

Irish Schoolyards: Teacher’s experiences of their practices and children’s play- “It’s not as straightforward as we think”

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With the inclusion of play as a right, schools are urged to consider whether *all* children can access play opportunities in schoolyards. Refocusing on play as occupation, is identified as an important way in which occupational therapists can contribute within schools. Greater knowledges of children’s play and teachers’ practices, in schoolyards in an Irish context, is required however to guide practices.

This inquiry used interviews to explore with ten primary school teachers, their practices, and experiences of children’s play in Irish schoolyards.

Reflexive thematic analysis was used to generate three interrelated themes. These were a) Break(in)time: Play in schoolyards as different from other ways of doing within schools, b) play as producing inclusion and exclusion, c) and certainties and uncertainties produced in teachers’ everyday practices.

This inquiry generated knowledges on the social nature of children’s play and teachers’ practices in Irish schoolyards as negotiated processes, interacting with diverse intentions, and the particularities of each schoolyard. The consequences of individualising choice were highlighted as central to the production of inclusion and exclusion in schoolyards. Greater consideration of how children’s play and teachers’ practices occur as collective occupations, is proposed to advance inclusive schoolyards.

Keywords: Play occupation, school-based occupational therapy practice, collective occupations

Introduction

Collaborative school-based occupational therapy practices are advocated to support children's participation in school occupations and influence inclusion (World Federation of Occupational Therapists, 2016). In Ireland, according to O Donoghue et al (2021) although occupational therapy is provided to children in education settings, most therapists are employed by health services. Recently, Fitzgerald, and Mac Cobb (2022) describe developments towards a school-based, tiered, practice model, focused on needs, rather than diagnosis, as part of the national inclusive education agenda. The need, to build knowledges with children, teachers, parents, and therapists in an Irish context is championed, due to a dearth of contextualized research specific to school based practices and criticisms of inclusive policy implementation (Fitzgerald & MacCobb, 2022; O'Donoghue et al, 2021; Shevlin & Banks, 2021). Increasingly relevant to school-based practices is children's participation and inclusion in play, given the repositioning of play in schools, as a right, and a determinant of health and well-being (Moore & Lynch, 2018; Prellwitz & Skar, 2016).

Russell's (2021) systematic review affirms the significance of play in schoolyards for children's health, well-being, learning, and belonging. Russell's (2021) analysis of the research concludes however that prioritising children's enjoyment of self-organised play and not instrumental outcomes offers the best outcomes. The review also draws attention to the amplified tensions within schools, where the emphasis is on learning and development, to these differing interrelated values on play, socially produced by adults and children. The need to focus on the provision of space, time, and permission for freely chosen play, is reinforced in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, General Comment 17, recommendations to schools (UNCRC, 2013). In an Irish context, educational policy mandates outdoor breaktimes (the equivalent word for recess) of thirty minutes per day (Devine et al, 2020). School principals are responsible for scheduling supervision as part of teacher duties to ensure the safety of the schoolyard. While the research is limited, schoolyards are described as predominantly hard surfaced, lacking play equipment with little guidance to teachers beyond optional online resources on schoolyard games (Devine et al., 2020; Marron, 2008). While evidence of an increasing value on play, is reflected in the inclusion of play-based and outdoor learning in Irish curricula, this has been critiqued as recruiting play for cognitive learning "eduplay" for mostly younger children (Kilkelly et al., 2016; Walsh & Fallon, 2021). Opportunities for free play are thus primarily consigned to

break times which receive limited attention in Irish educational policy (Lynch et al., 2017; Walsh & Fallon, 2021).

Within an Irish context, occupational therapy practice is also problematized, as continuing to focus on recruiting play for the development of skills, informed by normative adult assumptions about the nature of play and childhood (Ray-Kaesler & Lynch, 2016; Lynch et al., 2017). Play in schoolyards, according to recent research, remains neglected and underleveraged (Baines & Blatchford, 2019; Sterman et al., 2019). Despite this limited attention to date, Brown, and Lynch (2022) describe the key role that occupational therapists have in promoting, facilitating, and developing play opportunities, for children within schoolyards. Research on play-focused interventions internationally, has highlighted the importance of building teachers' capacity and evaluating and tailoring interventions to address staff cultures within schools (Grady-Dominguez et al., 2021; Sterman et al., 2020). This aligns with interdisciplinary research identifying the significance of adults' influence on children's play opportunities (Chancellor & Hyndman, 2017; Larsson & Ronnlund, 2020; Russell, 2021).

Teachers and play in schoolyards.

