘rubbish one no one goes to’, because they get treated badly at the nice ones that everyone else uses, with one exception, the skate park in town where they find the people who use that space to be more accepting.

When asked about spaces for play, children routinely identified multiple places in the home and garden (where available), indicating a substantial focus on playing in the home. Little reference to screen time activities was mentioned in response to questions about where children played. Outside of their homes, the spaces that these children identified for play included informal green spaces, local streets, the town centre, shops, food outlets, the retail park, and ‘pay for play/recreation’ venues such as the cinema and swimming. In addition, a significant emphasis was placed on visiting and playing on the local Traveller site, despite only one of the children living there. This site was a place children felt safe and welcome, where they knew everybody and could meet up with friends.

The lead practitioner also spoke of the strong play culture at the Traveller site. They told us that most children who live on the site play out regularly around their homes from a young age. The caravans are organised around a green area in a horseshoe shape that supports informal supervision. Whilst there is no formal play equipment on site, it is surrounded by a grassed mounded verge with trees which provide opportunities for play, the road into the site also provides a hard standing for things like football or bike riding, and there’s a rope swing that was erected some time ago by a team of playworkers who used to visit the site. However, the site is nestled between a dual carriageway with no pavement access. It is likely that children could be aged eleven before being perceived capable enough of accessing or entering the site independently and safely, meaning that younger children’s access on or off the site is reliant on adult accompaniment.

**Time for play**

None of the children identified taking part in any school based, out of school activities. All the girls and one boy identified carrying out daily chores after school, which they coloured amber or red. The lead practitioner for this group told us that families from the GRT community tend to ‘hold strong Victorian values’, with an emphasis on community education where girls learn housework from mothers and boys learn a trade from fathers. This can result in significant gender differences between what girls and boys are expected to do with their time.

All children identified green time after school or at evenings and weekends, with a significant majority identifying regular time for playing or hanging out with friends throughout the week. One child from this group, who lived in a community where there is a regular youth club, reported having accessed it when open and the lead practitioner reported some of the older children had attended discos at a community centre that neighbours the local Traveller site. Children also told us they enjoyed activities at the community centre on the Traveller site, but this wasn’t open at the time the research was conducted.
People’s attitudes and associated issues influencing play

More so than any other group in this study, children from the GRT community identified the attitudes and actions of other people as a significant constraining factor in their play and this appeared to be more of an issue for girls than boys. Girls told us that there were ‘no kind people in school’ and that ‘all teachers are horrible’, with the exception of the GRT support worker ‘she understands and listens to us’, boys agreed saying this person ‘helps with everything’. Other people that both girls and boys identified as supporting their play included parents, other family members and the caretaker at the local Traveller site.

Girls only identified friends from within the GRT community and cousins as other children who supported their play because they were the only children they could trust and that they didn’t feel shy around them. Girls in this group talked about ‘gorgers’, referring to other people outside of the GRT community, suggesting these other people were untrustworthy, ‘they stab you in the back’, they are insulting and ‘mock our language’. The boys also identified bullies that could make them feel bad.

The lead practitioner explained that it was common for people from the GRT community to experience hate crime from people outside of the GRT community. These experiences can result in a mistrust, leading to children not having friends outside the GRT community. Both girls and boys identified the need for dedicated provision for children from the GRT community.
Children that are also young carers

![Photo by Aedrian on Unsplash](image)

Play in school

For the young carers, school break times were either amber or green. Those rating break/play times amber consisted only of girls who recognised there was more freedom than during lesson time but equally didn’t feel free to play in all the ways they wanted to, pointing out that other people’s behaviour stopped them from doing what they wanted. The group rating break/play times as green felt they did have a sufficient degree of choice and control over their play. One member of this group, currently home educated, gave break/play times in school a red rating based on the fact she couldn’t remember break times being particularly good. Girls involved in this research, were more likely across all groups to identify not being able to do the things they would prefer during school break times, as well as identifying issues with the constraining behaviours of other people.

According to the lead practitioner, young carers can miss time in school often as a result of the various pressures and responsibilities associated with their caring roles and other health, poverty or mobility inequalities. Despite this, it is still likely that school, together with the projects run by Barnardo’s (described in more detail below), provide one of the few opportunities they have for playing with other children.
Time and space for playing close to home and in the local area

It is important to note at this point that the workshop with children that are also young carers was carried out online and under slightly tighter time constraints than the face-to-face workshops with other groups. We adapted the workshop to enable as much contribution from children as possible by combining some of the questions. As a result, the issue of ‘time for play’ is considered within this section rather than independently.

