



(P.inc) PLAY INCLUSIVE
Action Research Project

People play together more.

(P.inc) Research Report

People play together more: (P.inc) research report

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Many thanks to all the children and adults who participated in Play Inclusive (P.inc) Connections and contributed time, energy and ideas.

This report is also available in a larger font in Word only format.
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ISBN: 978-0-9517365-4-8

Published by:
The Yard
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Executive Summary

A theme of our previous work on inclusive play was that for children to really experience inclusion, they must have access to a range of inclusive local opportunities for play. In other words, a sense of being included might be better derived from the wider context of the social opportunities and networks children have access to than from their experiences within one setting.

These thoughts inspired P.inc Connections, the findings of which are reported on here.

Inclusive play is about every child's needs and interests. Play Inclusive (P.inc) action research takes supporting inclusive play to mean:

Enabling each child to play and express themselves in their own way and supporting children to play together when they wish to.

A review of literature carried out in P.inc shows that children can find that their play needs are not met for a variety of reasons, for example age, gender or disability and that a sense of inclusion is more dependent on friendships and fun than simply being in the same location as others.

The literature points to two important but different ways of looking at inclusion.

- Removing barriers to disabled children being included in the same setting as non-disabled peers.
- Promoting the factors that can help a child to feel a sense of being included.

P.inc findings are drawn from projects with schools, out-of-school clubs and play projects and demonstrate an inclusive framework for supporting play, within which there is scope for adults to create engaging, enriched play experiences, tailor opportunities to meet individual needs and support children to find playmates.

'People play together more. There's more happiness. People that don't play together have been and different ages playing together. You could see by people's faces they were enjoying it.' (Girl, P6)

Models of support

The P.inc approach offers hands on support to play, through:

- well thought-out use of the play environment;
- sensitive and responsive involvement in play;
- observation and reflective planning.

Simple, junk materials such as cardboard boxes, fabric or tyres open up opportunities for different types of play; physical, creative, imaginary or sensory. Children can use materials in a way that suits their own interests and abilities.

'(P.inc helped support inclusion) more so than these manufactured toys which aren't really inclusive if you don't have the skill.' (Assistant Service Manager)

Tailoring opportunities can build on individual interests and novelty can draw children in to playing together. Trying out different space layouts, particularly indoors, can have significant effects on how children play and adults can make use of this to accommodate different needs. Techniques such as holding frames of play together or facilitating communication can ensure children are supported in their play, while leaving control of play with the children.

The P.inc approach of hands-on support to play allows the ways of working and the processes taking place, to be modeled for other participating adults. Discussions after play relate what happened during play to the adults' experience, views and plans for the setting. The chance to observe different ways of working is consistently identified as the most useful type of support.

'I think the hands-on part and seeing it working is the most influential and the most valuable but also the chance to talk it through and the chance to talk about how to make it happen backs it all up.' (Project Manager)

Benefits of support

Without setting targets for children, a range of outcomes of interest naturally occur through the process of supporting play. Some effects stand out as being a particular support to inclusion, such as:

- children included in play who are not usually;
- some children more confident in play and interaction;
- strengthening relationships between children.

Adults taking part in P.inc play can see new approaches to supporting inclusion.

'It would open your eyes to just maybe go forward that little bit and engage with the child that you saw maybe just not quite joining in.' (Classroom Assistant)

Friendship, inclusion and play

Experiences throughout P.inc highlighted the importance of considering inclusion from a range of perspectives, such as:

- inclusion as something that is experienced by a person and how to support that in a way that matters to them;
- the need to engage with inclusion at the level of individual settings and at the level of the relationship between the opportunities in an area;
- even if barriers to access are removed, other factors within the provision could affect a child's sense of inclusion.

As friendships and fun are important to a child's sense of inclusion, free play can have a particularly important role in supporting inclusion.

'You have to be good at football to be good at football but you don't have to be good at play to be good at play.' (Think Tank participant)

P.inc found out more about children's friendships through consultation. The findings point to a range of different types of relationships that children can have with each other.

'With other friends you fall out but with best friends you just laugh if they say "I hate you".' (Girl, P7)

P.inc approaches to play can have an effect on children's interactions and playmate choices. Through opening up play opportunities, children can find new ways to express themselves and see new qualities in each other.