According to Russell's (2021) study research has focused on how teachers' decision-making regulates and circumscribes play within the schoolyard. Evidence suggests that teachers' interactions within schoolyards, are based on moral judgements and competing normative discourses, on children's need for both free play and protection (Chancellor & Hyndman, 2017; Kernan & Devine, 2010; Jerebine et al, 2022; Larsson & Ronnlund, 2020). While valuing children's freedom to make their own play choices, teachers' primary reported concern is maintaining control, to ensure safety and minimise antisocial behaviours (Jerebine et al., 2022; Prisk & Cusworth, 2019; Putra et al., 2020; Russell, 2021). This predominant protectionist agenda is, according to research, influenced also by an increase in professional accountability and further complicated by ; limitations in space, equipment, and training; inadequate ratios of teachers; conflicting expectations and contradictory guidance related to risk management (Baines & Blatchford, 2019; Jerebine et al., 2022; McNamara, 2017; Spencer et al., 2016; van Rooijen and Newstead, 2017). Despite providing a break from the rules and requirements of the classroom, the schoolyard is, for teachers, often the most stressful time of day (Russell, 2021).

The limited attention to play in schoolyards as a site of intersecting racial, religious, classed, and gendered exclusion is also identified in research (Chancellor & Hyndman, 2017; Devine & McGillicuddy, 2019; Mulryan-Kyne, 2014). In an Irish context, 1 in 5 children describe being bullied in schoolyards with evidence of teachers' benign and complicit responses to discrimination and racism towards children who identify as Irish Traveller (an ethnic indigenous community in Ireland), migrant and LGBTQI+ (Devine & McGillicuddy, 2019; Farrelly et al., 2016; Kavanagh & Dupont, 2021; McGinley & Keane, 2021). Similarly, recent international studies have described the invisible social and attitudinal barriers restricting disabled children's play opportunities in schoolyards (Serman et al., 2021; Wenger et al., 2021; Brown, 2013). These studies advocate for further research on how play transacts with social exclusion. Massey et al's (2020) recent review contends that there is a lack of understanding of the social dimensions of play, beyond the existence of power hierarchies and little evidence to date of social inclusion benefits of play interventions.

Addressing restrictions on children's space, time, and permission to play within schoolyards is the focus of interdisciplinary recommendations, aimed at reducing adult influences (Russell, 2021). Occupational therapy research on play-focused interventions, for example, describes supporting teachers with risk reframing, to increase play choice and inclusion in schoolyards. Risk reframing practices aim to challenge the reported adult conflation of risk-taking with danger and restrictive practices based on normative assumptions of children's capabilities (Grady-Dominguez et al., 2021; Hinchion et al., 2021). However, recent scholarship acknowledges that realizing children's individual rights and the best interests of the majority in schoolyards is complex. Given the lack of guidance regarding the schoolyard, a balanced approach is advocated that recognises the tensions and diversity of factors influencing adult decisions (Gillett Swan & Lundy, 2022; van Rooijen and Newstead, 2017). Findings of children's positive experiences of teachers supporting play opportunities in schoolyards and minimizing bullying and exclusion in the schoolyard also requires consideration (Hyndman, 2016; Massey et al., 2021; Russell, 2021). There is an argument, according to Pittard (2015) for a need to be critically open to ways in which research produces teachers, contributing often to a pervasive deficit and blame discourse, that reinforces teachers' individual moral responsibilities and measures of accountability. The reported dearth of research exploring with teachers their experiences and perspectives, suggests further examination is needed on representations of teachers as a primary restricting influence on children's play (Chancellor & Hyndman, 2017; Larsson & Ronnlund, 2020; Russell, 2021).

Interdisciplinary scholarship has criticized research agendas focused on validating current practices on “what” works and calls for different ways of knowing and practicing that shifts focus to “how” play emerges in specific contexts (Larsson & Ronnlund, 2020; Lester, 2020). Occupational science research has generated greater understandings of the contextualized and social nature of everyday play opportunities, to support occupational therapy practices (Galvaan, 2015; Gerlach et al., 2018; Ramugondo, 2015; Prellwitz & Skar, 2016). Increasingly, this research has drawn attention to how the complex socio-spatial processes occurring within play, can support inclusion and/or sustain exclusion and recommends further research in specific contexts with children and teachers (Brackmaan et al., 2017; Brown & Lynch, 2022; Fahy et al, 2020; Gerlach & Browne, 2021; Wenger et al., 2021). Given the limited research to date on this mandated yet neglected space and time in children’s daily lives, the generation of contextualised knowledges is necessary, to understand how play emerges and interacts with the creation of more inclusive schools.

This inquiry aims to explore with primary school teachers their practices and experiences of children’s play in Irish schoolyards. This inquiry is part of a wider research project which attempts to iteratively produce knowledges from different perspectives on play in schoolyards.

Approach

This research holds a critical intent to inform practice. According to Nayar & Stanley (2015) qualitative methods have been identified as most useful for practice-focused research, to explore the complex, diverse experiences, and perspectives of occupations in contexts. A qualitative methodological approach was thus employed, to generate knowledges that are ‘*socially produced and reproduced via an interplay of subjective and inter-subjective construction*’ (Byrne, 2022, p. 1396). Aligning with occupational science understandings of knowledges as relational and political, the meaning-making of participants and researcher interpretations are thus entangled in a co-constitutive process of inquiry (Clarke & Braun, 2019). While mindful of the inherent limitations of knowing one’s tacit assumptions as described by Taguchi and St Pierre, (2016) researcher reflexive diary processes were used throughout the inquiry. The primary researcher’s positionality includes holding points of connection with participants as a white cisgender woman, living in Ireland and working in public healthcare, with an interest in play and inclusion in schools. Experiences within

schools have been as a visiting therapist only and engagement with critical interdisciplinary research on play and inclusion inevitably influenced thinking. Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Log number: 2021-0357) and the Social Research Ethics Committee, University College Cork (Log number:2021-111). In compliance with legislation and good research practice standards, a detailed data management plan was used.

