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## How does a Level 2 Rights Respecting School facilitate play for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)?

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## How does a Level 2 Rights Respecting School facilitate play for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)?

### Cover Page Footnote

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How does a Level 2 Rights Respecting School facilitate play for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)?

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## **Abstract**

Rights Respecting schools have been evaluated to embed the rights stipulated within the UNCRC within their policy and practice, at all levels of school life. The award is granted at three levels; level 2 is the highest level of award. This case study focuses specifically on how one level 2 Rights Respecting school facilitates play for children with SEND. Data were collected via interviews with three children with SEND, their corresponding teachers, and their head teacher, and analysed using six-phase thematic analysis. Observations of the children, analysed using content analysis, further contributed to the data set. Findings from all data sources were triangulated to identify primary themes. Predominantly, themes of inclusion, child-centred practice and teacher knowledge contributed towards facilitating play for children with SEND. Limitations of the research and implications for future practice are discussed. The research highlights the indivisibility of the rights, and their contribution towards inclusive play and practice.

## **Key words**

play, children's rights, United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), General Comment No. 17, Article 31

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## **Literature Review**

### ***Play for Children with SEND***

The current research focuses upon the play experiences of children with special education needs and disabilities (SEND) as they were amongst the groups identified as being at risk of having additional barriers occluding their access to play opportunities (UNCRC, 2013). The

SEND Code of Practice (2014) states, “a child or young person has SEND if they have a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made for him or her” (p.16). Play for children with SEND can present differently to the play of typically developing children. Nevertheless, there is evidence to suggest that their play experiences are no less valuable to them than those for typically developing children. De Souza and Batiste (2008) document the social gains observed for visually impaired children through access to free play and Conn (2015) documents autistic adults’ recollections of childhood play as valuing sensory and perceptual experiences, as opposed to social interactions.

Presently, play for children with SEND is typically valued by adults as an area for diagnosis and intervention, with the importance on their access to free play neglected (Murdock, Ganz & Crittenden, 2013; Murdock & Hobbs, 2011; UNCRC, 2013). Play for children with SEND is also sometimes stigmatised as detrimental to development (Bundy, 1997). Whilst schools make reasonable adjustments within their settings to accommodate access to education for children with SEND, the same protections are not consistently afforded to their access to play (UNCRC, 2013).

Furthermore, adult pathologising of the play of children with SEND assumes the adult role as expert, contrary to Article 12 of the UNCRC, emphasising the child’s right to be heard and for their views to be taken seriously. Davis and Watson (2000) propose that in order to ensure full inclusion, adults need to account for children’s views, and challenge the structural, cultural and individual conditions that create disability.

### *Definition of Play*

The term “play” is employed for different purposes, often being utilised within educational policy to describe activities structured by adults, with specified outcomes, and encompassing some play-type features (Lester & Russell, 2008). Research literature terms this “instrumental play” (Lester & Russell, 2008).

The definition of play adhered to within the current research conforms to that specified in General Comment No. 17 of Article 31 of the UNCRC, often described within research literature as “free play.” The UNCRC describes free play as any activity that:

- is owned by the child;
- is non-compulsory, intrinsically motivated and focuses on process not outcome;
- involves the exercise of autonomy, physical, mental or emotional activity;
- has the potential to take infinite forms, either in groups or alone; and
- has key characteristics of fun, uncertainty, challenge, flexibility and non-productivity.

### ***Play as Fundamental to Development***

An extensive body of research has highlighted the myriad benefits of play in promoting healthy physical, social, emotional and cognitive child development (Almy, 1966; Carlton & Winsler, 1998; Dansky, 1980; Gray, 2013; Lester & Russell, 2008; Manello, et al., in press, Piaget, 1936; Sutton-Smith, 2013; Swann & Pittman, 1977). Additionally, there is some evidence to suggest that access to play allows children to experience and manage anxiety in a developmentally appropriate manner (Al-Yateem and Rossiter, 2016; Burghardt, 2005; Flinn, 2006; Lester & Russell, 2008), and facilitates the development of executive functioning, described as “the cognitive control processes that regulate thought and action in support of

goal-directed behavior” (Barker, et al., 2014, p. 1). Executive functioning has been evidenced to be a key factor of future well-being (Allan, McMinn & Daly, 2016; Cragg & Gilmore, 2014; Drever, et al., 2015; Logue & Gould, 2014), and it has been argued that the processes involved in play contribute to the development of resilience (Burghardt, 2005; Lester & Russell, 2008). In addition to these long-term benefits, of equal importance is the undertaking of play for pleasure, for its own sake (UNCRC, 2013). Indeed, play has been described as the “culture of childhood” (James, 1993, p. 95), and the International Play Association (IPA) describes how children have explained play to be one of the most important aspects in their lives (IPA, 2010).