'Simple equipment opened up a diverse arena for them to engage with, either imaginatively, creatively or physically – the children learn new qualities about themselves and see differences in others.' (Classroom Assistant)

Part 1. Background

1. Introduction

Play Inclusive (P.inc) Connections was an action research project that aimed to support the development of inclusive play opportunities. P.inc Connections took the approach of exploring inclusive playwork practice, in terms of the types of hands-on support adults can give to play, and the resulting effects and benefits to inclusion.

This focus stemmed naturally from the adventure play context of the project. Since 2002, P.inc has been a project of The Yard adventure playground in Edinburgh. The Yard is visited by children and young people of all ages and abilities. Adults who visit often report that children in their care are happier, more participative and more interactive when at The Yard compared to other settings. There seems to be something about the environment or type of adult enabling children find at The Yard that is particularly supportive of their needs and personalities. Action research stood out as the ideal method to explore this further and to take that experience out of The Yard to share with, and test in, other settings.

Two P.inc research projects have been carried out by The Yard:

- Play Inclusive (2002-2004) involved five primary schools and resulted in the publication of 'Inspiring Inclusive Play' (Casey, 2004), a pack containing a research report and practical advice on supporting inclusion in, and through, play.
- Play Inclusive Connections (2004-2007), which is reported on here. A related P.inc publication 'People play together more: A handbook for supporting inclusive play' has more in-depth practical guidance for readers, drawn from this phase of research.

In brief, 'Inspiring Inclusive Play' reported that:

- friendship, inclusion and play are interlinked and more understanding is needed of how;
- children's experiences at play are central to their experience of inclusion in a setting;
- play can be sensitively supported through the right types of play environment and with some adult enabling;
- the right types of support can enable children to take part in ways that they had not before.

A recurring theme in this early work was that for children to really experience inclusion, they must have access to a range of inclusive local opportunities for play. In other words, a sense of being included might be better derived from the wider context of the social opportunities and networks children have access to than from their experiences within one setting. These thoughts inspired P.inc Connections, the findings of which are reported on here.

Project aims

P.inc Connections aimed to support the development of inclusive play opportunities (including children with disabilities and marginalised or disadvantaged children) through a national programme of support, linking schools and out-of-school and community provision.

The key aims of the project were to implement:

- A national programme of in-depth support to inclusive play, in networks which include schools, out-of-school provision, playschemes and community based play opportunities.
- A related research cycle in order to:
 - identify and document the benefits to children, settings and communities;
 - identify and document effective models of support;
 - expand current state of knowledge of inclusive play in a wider context.

The networks

A network of settings was framed as being two or more places within a close geographical area in which some of the same children (who would benefit from support) play.

The reason for working in networks of settings, rather than just a collection of unrelated settings, was to support the wider social experience of participating children, something which was identified as important in the first P.inc project. However, the main project aim was to support inclusive play and so in each individual setting we did this in the way that felt most relevant to that individual context. Sometimes the same child who seemed to need support in one setting did not appear to in another. Despite this, working with the same children across different settings did prove to be a useful research set up, which highlighted the role that different play environments and other factors were having on play.

Additionally we were interested in children's friendships from a cross-setting perspective; whether or not disabled children have enough opportunities to continue their friendships out of school hours and whether this transference of friendship is something that can be encouraged. To achieve this we at first considered supporting children to access new projects and opportunities to which they had not previously had access. It became apparent, however, that this would not be workable within the scope of this project.

To aim for children to transfer their friendships into new settings would be complex. P.inc could temporarily fulfil this role but without comprehensive plans in place, as to who would continue this cross-setting role, this would not be sustainable and would be ethically questionable.

Without aiming to encourage friendships to transfer across settings it was still possible to explore much about friendship, inclusion and play in different contexts.

Play Inclusive worked with four 'networks'. The full range of settings and projects involved (P.inc worked with around three at a time) were:

- three primary schools (two with a learning support unit attached to a mainstream school);
- one youth club (8-12 yrs);
- two school lunch clubs (small support groups for children experiencing difficulty in the playground);
- four after school clubs that were non-childcare based;
- one out-of-school club;
- one outreach play project.

The P.inc team provided hands-on support to inclusive play (the main aim of the project) at each of the participating settings once, sometimes twice, a week. Approaches were tested and further developments made alongside participating children and staff, as ideas were shared.

The children who participated in P.inc Connections had a wide mix of backgrounds and abilities. We have not found it necessary to describe children, or breakdown numbers, in terms of particular additional support needs.