Participants

Primary school teachers with a specific interest in the topic of play and schoolyards were invited to participate, ensuring respect for the co-constitutive processes of the inquiry aims (Byrne, 2022). Purposive recruitment involved contacting primary school teacher organizations, regional practice education centers, and postgraduate courses with information to forward to their networks. The researcher also shared study information on social media, and with health and community networks. The information sheet had a QR code that invited completion of an MS Forms indicating interest in participation. Over four months of continuous information sharing, 14 teachers completed expression of interest forms. Potential participants were contacted by e-mail with further detailed information, researcher contact details, consent forms, and interview times. Ten teachers responded and consented to participate in the study, confirming their specific interest in play in schoolyards. Nine of the participants had more than ten years of experience working in diverse school contexts including disadvantaged schools and seven of the participants had teaching experience with children requiring additional educational supports. Participant characteristics are outlined in Table 1.

(Table 1 here)

Methods

Drawing on qualitative methods texts, interview methods that reflect the reflexive and responsive intentions of the inquiry approach were chosen (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). A more dialogic form of interviews enabled teachers to describe their experiences of children's play in schoolyards, clarify their perspectives on concepts and ideas, and engage in discussion within the interview. The inquiry aims and prompt questions were shared before the interview. However, each interview was responsive and entangled with ideas and thoughts from previous interviews in an iterative process of inquiry. Interviews were completed with 8 teachers using video conferencing software MS Teams and 2 interviews were completed

during walking interviews within their schoolyard. The virtual platform provided teachers with greater control over the interview (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Furthermore, completing interviews within teachers' own school environment both virtually and in the walking interviews, supported teachers with sharing thoughts prompted by being in context (Truman & Springaay, 2016).

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) provided a systematic way to engage with the interview data in a flexible 6-stage process (Braun et al., 2022). RTA understands knowledge as contextual, reflexivity as essential, and themes as generated by the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Expanding on Braun and Clarke's (2021) acknowledgment of the interrelatedness of the two primary analysis approaches, this inquiry prioritised participants' experiential subjective sense-making while also drawing on occupational science theorizing on play and inclusion processes to interrogate patterns of meaning from narratives (Braun et al., 2022; Byrne, 2022).

- The first stage of becoming familiar with the data involved transferring interview recordings of 50 to 100 minutes to secure MS stream software and generating an initial unedited transcript. Each audio recording was then listened to repeatedly and the unedited transcripts were reviewed to produce a final written record.
- The second stage of generating initial codes held on very lightly to the inquiry aim and was completed on each interview separately by identifying any words or descriptions that represented single ideas, relevant to what teachers and children are doing in schoolyards. Coding labels were produced for each interview and written in a column alongside the transcript. The initial coding labels recorded surface-level descriptions of children's play, teachers' practices, schoolyards, and experiences of inclusion and exclusion processes. Latent meanings were also recorded that -involved interpreting underlying ideas and assumptions from teachers' descriptions, informed particularly by the occupational science literature on play.
- The third stage of searching for themes involved grouping codes together from each interview separately that held commonalities for example, related to teachers' feelings, children's behaviors, or environmental factors. Links to relevant extracts from interviews were recorded to ensure the analysis remained focused on the data. Each set of interview codes was then transferred to a single document and an analysis of the entire data set was completed generating initial themes.

- Stage four involved reviewing and generating distinctive themes by looking for shared meanings across initial themes and identifying a central concept that captured the core point of each theme. At this stage, descriptions and interpretations were relevant to several themes and a visual map was used to help examine connections for example, the spatial dimensions of the schoolyard, teachers' practices, and children's play.
- The fifth stage involved collaborative reflexivity on the nature of each theme generated to ensure the central organizing concept was clear and supported by interview extracts. The process included returning to the inquiry aim and initial transcripts while also being mindful of the points of resonance and difference with existing theoretical concepts. At this stage, it was necessary to consider if any important elements in the data were excluded.
- The sixth stage of writing up themes involved further refinement to articulate clearly the main concepts and also the contradictions and ambiguities that each theme held.

Results

Analysis of teachers' interviews informed by occupational science theorizing on play, generated three themes (1) Break(in)time: Play in schoolyards as different from other ways of doing within schools, (2) play as producing inclusion and exclusion and (3) certainties and uncertainties produced in teachers' everyday practices. These different but interrelated concepts highlighted the contextualized and social nature of play and teachers' practices in schoolyards.