The play experiences of this group compare, more so than any other, with the experiences of the children for whom English is an additional language. For the majority of this group there was a strong emphasis on playing at home, almost always an indication of lower rates of playing out in local community spaces with friends. Furthermore, children in this group also reported more limited time spent playing.

The majority of these children did talk about playing out at least once or twice a week, with a small minority reporting playing out most days, when the weather was fine. However, for these children playing out predominantly consisted of playing in gardens, either their own or at a friend's house, the streets directly outside their homes or a space directly adjacent to their homes. Essentially, the spaces for play these children frequent are in extremely close proximity to their homes. Only one child, a boy, described having play experiences comparable with other groups experiencing more normative play lives, both in respect of his ranging distance and the number of spaces he could access for play.

The lead practitioner’s work includes carrying out monthly checks with families, these include talking about children’s opportunities for play and they confirmed that for many young carers playing out is rare. It is often the case that parents, as a result of their situation (for example poor health or limited mobility), have difficulties checking in on their children or going out to call them back in if they are out playing. As a consequence, they are more likely to keep children in or at least very close to home.

Whilst most of this group of children experience the majority of their play at home or in very close proximity to their homes, unlike the EAL group, they do for the most part evidence local knowledge of their neighbourhoods and the potential spaces for playing. Many of them can recall having played in these spaces even though that might be extremely irregularly. The children identified various green or wilderness areas suitable for playing, interstitial spaces in and amongst housing, car parks and roundabouts, as well as designated parks and play areas. These spaces were described as being sufficiently close to homes to be well within the permissible ranging distance experienced by many other children.

When asked how many places they could play in, if/when they had the time and permission to do so, these children’s responses ranged from 5 to 15 spaces, yet no child could actually name more than 5. This is in sharp contrast to the children from the rurally isolated community who could readily name and describe multiple spaces where they played.

All the children from this group attend provision delivered by Barnardo’s. This centre-based provision provides various opportunities for play, art and craft, dance and drama, as well as other recreation and sports type activities. The children attend these sessions once every other week and all value it. This is one of the few opportunities children identified where they played or
socialised outside of their very immediate localities. According to the lead practitioner, this is also one of the few occasions when these children get to socialise and play with other people who share their lived experience and are supported by staff who have a deep understanding of their context. It’s important to note that open access youth club sessions run routinely in the same building, but these children usually only choose to attend the biweekly young carers’ session.

**People’s attitudes and associated issues influencing play**

The young carers had been very particular with their contribution to previous aspects of our focus group discussion, more so than any other group. It was common for other groups to casually report parents or carers getting in the way of their play, or for that matter other adults whose actions, behaviours or attitudes, in one way or another, restricted opportunities for play.

The young carer group was different. We draw the reader’s attention back to a sentence used earlier in this section: “*children in this group also report more limited time spent playing*”. We chose our words carefully as we believe did the children. We sensed that these children were well aware their lived experiences were different to that which might be considered ‘the norm’ and that they were quite deliberate not to disparage or diminish that which was the cause of their difference. Whilst other children in this study might quite liberally say that things like chores got in the way of playing, these children did not, instead they simply described more limited time for play.

It was only when asked whether there were particular issues associated with being a young carer, which influenced their play, that the children made reference to their particular family circumstances constraining their opportunities for play. One child, becoming spokesperson for the group, summed up what was being implied more generally:

> “sometimes having to care, can get in the way, I would rather care than play, that can be the case pretty much all the time, I get a little break from caring and I get to play but then I go and get on with caring again”.

About half the group agreed with this description, the other half didn’t want to comment, and we weren’t happy to push it any further.
Discussion of findings

Perhaps most significantly, in terms of the different children involved in this research (and ironically in respect of this particular groups’ protective characteristics), children from the rurally isolated community lived close to each other in the same community, making it easier for them to meet up outside of school without the need for formal arrangement or adult support. Whilst the community itself may be seen as isolated from other parts of the county borough, the children themselves are not isolated from one another. Equally, the spatial and psychological assets of this particular community are, for the most part, supportive of these children experiencing a sufficiency of opportunities for play.

The combination of three well located designated play areas, set within more natural surroundings, incorporating or adjacent to sport facilities, together with other incidental features throughout the community and areas of wilderness in close proximity to homes, all made accessible by a network of formal and informal footpaths and pavements, makes for a rich and varied web of opportunities for play. The location, layout and topography of the community results in relatively low traffic volumes and speed. This, together with a long history and culture of playing out and a strong sense of community security born out of people knowing each other, results in a culture of permissiveness, where children are encouraged to play out together.

