

INCLUSIVE PLAY POLICIES: DISABLED CHILDREN AND THEIR ACCESS TO DUTCH PLAYGROUNDS

RIANNE VAN MELIK & NICK ALTHUIZEN

Institute for Management Research (IMR), Radboud University, PO Box 9108, 6500 HK, Nijmegen, the Netherlands. E-mail: r.vanmelik@fm.ru.nl; nickalthuizen@gmail.com (Corresponding authors)

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ABSTRACT

Despite the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, many cities are still struggling to facilitate inclusive playgrounds. This paper contributes to our understanding of the everyday landscapes of disabled childhood, by investigating the play-policy of Dutch municipalities via a mixed-methods approach. Our online survey reveals that 90 per cent have a play-policy, although the length and content of these documents vary extensively, and accessibility and inclusive play are often lacking. Additionally, we focus on the play-policy of two municipalities in the east of the Netherlands. Interviews with civil servants, play professionals and families with disabled children show that municipalities willingly respond to parents' requests for playground changes. Though resulting in tailor-made adjustments, this also configures disability as an individual problem. Parents and policy-makers also highlight different expectations regarding playground adjustments and investments. The paper therefore calls for open communication to avoid disabled children being involuntarily absent in public space.

Key words: Children's playgrounds; disabled childhood; inclusive city; play-policies; mixed-methods; the Netherlands

INTRODUCTION

A group of children accompanied by some adults enter a playground, dressed in red t-shirts and carrying signs. After playing for a while, they come to a verdict: either showing the green or the red side of their signs. This is the *Speeltuinbende*, literally translated as 'the Playground Gang', a collective that tests the accessibility and inclusivity of playgrounds in the Netherlands. Playgrounds are visited twice – before and after renovation – to assess if there have been improvements made as to their playability for both abled and disabled children.

Initiatives like these stress the importance of public space for the physical, mental and social development of young children, which is also widely acknowledged in academic

studies (Holloway & Valentine 2000; Karsten 2003; Goodley & Runswick-Cole 2010). Outdoor play not only physically helps to prevent ill-health and obesity, but also plays an important role in the development of young people's identity and social skills (Valentine & McKendrick 1997; Karsten & Felder 2016; Spierings *et al.* 2016). These benefits apply to all children; yet disabled children often experience limited access due to inaccessible playgrounds or unsuitable play equipment (McKendrick *et al.* 2000; Casey 2010). Research from the Dutch Foundation for the Disabled Child (*Nederlandse Stichting voor het Gehandicapte Kind – NSGK*), for example, illustrates that more than 85 per cent of families with a disabled child have problems finding a place to play outside (NSGK

De Speeltuinbende 2009). Hence, disabled children are often not able 'to enjoy a full and decent life in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in the community', as formulated in Article 23(1) of the UN's (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child, which the Netherlands ratified. Cities worldwide certainly 'do not cater for the full range of human body types and capabilities' (Hubbard 2018, p. 214), leading Jeanes and Magee (2012, p. 198) to assert that 'given the potential significance of play spaces in young people's lives, greater understanding of how all children are able to gain access to play facilities is critical to developing equality for disabled children more broadly'.

There are large bodies of research on disability theory (e.g. Oliver 1996; Butler & Bowlby 1997; Kitchen 1998; Gleeson 2001; Hansen & Philo 2007; Hadley 2014; Hall & Wilton 2017), as well as on the meaning or value of play in general (Stevens 2007), and for children in particular (e.g. Valentine & McKendrick 1997; Holloway & Valentine 2000; Holloway *et al.* 2019; Karsten & Felder 2016). Gradually, a more specific research strand emerged at the intersection of these two themes, focusing on the play practices of disabled children (e.g. Nabors *et al.* 2001; Prellwitz & Skär 2007; Casey 2010; Goodley & Runswick-Cole 2010; Jeanes & Magee 2012). Nevertheless, Ryan (2006) argues that the presence of disabled children in public spaces has been largely overlooked (cf. McKendrick 2000), both within geographies of disability and children's geographies.

This paper contributes to our understanding of the everyday landscapes of disabled childhood by investigating the inclusive play-policy of Dutch municipalities using a mixed-methods approach. We first executed a nationwide survey of play-policy in Dutch municipalities, administering an online survey, to which 38 per cent of the 393 municipalities responded. Ninety per cent have formulated a play-policy, although the length and content of these policies varied extensively, and accessibility and inclusive play were often absent. Subsequently, we zoomed in on two municipalities in the east of the Netherlands. Interviews

with government representatives, play professionals and families with disabled children revealed that governments are reactive rather than proactive in making playgrounds more accessible, configuring disability as an individual rather than societal problem. Moreover, we also encountered different interpretations of inclusive play from parents and policy-makers. Before discussing these findings in more depth, we first present the theoretical basis of the research and the research design.