Break(in)time: Play in schoolyards as different ways of doing within schools.

It's their break, their brain breaks, and they just want to burn their energy and run and have fun. So, it's free play. Yeah, it's not quiet time, it's fun time and they can just let loose, to an extent, within restrictions. But it's different (Teacher 4).

The central concept generated in this theme was how teachers experienced break times in schoolyards, as different from other school spacetimes, for both children and teachers. Play was fundamental to this perceived difference, represented as what children inherently choose to do when afforded a necessary break from the rigid requirements of classrooms. Play also opened up different ways of interacting with children and colleagues in schoolyards. Further analysis examined the contrasting narrative of teachers' everyday experiences of holding the tension of returning to classroom-type practices.

Compared to other spaces and times within school, the schoolyard was where teachers experienced “*kids being kids*” (Teacher 5). Despite more interest in imaginative games based on digital play worlds in recent years, children’s play essentially “*looks the same*” (Teacher 6). Experiences of children’s resourcefulness and imagination in appropriating objects and spaces for play, intersected with teachers’ experiences of certain “*patterns of what children want to do when they go outside*” (Teacher 7). Children as always inherently ready for play and fun was a dominant idea, whereby the schoolyard break was understood as opening up the possibility for play. Freedom as both the power to choose and in the emancipatory sense was thus central in teachers’ descriptions of how the schoolyard was different.

They need to reset their batteries and get fresh air and get out and move. You know if they did badly in a test, it's their time to forget about it when they go outside and enjoy their friendships (Teacher 4).

Freedom to choose what to do intersected with certain expectations, in teachers’ perceptions of the importance of movement and fresh air and of providing children with a necessary rest between learning times to support the primary educational focus within schools. Compared to classrooms, being outdoors required different considerations such as weather elements and seasonal cycles.

Getting on the grass is just like it's like I don't know animals in spring they just love it (Teacher 10).

The different ways of doing within schoolyards extended to teachers’ experiences of their own practices. This was most evident in descriptions of a reluctance to intrude directly in children’s play with structured games or play suggestions.

You might maybe suggest a game that they could play together but at the same time....I wouldn't feel happy dictating what the children do on yards (Teacher 6).

The ideal of providing a break time that was different, in allowing for freedom and choice, was however in tension with everyday experiences of children’s’ perceived natural tendencies to push boundaries- to run too fast, shout too loud, climb, and move outside allocated spaces. Navigating this “*minefield*” (Teacher 7) involves unpredictable everyday accidents and behaviors that regularly reach into classrooms, where teachers must deal with

issues from play. Despite being in tension with teachers' values of play for fun, freedom, and choice, a good schoolyard break becomes one with an absence of conflict. Teachers' practices aimed at preventing conflict differed depending on schools and included rules on picking teams and competitive games, establishing boundaries on movement, restricting access to objects, and giving access to digital play indoors on wet days. Teachers described this as not always the right thing to do however as necessary given their experiences of the consequences of the choices children make.

They're not allowed up on that hill during breaktime because they'd start rolling down....we were constantly dealing with rows, arguments over the games, UM, issues in friendships, stuff like that..constant, constant, constant sorting out of issues.. We don't allow balls out because we end up. It's like A & E for the afternoon when they come back in, fixing up cuts and bruises (Teacher 2) (*Accident & Emergency)*

As teachers with a specific interest in and inherent value on play, this time offered different positive experiences within the day, however also crossed the line at times to impact the well-being of teachers. Missing their own break, being out in inclement weather, getting hit with balls, and maintaining a constant state of vigilance is amplified within the schoolyard where “you’re *only as good as your last yard duty*” (Teacher 10). The sudden enforced changes of COVID-19 restrictions however made more possible teachers' ideals of the schoolyard as a different space for free play. Despite fewer children, restricted movements, and a need for increased supervision duty, predominantly teachers experienced the space as quieter with fewer incidents. However, teachers also noted how in smaller rural schools the need to separate children on schoolyards reduced social contact. Supervising the same yard each day allowed for “*seamless*” (Teacher 1) managing of yard issues on the yard and greater opportunities for teachers to take more notice, develop relationships, and be surprised by children’s capacities to make play happen.

Prior to COVID. you know, we were all rostered, but you could be supervising other class groups and you didn't know the children... I loved COVID yard (Teacher 7).

Play in schoolyards producing exclusion and inclusion.

Teachers' experiences, particularly of the play of children identified as minoritized in schoolyards resonated with theorizing on how play produces inclusion and exclusion, to generate this theme. The schoolyard was experienced by teachers as a thrown-together mix of children, and teachers with diverse abilities and difficulties. Inclusion within play in schoolyards intersected with teachers' values on children's individual freedoms to choose play preferences and to be their "real" selves on schoolyards. Based on their experiences, exclusion was anticipated by teachers for children who they perceived lacked the natural skills to navigate play with others. Inclusive play in schoolyards affirmed teachers' own identities as inclusive practitioners and was unsettled by teachers' acknowledgments of undercurrents of exclusion.