There appears to be few issues constraining children’s freedom of movement or access to opportunities for play, low level tensions exist amongst peers and between children and adults, but these were never registered as concerning enough that they disrupt children’s opportunities for play. Here, children have a rich variety of play experiences, play out often and have much to talk about both in terms of their existing opportunities and things that get in the way or could be made better. The opposite is true of children who have limited and uninspiring opportunities. Over and above their recommendations for improved care and maintenance of parks, the single strongest issue that emerged was the possibility to improve school playtimes and the group for whom this would have the most dramatic improvement would be the girls, although from our experience when good school play improvement programmes are implemented everybody sees benefits.

There are some parallels between the experiences of children from the GRT community and children from the rurally isolated community, for example, the freedom to access spaces for play and the number of different spaces accessed. Nevertheless, children from the rurally isolated community still reported accessing more spaces and higher quality spaces for play, and the differences between the experiences of girls and boys was much less pronounced amongst the rurally isolated group. However, whilst children from the rurally isolated community may be geographically isolated, at least from the wider county borough (not each other), the children from the GRT community are socially and psychologically isolated from the rest of society. These children were reporting substantial issues with the attitudes and behaviours of other people that influenced their opportunities to play in significant ways.

There are improvements that can be made at the local Traveller site including the safety of pedestrian access, helping to improve children’s freedom of movement. However, for these children (and we think children from the GRT community that would fall under our usual age range for Play Sufficiency Assessments), the route to success of any initiative aimed at improving their opportunities for play must focus on building trust amongst members of the GRT community.
and other people. This will require a sustained and continued effort and direct face-to-face engagement from staff who can support children’s play and, over time, become trusted adults, as is the case with the support worker in the secondary school and the local authority’s GRT community development worker. The current lack of trust is such that any approach to supporting their inclusion and integration within wider society will likely need to begin with dedicated provision for the GRT community and the local Traveller site (which all of these children access) would seem like the logical choice for where this dedicated provision could initially take place.

Children attending the PRU experienced a significantly impoverished range and quantity of opportunities for play than did either the children from a rurally isolated community or the children from the GRT community. This was to a large degree a result of social isolation. These children have diverse and often difficult lives brought about by multiple issues that over time have resulted in exclusions, suspensions, clashes with other people and incidents of bullying. As a consequence, these children are forced indoors and onto their screens or, worse still, are at risk of ending up in relationships where they are susceptible to engaging in more transgressive activities. These children are already experiencing extraordinary barriers to their play that are exacerbated by the fact they are educated otherwise than at traditional schools. Their attendance at the PRU unfortunately further separates these children from peers in their own communities, leaving them to build friendships with children from other places around the county. This means when they return to their own communities outside of school, they neither have friends living close by nor can they access the friends they have in other communities. For children with such reduced opportunities for play, school break times and lunchtimes become increasingly important aspects of their play lives. A school play improvement programme would greatly enhance these children’s opportunities for play during the school day.

Equally, a peripatetic playwork team consisting of experienced and skilled playworkers, working in targeted communities, could develop opportunities for play where children from the PRU could be included. Such a provision could enhance opportunities for play in local communities as well as supporting the development of friendships with peers within communities. Perhaps most effective would be that those staffing the peripatetic provision also deliver the dedicated provision recommended for the GRT group. Additionally, the peripatetic provision could also offer much to our two final groups, those who have English as an additional language and children who are also young carers.

Children who are also young carers, similar to the children attending the PRU, experienced a much lower quantity and quality of opportunity to play and a much-reduced ranging distance over what is the norm for children in the county. However, whilst they understand their lives are different to their peers, they often attend schools with children from their community and therefore have friends from their local community to play with, even though that might only be in gardens, one another’s homes or the streets directly outside their homes.

As described by the lead practitioner, young carers often have multiple caring roles, caring for a parent and other siblings. Unlike other groups in this study, and over and above those experienced by most other children, this results in real constraints on their time for play. As a consequence, these children often haven’t experienced the same range and number of opportunities to socialise and play as have many other children. Their different experiences over time, coupled with the other often multiple inequalities they experience, and in the worse cases being bullied because of their difference, can result in a lack of confidence and a reluctance to integrate. Finally, as with
both the children from a rurally isolated community and the children from the GRT community, girls have a much poorer experience of school break times.

A school playtime intervention may provide for an increased quality and quantity of opportunities to play and make a real contribution to the play sufficiency of this group. Improvements can also be made by extending Barnardo’s ability to provide additional service delivery, shifting from biweekly to weekly provision and/or identifying communities where peripatetic playwork provision can be targeted. Work can also be done with families to create some additional time and freedom of movement for these children to join in playing more widely with community peers, further enhancing their experience of play sufficiency.