### ***Reduction in Children’s Access to Play***

Despite the extensive research on the benefits of play to all children, a body of research has identified a reduction in children’s access to play generally (Ginsburg, 2007; Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001). The research attributes this to multiple factors, including: increased parental working hours; poverty; increased schoolwork demands upon children; behaviourist systems of managing behaviour within educational settings, such as the withdrawal of playtimes; non-creation of enabling environments for play for all children; lack of awareness across education staff of the importance of play for all children; and increased curricula demand upon teachers.

### ***The UNCRC***

The UNCRC is the “most complete statement of children’s rights ever produced and is the most widely-ratified international human rights treaty in history” (UNICEF, 2016). The

articles contained within the UNCRC have been ratified into the law of all countries in the world (with the exception of one) and are afforded to all children and young people under the age of eighteen. Article 31 of the UNCRC affords children and young people the right to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts.

*General Comment No. 17 of Article 31*

Following the emergence of initial research highlighting children's reduced play opportunities (Ginsburg, 2007; Hofferth, & Sandberg, 2001), a literature review was commissioned by the IPA and published by the Bernard Van Leer Foundation, and a Global Consultations Project was carried out involving partners in eight nations (IPA, 2010). Findings from this research supported the initial research highlighting children's reduced access to play internationally (Lester & Russell, 2008). Barriers to children's access to play, as identified through this literature review, and summarised within General Comment No. 17 of Article 31 of the UNCRC, are: children's increased exposure to violence; commercialisation of play provisions; the demands of child labour; domestic work; and increasing educational demands. Furthermore, certain groups were identified as being at particular risk of experiencing barriers, for example girls were more likely to be constrained in their play opportunities by the expectation of domestic work chores and children with disabilities were more likely to experience increased involvement in adult-determined intervention.

*Addition of General Comment No. 17*

Despite ratification into state parties' law, research found that there continues to be insufficient provision for Article 31 for all children (Lester & Russell, 2008). Following scrutiny of state parties' regard and provision for Article 31, the UNCRC (2013) found the omission of this Article from state parties' investment, legislation and provision. The UNCRC (2013) noted that where provisions for play were made explicit, these were with regard to the facilitation of instrumental play, particularly apparent within curricula documentation.

Following these findings, in 2013, the UNCRC made the addition of General Comment No. 17 to Article 31. General Comment No. 17 “seeks to enhance the understanding of the importance of Article 31 for children’s well-being and development; to ensure respect for and strengthen the application of the rights under article 31” (p. 3–4). It provides “guidelines for all individuals working with children ... on all actions undertaken in the area of play and recreation” (p. 3–4). The UNCRC states that educational settings should play a primary role in the realisation of General Comment No. 17, with a focus on four principles: structure of the day; educational pedagogy; physical environment of the setting; and school curriculum.

## **The Research Question**

### ***Rights Respecting Schools Award***

The Rights Respecting School Award (RRSA) was founded in 2006 by UNICEF UK following concern around the general lack of visibility of the UNCRC stipulated rights within UK educational policy and pedagogy. The RRSA aims to enable schools to “embed children’s rights in their ethos and culture, to improve well-being, and develop every child’s talents and abilities to their full potential” (UNICEF, 2016). Sebba and Robinson’s (2010)



qualitative evaluation found that the award resulted in children “having a good knowledge of the CRC, being motivated to take action for others’ rights, and being involved in decision making in their schools” (p. 60). Furthermore, UNICEF’s (2016) Impact Report employed mixed methodology to gather headteachers’ views on the impact of completing the RRSA. The findings illustrated the significant positive impact of undertaking the RRSA on all areas of school life.

The RRSA is comprised of three levels, namely “Recognition of Commitment,” “Level One,” and “Level Two.” Schools that have achieved Level Two are deemed to have demonstrated that they have embedded all articles within their practice and policy (UNICEF, 2016). This is assessed via observations, interviews with school staff, parents and children and perusal of school documentation.