Play in schoolyards as revealing individual identities entangled with recognitions of the production of both dominant group and marginalized identities. Teachers described their experiences of children who can move their bodies with ease, speak the primary language, and enjoy the same sense of fun as the majority, naturally negotiating play with others. The preferred play preferences of children with perceived natural abilities, mostly ball games and physical play were experienced by teachers as dominating schoolyards.

I suppose kids that have a good sense of humor and are orally capable. They do so well in play. Uhm, I think the lesser capable the lesser, the less sporty, and potentially the less popular children would end up nearly in their own little group. Not that that's necessarily right or wrong either....Like they haven't got the wherewithal to force themselves in or to be assertive enough to get involved. In general, I want everyone to be involved, but that's my understanding of it I don't necessarily think that that is the reality. (Teacher 1).

Friendships are formed around shared interests and teachers described how this inevitably created group differences and often hierarchies within schoolyards. Teachers reflected on the changing nature of contact between children outside of schools in different communities and how the potential to be in a class with peers with shared interest was also often just "luck" (Teacher 7). Children who do not speak the majority language and autistic children are of most concern in terms of not playing with others in the schoolyard and are marked out by their perceived lack of natural abilities.

You can nearly look at the one and say, ohh, right? I can see there's going to be a problem, or you can see the child where you know they're just going to get on (Teacher 4).

Teachers' descriptions of children not wanting to or having difficulty playing with other children intersects with normative assumptions of children in representing these children as different. The idea of the school as a community and of having a social responsibility to ensure all children are included was described as complicated by teachers, due to their experiences of children choosing not to play with others. Exclusion within play was thus individualized.

Probably the only time I've ever seen exclusion was where one child chose to exclude herself...So if a child wants to not...to be completely quiet and it, and it's their choice. It isn't an exclusionary practice(Teacher 8).

A sense of schoolyards as more inclusive spaces is according to teachers' present in experiences of children showing kindness to younger and disabled children, although less evident for children with hidden disabilities. However, teachers challenged romantic notions of the schoolyard based on their experiences of how children include and exclude each other within play as *"not as straightforward as we think it is. Just that, there's definitely, an awful lot more going on than we know or can think or see"* (Teacher 6). Exclusion tends to be largely unseen, an undercurrent within the schoolyard. Teachers experienced physical fighting as often merely blowing off steam, however, conversely had zero tolerance for the behavior for fear it would descend into further acts of violence. Exclusion is gendered as *"girls can be tricky"* (Teacher 6) and boys are *"trying to establish the hierarchy...because I'm stronger than you"* (Teacher 3) and racialized.

I know that they definitely do stick together because they know one another and they know they're the same, and I think that that is what it comes down to a lot of the time. That they know that they're members of the ethnic minority (Teacher 4).

Racism was described as particularly complex and difficult to navigate and as an undercurrent within the schoolyard. Racism was remembered from childhood and acknowledged as a societal issue that can seep into schoolyard play *"there is a divide in that way ..and you probably wouldn't sense it, if you visited the class. But under the surface it is*

there” (Teacher 4). However, a reluctance to accept racism was evident in teachers’ perspectives of increasing diversity within schoolyards where difference is accepted alongside dominant perspectives that racism is not inherent in children.

I think the opinion of a 12 or 11- or 10-year-old boy. He doesn't have that racist opinion (Teacher 7).

The tension between acknowledging both intersecting forms of exclusion and the schoolyard as inclusive is further nuanced by considerations of the schoolyard as affirming teachers' own positionality, as inclusive educators. Pride in the schoolyard where children play together affirms the work of teachers in promoting an ethos of inclusion.

You feel like the school is a success. If when you let the children out onto the yard and it's, it's not a teacher-led thing that if the children are actually, including each other and playing well together and stuff (Teacher 6).

Teachers' own identities are thus also produced on the schoolyard. Teachers share similar needs to belong and relate to others and preferences for natural, aesthetically, and sensory pleasing spaces that intersect with their own personal experiences from childhood, as parents, and as work colleagues.

Out in the yard, you're not the teacher, unless something happens, something goes wrong. You're kind of just. A bit of craic, bit of fun, you know (Teacher 7).

Uncertainties and certainties produced in teachers’ everyday practice in schoolyards.

This theme generated understandings of teachers' practices as produced by certainties of knowing what works and as responsive to unexpected everyday occurrences requiring the management of uncertainties. The analysis thus generated a central concept of teachers' practices that held contrasting and often contradictory dimensions. Being a parent and spending time on the schoolyard with children was most valued in terms of developing knowledges on how to support play and inclusion. More experience in different schools and roles further attuned teachers to the needs of children who find the schoolyard challenging, to how spaces influence children’s play, to teachers’ responsibilities and their potential to influence.

I used to kind of think of it that, what went on in the, on the yard, you couldn't really control, or you couldn't really get involved in. Whereas now you see some children that might struggle in the yard, and you can actually, make accommodations for them (Teacher 9).