Introduction to the research method

The project was carried out by one Project Coordinator joined by one Playworker from The Yard (in twice yearly rotation), all of whom are referred to in this report by the title of playworker-researcher. The intention was that P.inc would be sustained by values and experience gained from The Yard, while in return the Yard team would gain from the wider experience of members taking their work out to new environments. The playworker-researchers were advised by a consultant on planning and research.

P.inc utilised an action research approach. Action research is a type of qualitative research that aims to improve a situation by engaging with it. In P.inc the situation to engage with was inclusive play in various settings and ways in which this could be supported.

Action research involves three main components.

- Look
- Think
- Act (Stringer, 1999).

The purpose of these elements is to deepen understanding of a situation (look and think) and to plan and implement change (act). Reflection on the effectiveness of action taken will involve the look and think stages again and this may lead to further actions.

The tools P.inc used allowed for each of the three components. These were:

- observation forms of play (detailed forms were completed by P.inc and a shorter version by participating staff as and when they had time);
- review forms to think through the overall project processes and developments;
- notes from discussion with participating staff after play;
- consultations with children;
- interviews with participating staff;
- cross-sector P.inc Think Tanks to discuss the project within a wider context.

The tools were designed to explore broad categories of interest around the support provided to inclusive play. The categories required to be broad as supporting play is a complex process that can throw up different ways of working at different times. Experience at The Yard has shown that a high level of flexibility and responsiveness are useful in playwork practice. Flexibility and responsiveness were therefore also required in P.inc in terms of the type of information we looked for each week and how we would decide to respond (which would then influence what we looked out for the following week).

Triangulation between P.inc and participating children and adults was very important in exploring the support given and the benefits and effects, particularly with the long-term view participants had of play before, during and after P.inc.

P.inc playworker-researchers were involved in the action research process as participants too, suggesting and helping to implement change, based on our previous experience and findings. We were therefore not outside observers learning about or only facilitating what took place but were reflecting on and developing our work practice. For this reason the report is often in the first person to reflect our agency in the project. The third person 'P.inc' is used where it seems to fit better, to separate more clearly the different voices, or to convey P.inc as an overall project which has ran since 2002, involved a mix of people over that time and developed a particular ethos and approach. Often the reporting reflects the whole mix of voices that contributed as it is difficult to separate them out and many opinions were shared. However, participants are quoted in their own words where this was possible to record accurately.

For more information on the research method, refer to Part 3.

P.inc Moments

'P.inc Moments' are a feature of P.inc projects and reporting and are found throughout this report. They are taken from observations and feedback from the P.inc play sessions. These give a flavour of P.inc play sessions, including the key factors of the environment and adult support and are illustrative of key themes and issues emerging from the research and of the benefits to the children. Names and some details have been changed to preserve anonymity.

2. What is Inclusive Play? The Literature Context

For this review of literature, conducted early in the project, scholarly articles and reports of research were identified from a wide range of sources. Where possible we tried to identify research relating to Scotland and research which sought the views of children and especially disabled children themselves, therefore references to consultations with children are also made. This review also links back to a previous P.inc publication, the 'P.inc Briefing Paper: Friendship, Inclusion and Play' (Casey, 2003).

In this review we wanted to think about disabled children's experience of inclusive play and what the literature says about:

- what inclusive play is;
- where disabled children play;
- what disabled children say about their play and leisure experiences;
- links between friendship, inclusion and play.

This section outlines a selection of the literature that sets a relevant context and discussion base for the remainder of the report.

Some constraints

The play scholar Sutton-Smith (1997:208) pointed out that:

'In scholarship the denigration of play in intellectual terms is shown by the absence of the key term play from the index of almost every book about the behaviour of human beings... there is still much more resistance to the subject than is justified, given its universal role in human behaviour.'

As well as *inclusion* the key terms *play*, *friends* and *friendship* were used in this search. It was revealing to find, when searching databases related to education and/or inclusion of children with additional support needs, how rarely these terms yielded any results whatsoever.

Some of the research into play, play settings and play experiences does not include any serious attempt to involve the children themselves and considers parents as the primary users (purchasers) of services. Finally, there is an unexplained absence of disabled children from a significant proportion of what literature there is.

Play

To support inclusive play we must first consider what play is and therefore how that might be best supported.

A description of play that is often used in the UK is that play is 'freely chosen, personally directed, intrinsically motivated behaviour that actively engages the child' (NPFA 2000:6 drawing closely on the work of Bob Hughes and Frank King).