DISABILITY AND THE CITY

According to Hubbard (2018), cities are still often designed from the perspective of the 'able-bodied', or the 'average human being, plus or minus half a standard deviation' (Gleeson 2001, p. 256). Consequently, certain users encounter barriers in the city, such as (older) people with physical or mental disabilities, and parents with strollers. It might be impossible to cater for the needs of all these members of 'the public', as disabilities and barriers come in many different variations (Butler & Bowlby 1997; Goodley & Runswick-Cole 2010; Sawchuk 2013), which are sometimes even contradictory. For example, some designs that facilitate people with sensory disabilities are unproblematic for other populations (e.g. Braille signage), while others are not (e.g. textured street paving can impede the mobility of wheelchair users). Similarly, people with sensory disabilities require strong visual stimuli and bright lights, while some people experiencing behavioural disabilities instead need to avoid irritating environments (Goodley & Runswick-Cole 2010). Gleeson (2001) also describes tensions between preservationists protecting historic buildings and disability activists demanding that these buildings are made accessible. Both groups serve noble, yet seemingly incompatible goals of preservation versus universal access. Developing truly inclusive cities might therefore be an idealistic, yet practically unfeasible, endeavour.

One way to address the requirements of different population groups is to design use(r)-specific places. Consequently, we see – among others – the emergence of skateparks

(Németh 2006), community centres for older people (van Melik & Pijpers 2017), and playgrounds designed for disabled children (Jeanes & Magee 2012). Although these potentially cater to specific needs, they can be seen as 'single-minded spaces' (Walzer 1986) or 'closed systems' (Sennett 2010), designed with only one objective or user in mind. The question is whether such specifically designed spaces actually meet the users' demands; research shows how skateboarders prefer to make creative use of existing city space, rather than be corralled into designated skateparks (Németh 2006). Similarly, some older residents actively avoid assisted living facilities specifically planned for them and instead congregate in hallways, shopping centres and other places that are somehow considered more meaningful to them (van Melik & Pijpers 2017). Such monofunctional spaces can hardly be seen as signs of integration and inclusivity. Moreover, physically separating different user groups disregards the 'socio-spatiality' of places (Kitchen 1998); the utility of space does not rest alone with physical design, but rather with the social interplay and relationships that exist within particular areas, which are key in understanding how people use and perceive them. As such, places are not just physical domains, but also social constructs.

In a similar vein, following the social model of disability (Butler & Bowlby 1997; Casey 2010), one does not become disabled due to physical or mental impairments, but because society is not sufficiently adapted to 'deviant' bodily conditions and contains a series of barriers that exclude those with a disability from everyday practices (Prellwitz *et al.* 2001). In other words: while 'impairment is considered to be a bio-mechanical, physiological or cognitive condition, [...] disability is the experience of impairment as it is structured into a society' (Sawchuk 2013, p. 411). Consequently, disability is socially created (Oliver 1996); places that exclude disabled people 'are rarely natural constructs, but are a result of dominant relations, policy and poor relations all of which benefit the able-bodied community at the expense of people with disabilities' (Jeanes & Magee 2012, p. 196). Hence, creating inclusive cities

goes far beyond matters of accessibility and spatial design, but also includes changing social attitudes and fostering positive socio-relations (Butler & Bowlby 1997).

Engendering change is not an insignificant challenge. Breeman (2014, p. 2) describes the disabled body as a source of curiosity, discomfort, stigma or pity, which causes 'commotion' wherever it goes. Such prejudicial and discriminatory attitudes can lead to feelings of neglect, isolation and loneliness among disabled persons (Butler & Bowlby 1997; Ryan 2006). Research by Talay *et al.* (2010) shows that a large portion of the 355 investigated playgrounds in Ankara are physically inappropriate for the use of disabled children, due to unsuitable playground equipment and inaccessible ground cover, such as sand and gravel. However, the disabled children and their families feel even more excluded by social barriers, including prejudice, exclusion and disdain. McLaughlin *et al.* (2008) also finds that one of the biggest barriers for families of disabled children is the potential rejection of the child in play areas by other parents (often of non-disabled children).

These findings illustrate that how disabled people experience being in public space is a complex interaction of their own bodily characteristics ('corporeality') and self-image, but also social interactions with others as well as the physical and social structuring of the places visited (Butler & Bowlby 1997). Translated to the notion of inclusive play, this implies that enabling play for disabled children goes beyond the physical construction of adjusted equipment or playgrounds. According to Jeanes and Magee (2012, pp. 197–198, emphasis added), inclusive play is about creating 'places where individuals with and without disabilities are able to *engage in play together*, allowing social barriers to be bridged and contact and social acceptance to be established'. As such, inclusive play is more difficult to achieve than merely designing 'single-minded' spaces or adding special equipment for children with disabilities.