A Level 2 Rights Respecting School (RRS) is one that has been accredited to provide models of best practice for enabling all children access to the UNCRC stipulated rights. Therefore, it is posed that Level 2 RRSs provide a model of best practice for facilitating General Comment No. 17 for children with SEND. The research question posed is: “How does a Level 2 RRS facilitate play for children with SEND?”

The aims of the current research are to:

- identify barriers and facilitators to free play for children with SEND as identified by their teachers and the children themselves;
- identify if RRSs use the four principles described in General Comment No. 17 of Article 31 to inform their play and/or inclusion policies; and
- investigate how primary schools with a Rights Respecting Award promote free play for children with SEND.

## Methodology

### *Research Design*

The authors' epistemological position is one of critical realist. The current research adopts a critical realist approach by investigating the broader contextual factors and mechanisms influencing play for pupils with SEND (Kelly, Woolfson & Boyle, 2008). As the sample was small, to maximise data collection, a single case study design was employed (Yin, 2004). There were three units of analysis, and data were collected from the sources as depicted in Figure 1.

<b>Unit of Analysis</b>	<b>Data-Gathering Tools</b>
<b>1: Current practice regarding play for pupils with SEND</b>	Teacher interviews Pupil observations
<b>2: Play experiences of pupils with SEND</b>	Pupil interviews Pupil observations
<b>3: Factors that influence play experiences for children with SEND</b>	Pupil interviews Teacher interviews Pupil observations

Figure 1: Units of Analysis Contained Within the Case Study

### *Sampling and Participant Recruitment*

Purposive sampling was applied to elicit maximum participation. Special Educational Needs Co-Ordinators (SENCOs) of schools that met the inclusion criteria were initially contacted via email. Two schools requested further information regarding the study, which was provided via meetings with the first author. One SENCO consented to take part. The SENCO then identified child participants and their teachers who met the inclusion criteria. The parents of identified potential child participants and their teachers were informed of the study, and their written consent was gained. After written consent had been gained, the study was explained to the child participants, and their written assent was sought. Participants were assured of confidentiality and informed of their right to withdraw.

### ***The Research Site***

The final sample was drawn from one primary school and consisted of three children, their corresponding class teachers and their headteacher. The two male child participants were aged seven and ten years, and the female child participant was aged seven years. One male child had difficulties relating to communication and interaction and cognition and learning. The second male child participant had physical and sensory needs and difficulties relating to cognition and learning. The female child participant had difficulties relating to communication and interaction and cognition and learning. Their corresponding teachers were female and had taught for between ten and twenty-two years. The headteacher had previously held the position of SENCO for eight years, before becoming headteacher, a position she had held for two years.

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) data described the participating school as a much larger than average primary school in the north of England, serving pupils aged between four and eleven years. The proportion of pupils from

minority ethnic backgrounds was lower than average, and the number of pupils eligible for free school meals was above average. The number of children attending the school with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) was broadly average. The school had gained a number of externally moderated awards and had been recognised as “outstanding” by Ofsted.

The school gained their RRSA Recognition of Commitment in 2011, was awarded Level 1 in 2013, and Level 2 in June 2015. A comprehensive report from UNICEF was provided, detailing the evidence submitted by the school in support of the application to become a Level 2 school. The rights were visible throughout the school’s policies, for example, the school’s positive behaviour management policy quoted both Article 29 (“Education must develop every child’s personality, talents and abilities to the full. It must encourage the child’s respect for human rights, as well as respect for their parents, their own and other cultures and the environment”) and Article 2 (“To be treated fairly ... whatever their ethnicity, gender, religion, abilities, whatever they think or say, no matter what type of family they come from”), amongst others.

### ***Data Collection Methods***

Data were collected between February 2017 and July 2017. Semi-structured interview schedules were utilised to gain the views of both adult and child participants. Member checking was employed to ensure that codes emerging from the data were felt to be an accurate representation. Drawings were created by one child participant in order to maximise her ability to access the interviews (Merriman & Guerin, 2012). Observations of each child participant, lasting between ten minutes and one hour, were undertaken by the first author at times when children were expected to be accessing their right to play, that is, during break times. Key school policies were collected to provide context for the research.