Reassurances in the growing references to free play in curricula were described as problematic in focusing on pre-determined learning goals over children's choices. The limited understanding of conceptualizations of play mirrored teachers' experience of an overall limited interest in play in schoolyards among colleagues. However, the endless possibilities within schoolyard play were also described as providing learning opportunities not possible within the classroom and reinforcing content in a more natural environment.

They're all sitting at their tables in the classroom and you're practicing social skills or you're learning about social skills. They have to have the opportunity to put them into practice. And where better than on the schoolyard? (Teacher 6).

Disciplinary issues, safety, and staff well-being on schoolyards were identified as the primary agenda topics within staffrooms. This was reinforced by experiences of limited parental and societal tolerance for disciplinary practices alongside expectations to prevent all accidents and incidences of bullying and to remedy children's limited play opportunities outside of school. The absence of guidelines or funding for play in schoolyards, and the consequences of perceived personal accountability including litigation fears, means according to teachers that safety must be prioritized. Reaching for certainties settled somewhat the tensions between teachers' values and practices.

There's two things. One is that you have to keep them physically safe. That would be always my number one is to make sure that they're that they are safe. And I do think as a teacher you would feel that you know if you were slacking in that regard for whatever reason you, you know you wouldn't be long hearing about it from kind of senior management. If you weren't, you know enforcing kind of the school rules and making sure that everybody was safe. And the second thing is that you know it's your other responsibility is to make sure that children are happy on the yard and so that when they're outside at playtime, you know that they're not being left out, that you know that people do have an opportunity to kind of play and enjoy themselves (Teacher 6).

Teachers described their relationships with children, of knowing children, as central to supporting play and inclusion in schoolyards. Dilemmas around how to really ensure inclusion in play for all children require however in practice a “*lot of trial and error*” (Teacher 4) with often unanticipated outcomes concerning what works. Practically, teachers' experiences of children losing interest in new resources and conversely, of finding play despite potential barriers, reinforced preferences for increased space rather than play resources. The certainties of practices are unsettled by the constant weighing-up processes required alongside enforced management decisions, unanticipated events such as COVID-19, everyday unpredictable encounters, and differing perspectives of colleagues. Supervising schoolyards with teachers who perceive break time to be a difficult chore, their social time, or who “*don't tend to want to get that little bit wet themselves*” (Teacher 9) requires tactful negotiation and compromise. Frustrations particularly with younger teachers' lack of interest in play, however, intersected with an appreciation of the complex ambiguities of practice in schoolyards. Recommendations to risk reframe and create more inclusive play environments according to teachers, often lack contextualized knowledges and fail to address the consequences for teachers.

I think we as a staff can make that decision for us as a staff because I think you get guidance, but guidance is still going to be very generic. You know a school is still going to have to find out well, this is our specific setting (Teacher 2).

Policy guidance and more natural spaces were identified as desirable, however teachers valued most increased opportunities for professional discussions and sharing of perspectives and practices. This self-determination was reinforced when teachers had positive experiences of adapting to change during COVID-19 and working in solidarity with teachers who hold common values on play. Play together in the schoolyard and teachers' practices intersected with ideas of the school as a community, where everyday encounters are negotiated in response to individual needs and the needs of each other.

I often heard the saying that school is a preparation for life, but that's not the truth at all. School is life, and I think everybody needs to see it as that way (Teacher 10).

Discussion

This inquiry contributes to knowledges of teachers' practices and experiences of children's play in schoolyards, in an Irish context. Reflexive thematic analysis of interviews, with teachers who expressed a specific interest in and value on play, generated interpretations of play as fundamental to the difference of breaktimes within schools and the production of inclusion and exclusion. Teachers' practices as both reaching for certainties and accepting uncertainties intersected with tensions and challenges experienced within schoolyards that are comparable with results from existing studies (Baines et al., 2020; Chancellor & Hyndman, 2017; Larsson & Ronnlund, 2020; Russell, 2021; Spencer et al., 2016). As in other contexts, teachers in this inquiry described a) valuing play for social learning, rest, being with peers, physical activity, and fresh air however prioritized children's safety on schoolyards b) experiencing the schoolyard as stressful, with challenges such as limited space, lack of guidance on supporting play, reduced interest in play from colleagues, contradictory expectations and litigation fears and c) everyday practices as less guided by intentional pedagogical choices and more by tacit knowledge. These results align with research on the difference between ideals of the schoolyard as a place for free play, and the realities of adult governance and surveillance practices (Baines & Blatchford, 2019; Prisk & Cusworth, 2019; Ramugondo, 2015; Russell, 2021). Contrasting representations generated in this inquiry of the schoolyard as different from other school routines, yet constantly returning to classroom-type practices also highlighted the dissonance experienced between everyday practices and teachers' values on play and identities as inclusive educators.