INCLUSIVE PLAY POLICIES

Inclusive play is high on policy and research agendas (Prellwitz & Skar 2007; Casey 2010;

Talay *et al.* 2010): 'accessible and inclusive play and spaces for play have been the focus of research and revisions of practice' (Goodley & Runswick-Cole 2010, p. 507). In the UK, for example, there are multiple government funds for new public play provision that is accessible and inclusive (Dunn & Moore 2005; Jeanes & Magee 2012). However, drafting inclusive play policy – which might be viewed as the catalyst to achieving inclusive play – is not straightforward.

First, local governments often have insufficient knowledge and a lack of awareness of the needs of children with disabilities, even though there are many national and international policies in place, such as the US with Disabilities Act (1990) and Disability Discrimination Act (1995) in the UK (Butler & Bowlby 1997; Gleeson 2001). Referring to the Turkish Constitution, including the detailed Disability Act, Talay *et al.* (2010, p. 851) state, 'Despite these laws, legal arrangements and conventions, research indicates that physical environments as well as playground accessibility and usability have not been successfully implemented'. This echoes Gleeson (2001, p. 252), who describes that disability policy and regulatory initiatives in most English-speaking countries are often poorly implemented and their performance not evaluated, resulting in the strength and effectiveness of these laws varying considerably. Prellwitz and Skär (2007) also observe a lack of awareness regarding children's rights in society and legislation that govern playgrounds in Sweden.

Consequently, there is often limited awareness of the importance of play or agreement upon the meaning of inclusive play (Casey 2010). Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2010) illustrate the normativity of play-policy-making. Policies are geared towards disabled persons participating as 'normally' as possible, taking the non-disabled child as a frame of reference: 'non-normal bodies are therefore required to adapt and the families in which these bodies live are expected to become involved in the processes of accommodation and assimilation' (Goodley & Runswick-Cole 2010, p. 504). Similarly, Breeman (2014) states there is hardly any room for a suggestion that disability might be a natural, normal or even positive aspect of human experience. Instead, it is seen as

something that needs to be 'resolved' (Butler & Bowlby 1997), by aiding disabled people in 'doing things normally' rather than accepting the 'normality of doing things differently' (Hansen & Philo 2007, p. 501). With respect to disabled children, Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2010, p. 502) hence conclude that, 'The literature seems to suggest that while disabled children do indeed play, their play is not only different from non-disabled children's play but also deficient'.

Second, a lack of finance often contributes to a rather limited focus on inclusive play by 'adding on' specialist equipment at existing playgrounds. According to Jeanes and Magee (2012), creating an inclusive play facility ideally requires a multi-layered approach (cf. Butler & Bowlby 1997), consisting of both physical and social (re)structuring of playgrounds, which may involve staffing playgrounds. Although governments see the added value of competent staff or alternative ways to change social cultures at the playground, they return to a narrower focus on physical design in times of austerity. However, it is not only limited budgets that contribute to a fragmented approach to play. Knierbein and Tornaghi (2015, p. 5) describe how public space in general is still often treated as 'an abstract two- or three-dimensional object to be sliced into workable pieces (...) tailored to specialised disciplines'. Such a 'division of labour in shaping space' results in multiple municipal departments being responsible for playgrounds, ranging from public space to youth departments, resulting in undefined or inefficient collaboration (van der Meulen & van Melik 2019).

As a result, inclusive play-policies are still often focused on the physical provision and design of playgrounds. Yet, there is no evidence that providing more or better play opportunities also stimulates play. Valentine and McKendrick (1997), for example, find that it is not the level of public provision of play facilities, but parental anxieties about children's safety that determine children's access to play. Consequently, they conclude that children increasingly play in home environments or other institutionalised and supervised forms of play. Disabled children are even more likely to be offered

controlled activities in segregated environments (Goodley & Runswick-Cole 2010). Such closed systems do not foster inclusive play, but rather can result in disabled people feeling stigmatised by spaces that are specifically designed for them (Seeland & Nicolé 2006; Talay *et al.* 2010). Instead, inclusive play should not be about creating spaces for disabled children, but about fostering the interaction between all children: abled and disabled, rich and poor (Valentine 2016), boys and girls (Karsten 2003), and so on.

Precisely this requirement, however, seems to be puzzling for governments, as it is easier to design a playground specifically for children with, for example, sensory disabilities than one that needs to be accessible to all and facilitate joint play. The large variety of disabilities requiring different adjustments (Goodley & Runswick-Cole 2010) as well as the fact that inclusive play not only requires changes in the physical but also the social environment (Butler & Bowlby 1997) seems to complicate inclusive play-policy-making.

RESEARCH DESIGN

To research the extent to which Dutch municipalities stimulate inclusive play in their (semi) public play areas, we sought a mix of quantitative data (gathered via an online survey) and qualitative data (consisting of an analysis of policy documents and semi-structured interviews with stakeholders). The online survey preceded the qualitative research.