Play has recently been defined as 'what children and young people do when they follow their own ideas and interests, in their own way and for their own reasons' (DCMS 2004:8) while 'play provision' was defined as 'a space, some facilities or equipment or a set of activities intended to give children the opportunity to play' (DCMS 2004:9).

However, even these succinct definitions are open to much interpretation as Part 2, section 3, which covers P.inc findings on different understandings of play, demonstrates.

Playwork practice in the UK is often influenced by a particular theoretical background which emphasises:

- the role of play in brain development;
- the adaptive function play provides in mediating a connection between the playing young 'organism' and their environment (and indeed their culture and community).

(Bob Hughes discusses these points and highlights implications for playwork practice in his book 'Evolutionary playwork and reflective analytic practice', 2001.)

The academic Brian Sutton-Smith offers a summary of this adaptive process of play:

'Play, as a novel adaptation, may have developed in two stages: the first as a reinforcement of potential synaptic variability through the performance of variable antics (as in animals), and the second as a fuller imitation of the evolutionary process itself, in which the organism models its own biological character...It is a mastery process creatively derived from the exigencies of the evolutionary predicament.' (Sutton-Smith, 1997: 229)

It is not the purpose of this report to assess the validity of any theory of play, although it is important to point out that this view of play has shaped the work of The Yard and of P.inc, primarily in the consideration we have given to what sort of environment is most suitable for play and therefore inclusive play.

A rights-based approach has also shaped P.inc. Regardless of the developmental benefits to play, children have a right to play. The UNCRC states the rights of children and the standards to which governments must aspire. The UK government agreed to uphold those rights when it ratified the convention in 1989.

There are four articles which particularly relate to inclusive play:

- **Articles 1 and 2** ensure that the rights expressed in the convention apply to every child under the age of 18 without discrimination;
- **Article 23** recognises that disabled children should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions that ensure dignity, promote self reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in the community;
- **Article 31** recognises the right of the child to rest and leisure and to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

P.inc recognises that children play for a variety of reasons, perhaps initially because of deep-seated developmental needs, but also because it is fun and a way of making friends. For whatever reasons children play, they are entitled to interesting places, time and freedom to do so.

Some consideration is now given to research on outdoor environments for play and play in two specific settings – school and out of school clubs.

Outdoor environments for play

Children can and often do play anywhere, both in formal provision and informal spaces. Some research points to the general features children look for in their local outdoor environments, some considers specific features that are appreciated for play.

Thomas and Thompson (DEMOS/the Green Alliance, 2004) interviewed 10 and 11 year old children around the UK to establish their attitudes towards their environment and how this affects them. They found that the children had a strong sense of the environment as a social space and this influences the way they use public space for outdoor play and personal development.

The research also highlighted a disparity in children's access to high quality natural environments, saying that all children benefit from the opportunities provided by access to outdoor space but these benefits are currently not equally distributed.

The UNESCO 'Growing Up in Cities' (GUIC) project of the 1990s worked in eight cities across five continents, revisiting findings from original work pioneered by Kevin Lynch (1977).

All of the features that children identified as determining good environments in which to grow up in the seventies re-emerged in the nineties:

- a feeling of social integration and acceptance;
- varied interesting activity settings;
- peer gathering places;
- a general sense of safety and freedom of movement;
- a cohesive community identity;
- a community tradition of self-help and progressive improvement;
- where available, green areas for informal play and exploration as well as organised sports.

'Beyond the provision of basic needs, what the children wanted most was a sense of security, acceptance and positive identity, in places where they could socialise, play with friends and find interesting activities to join or observe.' (Chawla: 2001:21)

'Child's Play: Facilitating Play on Housing Estates' (Whewey and Millward, 1997) reports on a study which asked how contemporary children conduct their everyday lives and exercise independence in play and recreational activities and use of public space. The research comprised over 3500 observations over one summer of children at play in twelve housing estates, followed up by interviews.

The conclusions drawn from the research show how children make use of the outdoor environment of housing estates beyond that of play areas. Children's needs are multifarious: places for physically active play and quiet games; places which encourage social contact; and places which allow them to be mobile on foot and by bike.

The authors argue that there is a need to change our way of thinking about play space. The aim, they say, should be to provide a safe and interesting environment for play, not just a safe place to play.