An important contribution of this inquiry is the results on how teachers' own positionality as inclusive educators, interacted with a reluctance to acknowledge exclusionary elements within schoolyards. Teachers' acknowledgment of the constrained choices and undercurrents of invisible exclusions on some children's opportunities, conflicted with their own identities as inclusive educators. This inquiry made clear that while the schoolyard is understood as a place of play, teachers held a diversity of intentions that were often in tension, promoting individual children's play choices, ensuring that all children felt safe and included, and supporting the well-being of both children and teachers. Despite intentions to create opportunities for all children to play and reinforce community, a successful schoolyard was according to teachers, one with an absence of conflict. The prioritizing of children's safety

intersected with normative assumptions on childhood, risk and play and teachers experiences of being accountable for physical injuries on schoolyards. Van de Putte (2018) argues that a responsibility-blame discourse has consequences to how teachers interact on schoolyards and according to Lester (2020) also binds adults to certain ways of doing. Teachers' experiences of an absence of conflict as an acceptable outcome for breaktimes, in this inquiry, highlights the consequences of individualizing fault in restricting teachers' visions of what inclusive schoolyards could be.

The consequences of individualizing responsibility were equally present in relation to teachers experiences of children's play in schoolyards and inclusion and exclusion. This inquiry generated understandings of how the individualising of children's choice to play, is central to the production of dominant and at-risk identities in schoolyards. Children's shared motivation to have fun together and include each other within play existed in teachers' experiences alongside, what Ringrose and Renold (2016) have previously identified as "*normative cruelties*" (p 573). Negotiating everyday social conflicts within play is thus represented as an accepted aspect of childhood, reflected in this inquiry, in teachers' descriptions of their concerns for children who lacked these social skills. Risks of exclusion were then located in the child, who could not or would not play with others in the schoolyard. As Spencer et al (2016) has previously reported, differences are perceived as absences in the child. Normative discourses on play, as reflective of children's culture and childhood thus intersected with the production and fixing of identities of "naturally" good players and "others" who do not align with what Ronnlund (2017) refers to as, the ideal schoolyard child.

This individualizing of responsibility to children has however been problematized, as not only reflecting deficit assumptions but of failing to recognize structural inequities and intersectional oppressions (Ronnlund, 2017; Russell, 2021). Occupational science research has contributed to understandings of how structural and socio-spatial inequities constrain children's everyday play choices (Brackmaan et al., 2017; Galvaan et al., 2015; Ramugondo, 2015). Furthermore, recent research in an Irish context has examined how self-segregation and disruptive behaviors are represented as individual choices rather than maladaptive coping strategies (Ní Dhuinn & Keane., 2021; Mc Ginley & Keane, 2021). The silence around violence in play described by Russell (2021) was present in teachers' representations of racism in Irish schoolyards, as an unseen, undercurrent. As Lentin (2020) argues, the mattering of racialized identities, is necessary. Despite inclusive intentions, according to Mc

Ginley & Keane, (2021) tendencies to refute racism within schoolyards has been equated with indifference and complicity. An increased consciousness of social exclusion sustained by and through everyday play is according to recent research, necessary for promoting a common school identity, enhancing belonging and realizing teacher's identity as inclusive educators (Ramugondo, 2015; Mulryan-Kyne, 2014; McNamara et al., 2017; Massey et al., 2021; Narayan & Armheim, 2020; Walker et al., 2022).

The reported reluctance to interfere in children's play, identified in this inquiry aligns with play scholarship recommendations advocating for minimal adult interference to focus on creating time, space and permission for play (McNamara et al., 2017; Brown & Lynch, 2022). However, this supervisory role was complicated by teachers experiences of balancing their diverse intentions and responsibilities, their knowledge of and relationships with children and the contextualised differences of each schoolyard. Teachers' everyday day experiences involved navigating whether to step in or stand back and allow children to manage the social "risks", and extend classroom taught prosocial rules to the schoolyard. Teachers described responding in a "trial and error" way acknowledging the uncertainties about not always knowing what was best to do. This lack of certainty may also reflect the reported dearth of research and guidance on practices that address social conflict and exclusion occurring within schoolyards (Gillett Swan & Lundy, 2022; Massey et al, 2020; van Rooijen & Newstead, 2017). However, this inquiry also highlights how children's and teachers' everyday choices were experienced as negotiated and responsive processes, occurring within this always changing break(in)time.

Representations of children's play and teachers' practices in schoolyards as guided by individualistic assumptions, are disrupted in this inquiry when considered alongside teachers' descriptions of the contextualized and social nature of the schoolyard. Research within occupational science on the need to shift from individualistic to social understandings of play (Brackmaan et al., 2017; Galvaan, 2015; Gerlach et al., 2018), informed the analysis of teacher's descriptions of their experiences of schoolyard occupations. The knowledges generated resonated with recent occupational science conceptualizations of collective occupations, defined as:

Occupations that are engaged in by individuals, groups, communities, and/or societies in everyday contexts; these may reflect an intention towards social

cohesion or dysfunction, and/or advancement of or aversion to a common good
(Ramugondo and Kronenberg, 2015, p. 10).