For the online survey, all 393 municipalities in the Netherlands were contacted via email. Within the framework of a research internship at the consultancy company OBB, which specialises in engineering sports and play facilities, we were able to use their database consisting of direct personal contacts rather than a general municipality email address. In total, 151 participants completed the survey, representing 38 per cent of all municipalities. To respect anonymity, we number rather than name the municipalities. Alongside answering both open and closed questions on their play-policy, the municipalities were also asked to upload their play-policy documents for further analysis.

Subsequently, we selected two cases to conduct semi-structured interviews and in-depth document analysis of relevant (play) policies. The selected cases are two municipalities in the east of the Netherlands; one medium-sized city (about 170,000 inhabitants) and a nearby smaller town (about 46,000 inhabitants). For anonymity purposes, we will refer to them as respectively *City* and *Town*. We deliberately selected a bigger and a smaller municipality to explore potential differences and similarities in play-policy due to the different capacities of their civil service organisation. During the selection procedure, we considered only those municipalities that had a relatively successful inclusive play-policy, as we wanted to learn from best practices rather than investigating municipalities without such policies. As such, *City* and *Town* are not representative for all Dutch municipalities, but we feel they illustrate well how Dutch municipalities (try to) stimulate inclusive play.

Focusing on these two municipalities, we first examined their official play policies to determine the status and implementation of their play-policy. We not only analysed play-policy documents, but also other related policies, for example on disability in general. However, policies do not just exist on paper; their implementation is very dependent on the interpretation and practices of involved stakeholders (van der Meulen & van Melik 2019). Therefore, we conducted 14 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with seven government representatives (five in *City*, two in *Town*), two families with disabled children (both from *City*), a representative of a neighbourhood association and a representative of a playground association (both in *Town*), and three play professionals. We interviewed all of the relevant government representatives in both municipalities, who referred us to the other interviewed stakeholders. The selected parents were involved in the research because they play an active role in making playgrounds more inclusive, as illustrated below. Hence, these interviews did not focus on the everyday use of the playgrounds by their disabled children, but on their own involvement in play-policy formation and playground design. We decided to not interview disabled children due to our focus on policy-(making)

rather than the actual use of playgrounds, although we acknowledge that the work of the Playground Gang (see introduction and results section) illustrates that disabled children can certainly be included as assessors of playgrounds, for example by using drawings or other visual prompts such as photographs or signs (Jeanes & Magee 2012).

The interviews were conducted in the spring of 2016 and ranged in length between 45 and 60 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, coded and analysed. To respect the respondents' anonymity, we refer to their professions or role instead of using their names. All quotes in this paper from the survey, interviews and policy documents were translated from Dutch.

Using this mixed-methods approach has both advantages and disadvantages. The most important disadvantage is that redistributing research time over three different methods might reduce the overall depth of the data collection and analysis. Arguably, our survey could have been more elaborate (in terms of questions asked) or analytical (in terms of statistical tests performed). However, the purpose of our survey was only meant to provide a basic understanding of the status quo of Dutch play-policies, as this information was lacking. Similarly, our qualitative study could have included more cases or more respondents if we had only focused on one method. Indeed, as parent involvement turned out to be an important emergent theme (see below), having included only two families is relatively limited. Nevertheless, we feel the strength of this exploratory study is precisely its combination of quantitative and qualitative data, despite these drawbacks. While the survey mostly shows the policy *outcome* in different cities, the case studies illustrate the underlying *process* of policy formation, including the emergence, interpretation, formulation and execution of (inclusive) play-policies.

INCLUSIVE PLAY IN THE NETHERLANDS

Status quo of play policies – The majority of the surveyed municipalities (83%) has a play-policy or comparable document in place (Table 1). However, the interpretations of what this pol-

Table 1. *Play policies of Dutch municipalities.*

		N	per cent
Have play-policy or comparable document?	Yes	123	90
	No	14	10
Ambitions to renew play-policy in near future?	Yes	60	56
	No	47	44

icy should entail differ extensively. Some municipalities have concrete criteria that playgrounds should meet (e.g. Municipality 109) or prescribed standards regarding the number of play areas in relation to the number of children in the municipality (Municipality 188). Others, however, only have a replacement or maintenance schedule regarding playground equipment: 'there is a management plan, which should be upgraded to a policy plan, but we already know there are no financial resources' (Municipality 87). A national 'blueprint' indicating the basic content of play-policies is lacking, except for the 2006 NUSO (*Nederlandse Unie van Speeltoernorganisaties* – Dutch Union of Playground Associations) guideline that 3 per cent of residential areas should be used for (formal and informal) play areas. However, in addition to being a suggestion rather than an obligation, the norm was difficult to test and valued quantity over quality of play spaces. Consequently, we discovered a large variety in both size and content of play-policies, ranging from short paragraphs focused only on finance to comprehensive, integral policies.