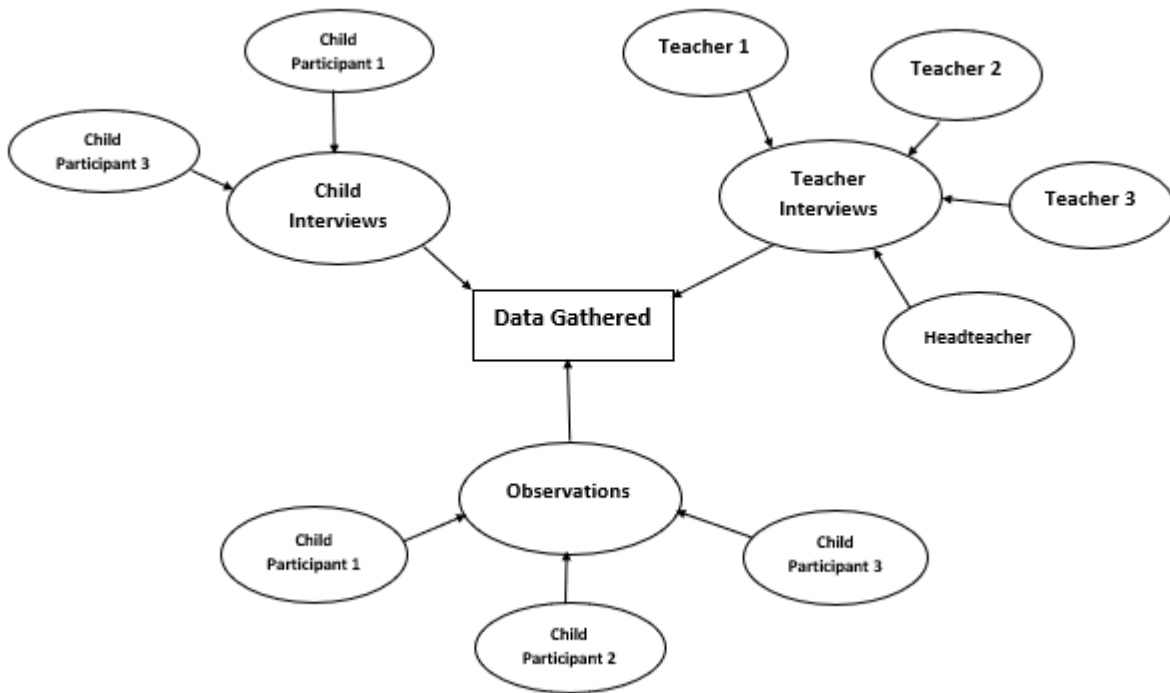


Figure 2: Data Sources

***Method of Analysis***

Interviews with adult and child participants were transcribed and analysed inductively due to the infancy of this area. Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase thematic analysis was employed. Initial coding of the teachers’ interviews revealed 153 codes. A sample of interview transcript was coded by a second researcher, and six further codes were identified. Following this, the four transcripts were reanalysed, with a total of 159 codes emerging. These codes became twenty sub-themes, then seven main themes. Coding of children’s interviews revealed three main themes.

Observations were analysed using content analysis (Hseih & Shannon, 2005) against the four areas presented in the UNCRC (2013): structure of the day; educational pedagogy; physical environment of the setting; and school curriculum. These were then coded green for facilitators, and red for barriers.

### ***Ethical Statement***

Ethical issues were considered, and approval was granted from the Manchester School Research Integrity Committee (RIC) in September 2016. Data were stored securely in line with data protection guidance.

### **Findings**

Findings from teacher and child interviews and child observations were integrated via a triangulation process. All themes that arose from the data were included. Figure 3 depicts the data sources from which each theme arose. Some themes spanned more than one data source, while some were visible in only one data source.

	<b>Data Source</b>		
	<b>Teacher Interviews</b>	<b>Child Interviews</b>	<b>Child Observations</b>
<b>Individual Level</b>			
Accessibility	X	X	X

Flexibility of teaching and structure of day	X		X
<b>Whole School Level</b>			
<i>Teacher knowledge and belief</i>	X		
Pedagogy	X		
Use of play continuum	X		
Importance of play	X	X	X
<i>Centrality of choice/voice of the child</i>	X		X
Variety of activities	X	X	X
<i>School Ethos</i>	X		X
Pupils' inclusive values	X	X	X
Inclusive	X	X	X
Child-centred	X		X

Figure 3: Data Source Providing Themes

The colour-coded thematic map presented in Figure 4 demonstrates how the themes are interlinked within the setting. Play facilitators are coded green, and barriers coded red.