Children with English as an additional language also experience some of the most extraordinary barriers to play and similarly low levels of play sufficiency. Their ranging distances are very much reduced in comparison to what we know about the normative childhood experience in Merthyr Tydfil. It is likely that, outside of school, the majority of these children’s play experiences take place indoors, in their homes or the homes of relatives and friends as a part of informal childcare arrangements. Over and above that for children whose parents allow them to play out, it will be in the very immediate vicinity, directly outside homes or in a very local park where there is one. There will be some exceptions to this. The children that were born in this country or have been here a long time may have a greater degree of freedom of movement and social networks wider than family and family friends, meaning that they can play further afield. Predominantly children who are newer arrivals to this country will have a very narrow range of experiences locally.

A school playtime intervention may again provide for an increased quality and quantity of opportunities to play, addressing the recurrent deficit experience of playtimes for girls over boys but equally providing improvements for all. Doing so could make a real contribution to the play sufficiency of this group. Outside of school, the provision and design of community spaces for playing could be improved but if parents still fear letting their children out to play, these children will not use those spaces. Again, playworkers could be used to generate an increased sense of safety amongst parents and children, providing a friendly face, reassurance, and building relationships with parents and the wider community.

Perhaps one final issue of note is that put forward by the deputy director of Play Wales and observed on multiple occasions throughout this research. Children’s lives can rarely be characterised by a single protected characteristic. Many of the children we worked with experience multiple interconnected challenges in their lives. Single issue outcome focused services can struggle to attend to all aspects of these children’s childhoods. We propose that increased playwork provision may compliment the work of existing services in extending the Local Authority’s ability to improve experiences of play sufficiency and support these children’s holistic needs.
Conclusion

We propose the example in this research of children living in the rurally isolated community provides a near perfect example of the coalescence of the temporal, spatial and psychological assets that make up a sufficiency of opportunities to play. However, play sufficiency doesn’t necessarily depend on perfect conditions, rather it is about those conditions being good enough for children to play. There are still improvements that can be made in this community, particular in respect of children’s opportunities to play in school. Furthermore, the conditions that were good enough when we did this research are dynamic and subject to change. Ensuring continued play sufficiency therefore requires equal attention be paid to the maintenance of conditions where things are good enough as it does the improvement of conditions where things are not good enough.

While the rurally isolated community may be an archetypal example of play sufficiency, we would argue that to varying degrees, the majority of children in the remaining four groups are experiencing the very antithesis of play sufficiency. The temporal, spatial and psychological conditions that many of these children experience prevent and constrain their opportunities for play. This makes their experiences very different to the children from the rurally isolated community and the majority of other children across the county.

Successive national research into the enactment of the Welsh Play Sufficiency Duty has used and adapted Amin’s (2006) Registers for a Good City as a framework for approaching play sufficiency. Here we recommend the same framework can be used to good effect. Repair and maintenance of generalised environmental and societal conditions, together with the promotion and upholding of children’s rights, are essential in securing play sufficiency for all children. These processes should be embedded with the universal services of the local authority. However, for children like those involved in this research, who experience extraordinary barriers to play beyond those experienced by most other children, discreet and targeted interventions will be required to dramatically re-enchant their opportunities for play. At their core, these interventions must address issues of relatedness and the lack of connections these children experience with other people and their local environments. The hope being that these children experience improved opportunities for play both as a direct result of the targeted interventions but also by beginning to benefit from other opportunities available to all. Given the overriding issue of relatedness, these interventions will require interpersonal engagement that is both consistent and sustained.

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Recommendations

The recommendations proposed here are specifically targeted at those groups of children involved in this research and others like them who are likely to experience extraordinary barriers to play.

Improving opportunities for play for children experiencing cultural and social isolation.

- Improve the physical design of space and resources for play available at the primary and secondary PRUs and the EAL centre, providing facilitated play sessions for these children.
- Establish a regular playwork project on the local Traveller site.
- Work with Barnardo’s to enhance opportunities for play and enhance their capacity to identify and respond to the play needs of children in their communities.

Improving access to opportunities for play in the local community.

- Develop a peripatetic playwork project that seeks to actively engage these children, and others like them who experience extraordinary barriers to play, in accessing opportunities for play with other children in their local communities.

Improving opportunities for play during the school day.

- Develop a school’s playtime intervention programme to improve equality of opportunity and the temporal, spatial and psychological conditions for play during the school day, prioritising those schools which these children attend.