Most of these play policies are relatively young; Dutch municipalities have started to formulate them only since the turn of the century. For example, *City's* and *Town's* first play policies emerged in respectively 2000 and 2007.¹ In 1996, the national government introduced the so-called WAS (*Warenwetbesluit Attractie- en Speeltoestellen*; Commodity Law for Amusement and Play Equipment), which outlined safety standards for both electric and non-electric equipment (ranging from carousels and rollercoasters to swings and seesaws). According to Play Professional 2, this national policy stimulated local governments to develop their own municipal policies. Although local governments had certainly provided play areas and activities before, this provision was without clear focus, strategy and budgets.

There are two important reasons for local governments to formulate concrete play policies. First, a well-formulated policy is required to guarantee its continuity, both in budgeting and staffing. Although we found that many municipalities still struggle with budget constraints (see below), their play-policy formulation has at least made them aware of the necessity to dedicate budgets to play. As Play Professional 3 outlined, ‘A lot can be done when you at least have a replacement budget’. Civil Servant 7 (from *Town*) confirmed, ‘Policy is used as substantiation for your budget and without this financial coverage, the budget available for outdoor play can change every year’. Additionally, Play Professionals 1 and 2 stressed that each civil servant has different priorities and that they frequently change position. Without a clearly formulated policy, play provision might therefore be both unstable and random. Second, municipalities – especially larger cities – increasingly realise that play provision requires an integral approach, as different policy fields come together at the playground: public space, youth, sports, health, environment, etc. Drafting a play-policy hence requires different municipal departments to cooperate rather than to divide the labour (cf. Knierbein & Tornaghi 2015).

Fifty-six per cent of the municipalities indicate that they have ambitions to renew their play-policy in the near future (Table 1). Most play-policies have a lifespan of ten years, with an evaluation after five years. For example, *City’s* play-policy has been evaluated and adapted three times since 2000, while *Town* evaluates its play-policy every five years. Budget cuts are an important reason to renew play-policies; play budgets are under constant constraints in the Netherlands – like elsewhere (McKendrick *et al.* 2015). While Jeanes and Magee (2012) found that these constraints lead to governments focusing on physical design instead of staffing, our results indicate that municipalities often choose to focus on quality instead of quantity. Smaller playgrounds are eliminated in favour of larger centrally located playgrounds to reduce the amount of play areas and equipment. Other motivations to renew their play-policy include staying up to date and reacting to new trends, such as the development of natural play areas

(Municipality 159). Municipality 79 explicitly indicates that their plans for policy renewal stem from the increased awareness to ‘pay more attention to play for children with a disability’.

Inclusive play in policy plans – While 90 per cent of the participating municipalities have a play-policy, only 37 per cent specifically address inclusive play in their policies (Table 2). Moreover, when asked to self-evaluate their inclusive play policies, many municipalities scored relatively poorly, with an average grade (on a scale of 1 to 10) of 5.5 (Figure 1), well below *City’s* and *Town’s* self-evaluation of 7.5 and 7, respectively. Of course, we can question the value of these self-assessments, as some respondents might be more critical than others. However, we also asked the respondents to clarify their assessment. Some mentioned that inclusive play was absent in their policies because ‘the number of disabled children is limited’ (Municipality 263) or ‘accessibility for disabled children was not that much of an issue at the time the play-policy was created’ (Municipality 10). Others stated that there was no need, because nobody asked about accessible inclusive play areas, suggestive of a reactive rather than proactive attitude in local government. Municipality 42 explicitly indicated not taking disabled children into account when designing play areas (self-rated grade: 1). Others illustrated that they do offer special equipment accessible to disabled children such as bird’s nest swings, but that further improvements can be made: ‘what could be better is the accessibility of play areas; that is not done enough in the beginning of the process’ (Municipality 10, self-rated grade: 6). There are also several municipalities that believe inclusive play is

Table 2. *Inclusive play in Dutch municipalities.*

		N	Per cent
Inclusive play included in play-policy?	Yes	43	37
	No	74	63
Availability of inclusive playgrounds?	Yes	80	64
	No	45	36

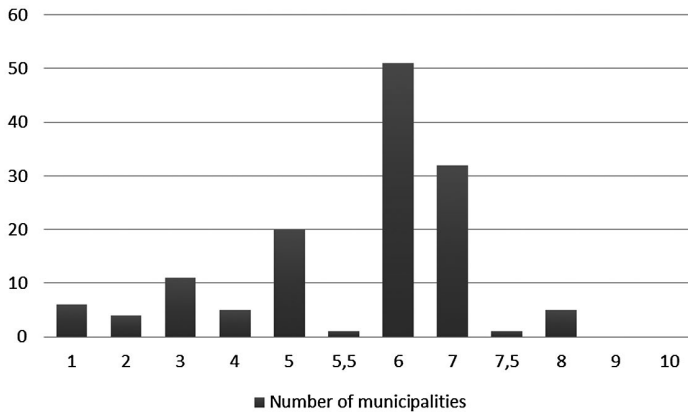


Figure 1. *Self-rated grade for level of inclusive play.*

the standard – and hence does not need to be specifically addressed in policy: ‘all play areas should be accessible for all’ (Municipality 2) and ‘we chose equipment that is suitable for both children with and without a disability’ (Municipality 9). This interpretation might explain why 64 per cent of the municipalities indicate they have inclusive playgrounds, while only 37 per cent have inclusive play officially addressed in their play-policy. Inclusive playgrounds can thus emerge without a clear policy on inclusive play, but also vice versa: an inclusive play-policy does not always result in inclusive playgrounds.