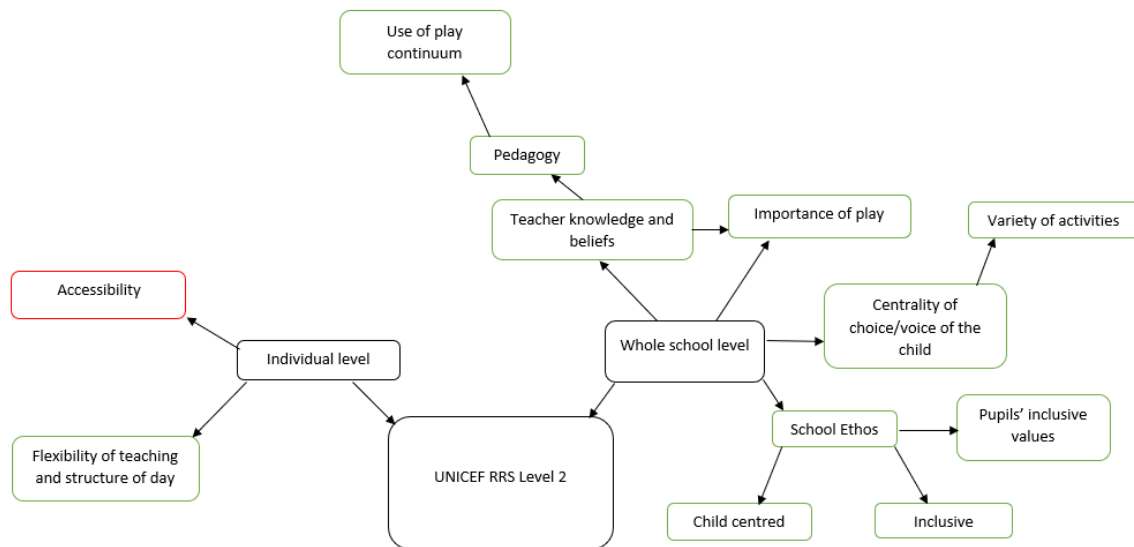


Figure 4: Thematic Map Showing Triangulation of Data Source

Data were gathered at various levels to provide insight into how General Comment No. 17 was embedded, and to establish consistencies between interview data and practice. Although various data sources were utilised, the majority of the data was collected from teacher interviews. This was for three primary reasons. Firstly, the school had taken an active role in becoming a RRS and teachers were keen to speak openly and at length about the integration of the rights-based approach within the school. Secondly, the current study's general focus on facilitation of play for SEND pupils in a RRS meant that detailed exploration of the integration of General Comment No. 17 was outside the scope of this initial exploratory study. Data from child interviews and observations was utilised to understand the data from the teacher interviews. Thirdly, teachers and the headteacher are likely to have most insight into how play is planned for, whilst pupils are most able to corroborate or disconfirm this through their comments on how this is experienced.



Findings illustrated that inclusion within the whole school setting for all children and inclusive play for children with SEND were inextricably linked. Therefore, the data presents a whole-school approach that facilitated inclusion and inclusive play for all children, as well as adaptations made at the individual level for children with SEND.

### ***Whole School Level***

#### *Teacher Knowledge and Beliefs*

This theme emerged from the data from teacher interviews and pupil observations. Teacher knowledge and beliefs consisted of three themes: teachers' belief in the importance of play as defined by the UNCRC; teachers' pedagogy; and the use of a play continuum concurrent with the continuum as described by Wood (2007) within their planning and teaching.

#### Teachers' Belief in the Importance of Play

Via the interviews, staff acknowledged the importance of play for all children. They echoed the myriad cognitive and social benefits afforded by play as cited in the research, although they did not differentiate between benefits afforded through instrumental play and those afforded through free play. Teacher 3 also described the child's need to play for fun, for its own sake. With reference to their own experiences, teachers described how the protection of leisure time contributed to the well-being of the child.

Although overall the school emphasised the element of children's choice and influence, teacher participants appeared to be at different stages in their journeys with regards to understandings of play. For example, one teacher described only the academic gains of

play, whereas others emphasised unique aspects of play, such as control, motivation, enjoyment and choice.