Teacher's descriptions of their experiences of schoolyard occupations went beyond the boundaries of play and teachers practices to include –talking with friends, fighting, resolving conflicts, enjoying shared interests, having the “craic”, (fun) and negotiating the use of objects and spaces. Expanding on this, were teachers' experiences of the shared collective preferences of both children and adults for natural and sensory-pleasing spaces that afford a sense of safety, well-being, and belonging. The schoolyard, comprised of children and teachers, both known and unknown to each other with diverse identities, experiences, values, and preferences engaging in a variety of occupations. Considering collective occupations according to Ramugondo (2015) supports a shift in focus from individualistic ideas to a recognition of the interconnectedness of people as constantly being shaped by “*what we are able or unable to do within groups, communities, and society*” (p. 496). This inquiry highlighted the diverse rather than shared intentions present in everyday play and practices and how this intersected with the particularities of each schoolyard and normative discourses, to produce inclusion and exclusion. Framing play and teachers' practices as collective occupations highlights the importance of examining the intentionality within schoolyards. Furthermore, it prompts the question of how play represented as fundamental to the perceived difference of the schoolyard in this inquiry, can be mobilised within the shared space of the schoolyard to create inclusive communities.

Implications for Occupational Therapy

The need for greater attention to the social dimensions and interdependence of occupations and the diversity of school contexts is identified in recent research on occupational therapy practices in schools (Fitzgerald & Mac Cobb, 2022; Grady-Dominguez et al., 2021; Moore et al, 2022; O'Donoghue et al., 2021; O' Leary, 2022). This inquiry contributes to knowledges on the social and contextualised nature of children's play and teachers practices in schoolyards. The significance of children's play in schoolyards to inclusion reinforces the importance of focusing on play in schoolyards as occupational therapists. This inquiry highlighted how teachers prioritized having more opportunities for professional dialogue within schools to address challenges as they valued most knowledges about the contextualised differences of each schoolyard. This reinforces the benefits for

occupational therapists to develop collaborative relationships within school contexts and act in solidarity with children and teachers to address the challenges identified.

Furthermore, the inquiry proposes that the concept of collective occupations offers occupational therapists a way of extending current practices from a focus on individual children's right to play and universal recommendations alone. This framing prompts consideration of how play emerges within collective occupations occurring within schoolyards where everyday choices are negotiated and responsive within relationships and the particularities of each context. Occupational therapists can create spaces for teachers and children to engage in reflexivity on the diversity of intentions held in relation to breaktimes, the challenges particular to each schoolyard and how inclusion and exclusion occurs within collective occupations in schoolyards. Raising consciousness can support the negotiation of a shared purpose where the focus shifts to "*doing well together*" in schoolyards (Ramugondo & Kronenberg, 2015). As occupational therapists, this inquiry also supports the need for further research on the transformative potential within play, towards creating inclusive communities.

Methodological Considerations

This inquiry holds no intentions to represent or report consensus findings of teachers' experiences, as reflected in the purposive sampling of teachers with a specific interest in play and schoolyards and the analytical approach taken, privileging some possibilities over others. This inquiry provides a contextualized analysis of play and teachers practices in Irish schoolyards and relates this interpretation to conceptualizations within occupational science. Smith (2018) articulates there are multiple forms of generalizability aside from statistical probability. Despite these limitations, given the critical intent to inform practice, this analytical framework and the interpretations generated may then enable the inquiry to resonate with readers when reflecting on their own contexts.

Conclusion

This inquiry generated knowledges on the contextualized and social nature of children's play and teachers' practices in Irish schoolyards. Teachers' experiences of children's play and the tensions and challenges within schoolyards, in an Irish context, are comparable with research in other countries. This inquiry highlights, however, the consequences of individualising choice, as central to the production of inclusion and exclusion, and as of equal relevance to teachers. Furthermore, the collective nature of everyday choices was evident in teachers'

experiences of practices and children's play as negotiated and responsive processes that interact with ideas on childhood, play and inclusion, diverse intentions, and the particularities of each schoolyard. Greater consideration within occupational therapy practices, to collective occupations occurring within schoolyards, is proposed, that recognises the transformative potential within play for building inclusive communities.

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Declaration of interest statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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Table 1. Characteristics and teaching experiences of participants.

<i>Teacher</i>	<i>Years Teaching</i>	<i>Rural Schools</i>	<i>Urban Schools</i>	<i>Disadvantaged Schools *</i>	<i>Special Education**</i>	<i>Management</i>
1	>10	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
2	>20		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
3	>20		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
4	<10		Yes	Yes		
5	>20	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
6	>20		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
7	>20	Yes	Yes		Yes	
8	>20		Yes	Yes		
9	>20		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
10	<10	Yes	Yes	Yes		

*(Disadvantaged schools are identified as having higher levels of concentrated educational disadvantage including a higher proportion of students from marginalized backgrounds and receive additional resources under the government funded Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools programme, (Kavanagh et al, 2017)).

** (Special educational needs are recognized as occurring along a continuum ranging from mild to severe, and from transient to long term, with pupils requiring different levels of support depending on their identified educational needs (National Council for Special education, 2017)).