City and *Town* have a similar view on inclusive play. They both address inclusive play in their play-policy but not in great detail. They do not have playgrounds specifically designed for disabled children, but have adjusted equipment added to existing playgrounds as this allows for integration rather than separation, so the argument goes. Civil Servant 7 from *Town* states, ‘There is no playground specially made for disabled children and that is not the policy. They should integrate with other children and therefore we have play equipment that disabled children can also use’. Limited budgets also constrain both municipalities from making each play area inclusive for all types of disabilities or to create special playgrounds for disabled children. Therefore, variety is central to their policy plans. *City’s* play-policy indicates (emphasis added): ‘Playing together and moving around should be possible for everyone,

regardless of age or limitation, [which is achieved] by creating a significant infrastructure of both formal and informal play areas, that offer *multiple* safe opportunities for children to develop themselves physically and socially’. Similarly, *Town* stresses (emphasis added): ‘To create a *balanced* range in play functions, it is important to ensure that there are enough play possibilities (by design, appliances, play incentives and space) and that there is enough *variation* in playground equipment and features’. As such, both municipalities emphasise the importance of a multiple/balanced/varied range of play opportunities, to accommodate people with different disabilities. In contrast to other studies (e.g. Beunderman 2010; Jeanes & Magee 2012), Dutch municipalities also seem to focus more on physical rather than social adjustments of playgrounds; none of the municipalities in our research mentioned the role of play-workers as ‘bridging agents’ in bringing together young people to encouraging them to play on equipment together. Instead they focus on physical infrastructure.

However, the interviews revealed that it is often unclear which equipment is best for which disability and optimal or effective combinations of play equipment. Moreover, local governments struggle with not exactly knowing the number, profile and location of disabled children within the municipality, as data is lacking or incomplete. Therefore, despite good intentions formulated in their policy plans, *City* and *Town* are seldom

proactive in making their playgrounds more inclusive. Instead they react to requests from parents or neighbourhood associations to adjust play areas, yet such requests prove to be rare. *Town*, for example, thus far has received only one request from a neighbourhood association to include a bird's nest swing for a disabled child, which the municipality accommodated. This low number might indicate that disabled children in *Town* experience no problems in accessing and playing at municipal playgrounds. However, interviewed Mother 1 finds it more likely that parents of disabled children lack the time and energy to actively demand changes in their neighbourhood, as they are often strained by heavy care duties depending on the severity of their child's disability. This illustrates the difficulties of engaging families of disabled children in policy-making.

Inclusive policy-making – When drafting their play-policies and designing specific playgrounds, the investigated municipalities consult different population groups (Figure 2), ranging from disabled and non-disabled children and their parents to teachers and other participants, such as neighbourhood residents or consultants. These different population groups are generally involved more often in the design process of play areas (light grey) than in play-

policy formation (dark grey). However, non-involvement is still extensive: 34 per cent of the investigated municipalities have never involved any population groups in formulating their play-policy, nor in designing a playground (25%). According to Jeanes and Magee (2012, p. 201), this is problematic because 'parents and young people felt that through being consulted and having the opportunity to significantly influence the design of the facility, play provision was developed that they genuinely wanted and that met their needs as opposed to what service providers considered was in their best interest'.

Many of our investigated municipalities shared this opinion. Municipality 110, for example, indicated that their experience with consulting children and parents was 'good, [consequently with] playground equipment matching their wishes'. Some municipalities only invited children with a disability to participate in the design process (Municipalities 49 and 123), while others like Municipality 86 also asked them to test play areas. Municipality 168 asked parents of disabled children to fill out a survey indicating their needs, but did not receive any responses asking for specific adjustments. *City* and *Town* also adjust their playgrounds in response to specific requests. For *Town* this is not only a matter of being efficient, but also simply because the municipality