Teacher interviews suggested that leisure time and play was seen as a basic need for the children, and therefore was not withdrawn as a behaviour management strategy. Data from observations and informal discussions with teaching assistants on the yard suggested that interventions did not take place at break times. Teachers' belief in the importance of play was enacted through the protection and enhancement of break times:

I think sometimes, there's so much emphasis on moderating their reading and their writing but before any of that can take place, I think that play has to be central to all the learning. (Teacher 3)

I think giving them the freedom to have fun and make friends and then they're ready for learning after that. (Teacher 3)

It's giving them time to rest, time out, they can't just work all the time! (Teacher 3)

It's allowing them to have that little bit of independence, and shout with their friends and get into a bit of trouble sometimes. Because they're never allowed that, are they? And again, getting into trouble really is all part of their learning process, so they know when they've over-stepped the mark, or they've pushed the boundary too far, so they know not to do that again. It's all part of learning. (Headteacher)

### *Teachers' Pedagogy*

Teachers' pedagogy was child-centred, first identifying the needs of the child, and then planning for learning. In line with Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943), this ensured that learning was accessible for all children. Individuality, universality and rights were concepts that were frequently discussed with the children, both in discreet lessons and throughout the day. One opportunity that presented for discussion of children's rights between staff and children was via a restorative behaviour management system. Furthermore, at the beginning of each academic year, each class created a charter together, based upon the UNCRC stipulated rights:

It's looking at everybody as an individual and saying just because you're in Year 2, and these are our objectives for Year 2, not everybody can meet those. So. it's saying, "Yes, you have a right to learn, but you have a right to learn in the way that suits you best." (Teacher 2)

This child-centred approach allowed the teachers to identify the child's need for leisure time and play, informing the structure of the day and lesson. For example, during informal observation during lesson time, a child with a physical disability became tired during classwork, and so was taken out of class for some leisure time.

### *Use of a Play Continuum*

When asked to discuss play in relation to current practice, teachers generally described benefits of both instrumental and free play, without differentiating between the two.

Descriptions of play scenarios shifted along a continuum from instrumental play to free play (Wood, 2007). For example, Teacher 2 described a scenario that had begun as instrumental play and eventually became free play, as the child chose to persist at the activity after being told they had achieved the goal. She found this shift interesting and highlighted it as a time at which the child exercised their ability to choose:

If you turn it into a quiz, then suddenly, it's a game. (Teacher 1)

It helps children socially, emotionally; it helps them with cooperative skills, taking turns. But academically, it can also help embed those skills of your maths and English because the more they play it they don't realise they're learning. (Teacher 2)

### ***Centrality of Choice/Voice of the Child***

Children were heard within the school, and they had influence in the planning and execution of activities and initiatives. They had a high degree of participation (Hart, 1992). This was enacted at playtimes through children's planning and organisation of multiple optional activities. The activities were either child-led, adult-led or independently accessible. Children also had the option to play on the yard with or without play equipment, or just walk around the school or playground. Children were permitted to stay in their classroom if this was their preference. It was apparent through both observations and reports from teachers and children that children had ownership over their environment:

I like to do the walk, go 'round the yard. (Child 1)

When it's raining, I play in class. [inaudible] it's the best game. You try to get all your gems, try not to die, and try to get to ten points to go onto the next level. (Child 1)

I like playing football because I keep scoring goals, at least trying! (Child 1)

We had children who would be in the toilets all playtime or, always the same ones asking, "Can I stay in and do a job?" because they don't want to play out. And we thought, you shouldn't have to do a job because you don't want to play out. They should be doing something that they want to do. (Headteacher)

Well it's for all the children really, a lot of activities at playtime. So, we change the way all our playtimes are now. So, instead of them just going out and having free play, they still have that option, but they also have ... all the teaching assistants, there's like a rolling programme, do different activities. So, it can be things like board clubs, they've got the table football. (Teacher 1)

And then when they go outside at playtime, yes, we've got the play equipment, we've got buddies, but we offer all different sorts of clubs now as well. Because not everybody wants to go outside! (Teacher 3)

And then some children I just find them wandering, but they just pop in to say hello. And they're not doing anything they shouldn't be, they're just, that's their relaxation time, and I thought, we all have our break times. (Teacher 3)

Provision for playtimes changed daily, with announcements on a PA system of play options for the day. These options were informed by the children's school council. Children with SEND had the option to access any of the activities or engage in play on the yard.

### ***School Ethos***

Evident in both observations and teacher interviews was the narrative of the school of being both inclusive and child-centred. This appeared to be the most important element of the schools' narrative, and staff were keen to promote this. The theme of school ethos includes three components: the pupils' inclusive values; a child-centred approach; and an inclusive narrative.