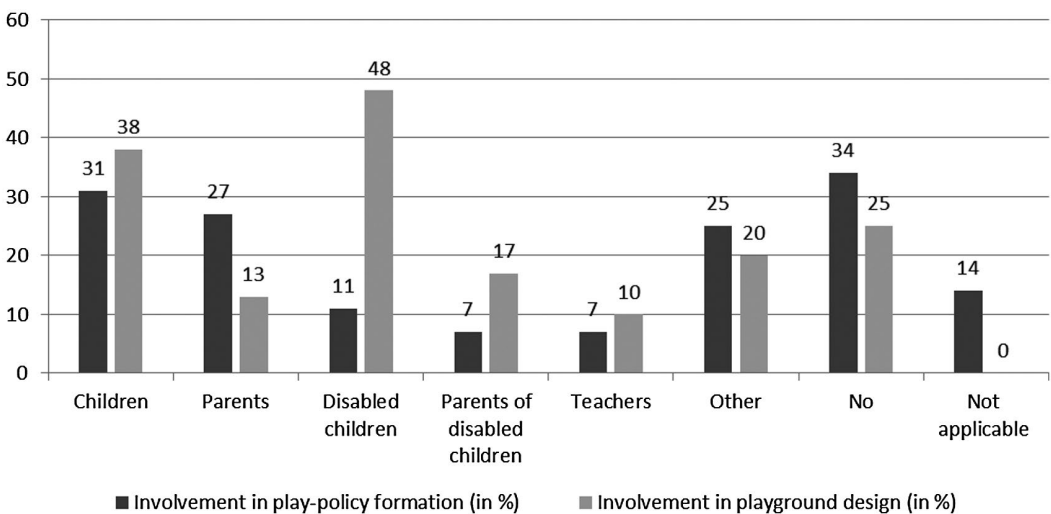


Figure 2. Percentage of municipalities involving different population groups in drafting play-policy (dark grey) and/or playground design (light grey).

lacked knowledge on which adjustments are necessary: 'there was never any attention for accessibility and inclusive play in the policy and it was not a topic of conversation' (Civil Servant 6).

Jeanes and Magee (2012) seem to suggest that involvement is a required condition for inclusive play in order to create a perfect match between children's needs and playground design. However, the active involvement of families in policy-making and designing playgrounds is hampered by a number of factors, including heavy care duties. Parents often lack the time and energy to actively participate in these policy and design processes. Play Professional 1 confirms that, 'Parents already have a lot of pressure and the [disabled] children are spread over the municipality'. In contrast, Jeanes and Magee (2012) investigated how families were successfully consulted – and even became significant leaders – in the design and management of a play facility in the UK. Their investigated playground was situated on a special school campus where disabled people 'held a central position' and which 'already contained established norms of tolerance and acceptance to difference' (Jeanes & Magee 2012, p. 203). It proves to be much more difficult to mobilise parents in their home environments, where their disabled child might be the exception. In this regard, initiatives such as the Playground Gang – the test team described in the introduction – are very important.

The Playground Gang is a non-profit organisation aimed at stimulating, developing and executing projects that facilitate inclusive play, initiated by the Dutch Foundation for the Disabled Child (NSGK). One of their primary activities is playground assessment by test-teams consisting of both abled and disabled children, as sketched in the introduction. The 'gang' has played an important role in the life of Mother 2 and her disabled son. A couple of years ago it was very difficult for them to visit a play area: 'We almost never went to playgrounds, simply because my son could not play there. After we joined the Playground Gang this got a lot better. Now we know where we can go and play'. As mentioned above, more than 85 per cent of families with a disabled child have similar problems finding appropriate places to play

outside (NSGK De Speeltuinbende 2009). Being part of the Playground Gang provided Mother 2 with practical information where to go, but also motivated her to actively approach the municipality and ask for adjustments in her neighbourhood. *City* willingly responded to her request. In return, it also asked the Playground Gang to test one of its largest staffed playgrounds. According to the interviewed civil servants from *City*, the received feedback was very helpful in giving insights on inclusive play. *City* now regularly tests other neighbourhood playgrounds with the two interviewed mothers and their disabled sons. In *Town*, the local playground association also had their playground tested by the Playground Gang. Although this increased the association's awareness of inclusive play, it unfortunately lacked the budget to do most of the required adjustments.

Indeed, some professional play equipment, such as the bird's nest swing (over €3,000) or wheelchair swing (over €5,000) are quite costly. However, Mother 2 claimed: 'It is often much more fun to keep it simple (...) a wheelchair swing is fun at a school where many children are in a wheelchair, but not in a neighbourhood play area'. She instead preferred 'regular' inclusive equipment that can be used by all children, such as the inclusive playground in the north of *City*, which was designed to resemble a traffic square, with lanes, traffic signs and a roundabout (Figure 3). Mother 1 initiated this playground in close collaboration with the local government, a contractor and some volunteers. The playground enables her son to play together with abled children riding their bikes or go-karts instead of isolating him in his play with expensive specialised equipment. Moreover, investments here were limited, only requiring paving materials and a number of traffic signs. Mother 2 has the impression that civil servants often believe they have to buy expensive pieces of equipment to foster inclusive play. Civil Servant 3 from *City*, on the other hand, states that parents tend to have unrealistic expectations: 'Of course these parents hope everything is adjusted right away, though I think they understand that we do not have the money to do so'. These quotes illustrate misconceptions



Figure 3. *Traffic roundabout in City facilitating inclusive play.*

Source: Facebook Page, Playground Gang. Used with permission of Mother 2.

that might exist between policy-makers and families of disabled children regarding the costs or design of playgrounds, which could be resolved by explicitly expressing mutual expectations.

In sum, despite the wide variation in policy plans, we found considerable willingness from local governments to accommodate families of disabled children, but in a very responsive rather than proactive way. Municipalities often lack knowledge on where disabled children live and what their needs are in public spaces. Consequently, they wait for families to ask for changes in the urban landscape to stimulate the play activities of their disabled child, which requires active, energetic, confident, and knowledgeable parents. On the one hand, this seems a reasonable approach, since the diversity of impairments makes it impossible for governments to implement all desired adjustments, certainly when budgets are tight. Responding to specific requests is a way to spend limited play budgets efficiently. On the other hand, this approach configures 'disability as an individual problem (...) cast[ing] illness, disease and disability as a private catastrophe a person needs to deal with' (Breeman 2014, p. 2). Hence, inclusive play seems to become the responsibility of the active parent of a disabled child rather than of political concern. According to Butler and Bowlby (1997,

p. 413), political agendas are 'built on the strength of the disabled population working as one homogenous mass'. Acknowledging that each disabled child is an individual body with specific needs is thus empowering and disempowering at the same time; it might result in the perfect match between play provisions and the needs of a disabled child (cf. Jeanes & Magee 2012), but also individualises (or, alternatively, de-collectivises) the problem of inclusivity. Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2010, p. 504) also emphasise the active attitude demanded in the daily lives of disabled people: 'Non-normal bodies are therefore required to adapt and the families in which these bodies live are expected to become involved in the processes of accommodation and assimilation'. Families of disabled children are by no means reluctant to do so – as the active involvement of Mothers 1 and 2 in policy formation and playground testing showed – but their care duties often already put a heavy burden on them.

CONCLUSIONS

According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), all children have the right to play, regardless of different impairments that might affect their accessibility to, and use of, playgrounds. We investigated

the play-policies of 151 Dutch municipalities through an online survey, followed by a case study focusing on two municipalities to gain a more in-depth understanding of play-policy-making, including document analysis and interviews with local government representatives, play professionals and families of disabled children. The results show that although the importance of inclusive play is increasingly acknowledged, there are multiple barriers hampering disabled children's right to play, including a lack of experience drafting inclusive play-policy, knowledge on disabled children and their needs, and the budget required to make adjustments.

We found a large variety in the size and content of Dutch play-policies, ranging from short paragraphs on budget to comprehensive, integral policies. A national 'blueprint' is absent; local governments each have to draft their own play-policies. This is not necessarily bad, as it gives municipalities the authority to focus on what they regard as most important. However, the relatively limited policy plans of some municipalities do seem to confirm that disability policies are still often poorly formulated, implemented and evaluated (cf. Gleeson 2001; Prellwitz & Skär 2007; Talay *et al.* 2010). Inclusive play has only emerged as a relevant policy theme in the Netherlands in the last two decades, and is still in its infancy. Rather than posing norms or formulating strict guidelines, the national government and/or Dutch Union of Playground Associations (NUSO) could offer more practical information and advice to municipalities and playground associations on how to draft proper play-policies in dialogue with relevant stakeholders.

Such stakeholders, including (disabled) children, their parents, teachers, and playground and neighbourhood associations, have limited involvement in drafting play-policy or designing playgrounds (Figure 2). This is certainly not a matter of unwillingness; some municipalities simply lack information on the number of disabled children and their needs in public space. Hence, they rely on proactive parents requesting specific adjustments to playgrounds. Though this potentially leads to tailor-made adjustments, it also configures disability as an individual problem. Consequently, such a responsive municipal approach might conceal

inclusivity problems. After all, the absence of disabled children in public space (or absent requests for adjusted equipment) might then be interpreted as inclusive play being irrelevant, which in turn could become a self-fulfilling prophecy; the seeming absence of disabled children leading to limited inclusivity adjustments, resulting in the absence of disabled children.

Even if municipalities have experience in how to draft play-policy and know which adjustments are required to make their playgrounds more accessible, they often lack the budget to do so. However, rather than a budgetary issue, this seems to be a problem of communication and prioritisation. Our research has shown that policy-makers and parents have different expectations regarding playground adjustments and investments. The interviewed civil servants tend to believe inclusive play requires expensive adjusted play equipment, while families and organisations such as the Playground Gang emphasise that it is about offering opportunities for children to play together without shame or barriers. In that respect, accessibility of playgrounds is far more important than offering adjusted equipment such as expensive wheelchair swings. Such misconceptions could be resolved by explicitly expressing mutual expectations.

With limited budgets, municipalities can therefore better invest in playground accessibility and improving their communication and collaboration with other potential stakeholders such as families, schools, playground associations and non-profit organisations like the Playground Gang. After all, having a right to something (in this case play) also entails 'the right to not be marginalised in decision making' (Attoh 2011, p. 676).

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Note

1. Official policy documents available upon request, not included as references to assure anonymity.

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