### ***Pupils' Inclusive Values***

The frequent discussion around individuality, universality and rights appeared to have created a culture within the children of accepting differences. Via observations and pupil interviews, the primary factor in the inclusion of all children in play was the behaviour of other children. For example, a child with SEND came onto the playground. The rest of the children were already playing a game. When they saw the child with SEND, they approached him and asked him to join in. When he struggled to follow the rules, one child held his sleeve to help

him to run in the appropriate direction. During an observation of a different child with SEND, a group of girls realised that the game they were playing was too complex for her to access, and so moved into an area that she preferred. They then all became absorbed in their play and were able to play together in this area for a sustained period of time:

But when she is outside, we don't need to tell her, or get a group to say "Can she play with you?" It just happens naturally. The children come over and include her. They're very good at including her. (Teacher 2)

The headteacher appeared to be particularly proud of the way in which the children had adopted the rights respecting approach:

I asked the children what we would do if we weren't granted the Level 2 Award. They replied "We will carry on, because it's the right thing to do." (Headteacher)

It makes playing easier, like playing with your friends. (Child 1)

I like to play with my friends ... Mr. R, Mrs. S ... [child name]. (Child 3)

### *Child-Centred Approach*

All teacher participants commented that they considered their practice child-centred prior to undertaking the RRSA certification. They felt that it gave them a framework onto which to

map their current practice. They felt that treating all children as individuals and meeting their needs facilitated inclusion for all children, particularly those children with an identified SEND. Teachers felt that this approach impacted the behaviour of the children and facilitated respect between and across children and adults:

I think because this school ... the children are at the heart of everything ... and what the children need. I think I'm more aware of what we're doing and why we're doing it. (Teacher 3)

#### *An Inclusive Narrative*

The headteacher commented that she felt the school was already inclusive when they began to undertake the RRSA certification, and inclusion was facilitated throughout the school via the child-centred approach taken to teaching and learning:

I think we already were a very inclusive school. And we already considered the needs of all of our SEND children really carefully. But we have used the articles to show that children with disabilities have extra needs. And I think that was an important thing that it's about that equality, isn't it? (Headteacher)

Inclusion was mentioned in all of the teacher interviews directly, with the exception of Teacher 3's interview. However, Teacher 3 commented to the effect that inclusion was important:



And we also explain what they are capable of, and what they're not ... so that the other children can accommodate them in their play as well. And it's also saying, "Just because you can't do this the same as the other children, you can do something better in another area." (Teacher 3)

### *Individual Level*

#### *Accessibility*

Accessibility of the school grounds was observed to be a barrier to inclusion and play for the child participant with a physical disability who used a wheelchair as his primary method for movement. This was most clearly illustrated through access to the field. Teachers had recognised that his access to play was restricted by his inability to access the field in his wheelchair. Therefore, a path had been built onto the field to allow him access. However, as the child took longer to get onto the field via the path than the other children, playtime had usually ended when he reached the field, thus restricting his play opportunities. This barrier was recognised by the headteacher, and she commented that they were exploring different ways to help the child to access this play opportunity.

#### *Flexibility of Teaching and Structure of the Day*

Flexibility of teaching and structure of the day facilitated play for children with SEND. Teachers often differentiated their planning to allow for children with SEND to access their learning via different methods, such as through the use of instrumental play. Teachers adapted their teaching without prior notice if they felt that a lesson was inappropriate for a

child. The structure of the day was flexible, allowing for children with SEND to access interventions during typical lesson times, and therefore protecting playtimes:

The other day, I walked through the hall and there was a Year 6 group of children who struggle with their spellings and things, including special needs children as well, but they were learning it through a game. They were basically doing their spelling test, but it was a game, so they loved it. It's not that intense environment that they have in class, basically. (Teacher 1)

## **Discussion**

A body of research has highlighted children's decreased access to play opportunities (Ginsburg, 2007; Hofferth, & Sandberg, 2001; Lester & Russell, 2008, 2010). Children with disabilities were highlighted as a sub-group of children with additional barriers occluding their access to sufficient play opportunities, such as increased adult intervention and withdrawal of playtimes as a form of punishment.

The presented case study demonstrates how the facilitation of play for children with SEND is complex and multi-modal. The UNCRC states that "inclusive education and inclusive play are mutually reinforcing" (p. 10). This was demonstrated in the study findings at two levels: through an inclusive ethos supported by the RRSA at the whole-school level; and through adaptations made for children with SEND at the individual level. Inclusion was primarily facilitated for children with SEND through their inclusive interactions with other children. The RRSA provided a framework for facilitating discussion around individuality and facilitating the needs of all, which created an inclusive environment within the children.

A prominent aspect of the RRSA was the choice of children in their environment. Reddy and Ratna (2002) present levels of adult–child engagement, beginning where the adults actively resist children's participation through to scenarios jointly initiated and directed by adults and children. It was interesting to note the headteacher's description of the school's journey from the adults introducing the RRSA, and the active resistance of some school members, to the stage where children were jointly planning and executing initiatives alongside the staff. With regard to General Comment No. 17, this was demonstrated through the children's planning of their playtime activities, to their independence in how their leisure time was spent.

Casey (2015) highlights that children with disabilities may face co-occurring barriers to play, such as poverty. Kemp, et al. (2004) have identified the increased risk of poverty for those families that include a disabled child or young person. Therefore, all factors that may impact upon children's access to sufficient play opportunities must be considered. The research school's sensitivity to children's needs regardless of disability ensured that these co-occurring barriers were not neglected.

Some UK governments have begun to recognise the need for prioritising play for all children (Welsh Government, 2012; Scottish Government, 2013). Recognition of the child's right to play within government policy signals a positive shift in policymakers' thinking around the topic. Although the evolution of national policy signals a positive development for the recognition of the importance of play at the governmental level, transferring these changes into practice is more complex (Whitebread, et al., 2012). Teachers are currently facing increasing challenges — amongst these, pressure from management and parents to ensure specified academic attainment (Atkinson, et al., 2017) — often meaning that playtime is seen as an unnecessary extra (Pellegrini, 2008).

Despite these pressures, teachers and management staff within the current research site had prioritised play for children with SEND. The school staffs' understanding of the importance of and the developmental and academic gains afforded through play meant that adequate play opportunities were provided for all children.

### ***Limitations and Directions for Future Research***

The research provides a detailed description of how one Level Two RRS facilitates General Comment No. 17 for children with SEND, as well as offers some insight into the accompanying barriers and facilitators. Generalisability of the research is limited by the small sample size and self-selecting bias. The research is further limited by the use of a single-observer perspective. Future research should aim to provide a comprehensive evaluation of RRS practice and policy regarding General Comment No. 17. Exploration of the differences in views and practice between staff levels may be beneficial.

The current research did not focus primarily on the voice of the child. The author assumed that the child's voice was central to the Level 2 Award, therefore, this focus fell outside of the scope of the current research. However, future research may explore the level of participation of children with SEND in the development of General Comment No. 17 within their settings, possibly via the use of Hart's (1992) ladder of participation.

### **Conclusion**

The case study begins to address the gap in the research literature about how a mainstream education setting facilitates play for children with SEND. Despite the described limitations of the current research, it provides valuable insight into how this can be addressed.

Teachers facilitated inclusive play and inclusive education by taking a rights-based approach to practice. Reports from teachers suggested that facilitating this culture between and within levels in school led to a significant improvement in children's behaviour. The research highlighted that, for effective facilitation of inclusion, the rights cannot be viewed in isolation but rather as an interlinked system. Equal consideration must be given to all afforded rights via a whole-school approach.

The research shows that inclusive play and inclusive education are inextricably linked. It is surmised that creating an inclusive environment with a focus on children's rights increases children's feelings of belonging and attachment to their setting. Discussions around the UNCRC increase children's awareness of the rights of others and their understanding of their role in enabling these for others.

### ***Implications for Practice***

#### *Implications for Schools*

The current research provides an example for schools aiming to increase inclusion within their settings, and to facilitate play for all children, including children with SEND. Teachers from the current research site echoed Sebba and Robinson's (2010) and UNICEF's (2016) findings by stating that achieving the RRSA certification process has facilitated inclusion and improved behaviour within school.

Pearson and Howe (2017) highlight the often-reported difficulties around playtime behaviour and explore how children's participation within the design of their play spaces can improve this. The current research provides evidence for supporting children's ownership of their setting and may be of interest to settings attempting to improve behaviour in general, with a particular focus on playtime behaviour.

### *Implications for the Award*

The UNCRC (2013) suggests that ongoing training and development is central to the realisation of the rights. Although the teachers described the evolution of practice when first embedding the RRSA, they did not discuss further training after the RRSA was granted. This may be an important factor in future development of the RRSA.

### *Implications for Playwork Practitioners*

In line with the principles of Article 31, playworkers create time and space for children to follow their play interests, sometimes within the school context. An understanding of how play can be facilitated for children with SEND within a mainstream context, and barriers that exist to the facilitation of play within these contexts, will prove valuable.

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