However, many children experience barriers to these types of play experiences. 'Making the Case for Play: Building policies and strategies for school-aged children' (CPC, 2002), which drew on four pieces of new research, identified a number of factors that restrict play opportunities for many children and young people, including:

- parents' fears for their children's safety, children's own concerns about safety, the state of their play spaces, and a reduction in the number of play spaces available to them;
- free open access play provision has been replaced by childcare services where parents have to book and pay for their child's place;
- providers' concerns about accidents and liability limit the excitement and challenge in play;
- the needs of different groups of children are overlooked.

The report goes on to argue that for children and young people to have and make use of the best possible play and free-time opportunities, they need to have places near their homes and schools where they can:

- enjoy themselves and play with or without supervision from adults;
- choose and take control of their play activities;
- play by themselves or with others;
- experience varied and interesting environments;
- challenge and extend the limits of their physical, mental, emotional or creative abilities;
- feel safe from environmental and human dangers.

Other research has explored quite specific features that children appreciate and engage with in their environments. An Australian study found that children preferred school grounds that had adaptable elements, colour and nature (Groves and Mason, 1993). Titman's research showed the importance to children of a natural landscape with living things, natural colour, nooks and crannies and flexibility (Titman, 1994).

Some research draws quite strong links between play and exploration of nature. A recent in-depth review of research on play and nature found, in summary, that 'given space and opportunity, children will enact the two basic drives explored – to play and to affiliate with nature – in interactive, complex and individualistic ways' (Lester and Maudsley, 2006). A related survey commissioned by the Children's Play Council for Playday 2006 found that 80% of children would rather play outdoors and that 82% of children would prefer to play in natural spaces such as gardens, parks or fields than in environments such as streets.

Play in schools

The P.inc briefing paper of 2003 previously suggested that it has been found that 'play and playtime are integral to children's experience of inclusion.'

The review included some research showing how break time games and organisation serve to include or exclude individuals or groups of children (Smyth and Anderson, 2000 and 2001) considering children with coordination and motor difficulties; Swain (2000) explores the 'part football plays in the social construction of hegemonic masculine practices' amongst boys at an English junior school. One of his observations is that 'girls are excluded from the games, along with some of the boys in the subordinated group who become feminised by their lack of skill and competence.'

Pellegrini and Blatchford (2002: 61) suggested that:

'It may be the case that the efficacy that children experience at games in the playground during their first year of schooling transfers to more general feelings of competence in school. This sense of efficacy in a school context, albeit an informal one, may have resulted in children having a more positive attitude to school.'

Out of school care

'Child-centred after school and holiday childcare' (Smith and Barker, 2000) considered how children, as the primary users of the service, experience it and explored how they would like to see it develop.

The vast majority of children involved in the study expressed that they enjoyed spending time in an out of school club. They liked the opportunity it gave them to play with friends (in particular in rural areas) and access specialist play equipment that they do not have at home. Homework is an unpopular activity in out of school clubs.

Some of their findings related to the appropriateness and availability of the service for different groups of children. They found:

- there is a lack of services catering for ethnic minority children, children in low-income families and for children with disabilities;
- boys and older children expressed some concerns that playworkers do not structure clubs to meet their specific needs;
- children are rarely consulted about the out of school services they use, although there are a few excellent initiatives aimed at encouraging children's participation in decision making;
- clubs are not promoting equality of opportunity for all children.

A 'Brief Review of the Literature on Out of School Care' was carried out by Malcolm, Wilson and Davidson (The Scottish Council for Research in Education, 2002) who found that children of 8-year-olds and older thought that both activities and staff focused more on younger children's needs, that the premises were drab, uninspiring and uncomfortable places to play, and that their own ideas about new activities or equipment were not canvassed. The children also revealed that they would like to see staff shouting less when they reacted to children's challenging behaviour, and boys thought staff spent too much time with girls; they wanted more male playworkers.

Inclusive play

Having considered a snapshot of relevant research on play, the following literature looks at what else might be involved when considering inclusive play.

A 2004 consultation in Edinburgh with disabled children (Casey and Coates, 2004) found that children with disabilities and additional support needs, along with their siblings, are seeking the same kind of experiences that other children seek in their play – adventure, fun and being out of doors in a friendly and stimulating environment.

The findings suggest limited use of outdoor play areas by many children with additional support needs. What discouraged or stopped the children from using play areas was not in the main specific to disabled children.

The children identified four aspects that would encourage their use of outdoor play areas:

- feeling safe and secure;
- close to home;
- more variety and adventure;
- well-maintained and cleaner.

Kids' Playwork Inclusion Project has a clear statement of what they understand inclusive play provision to be:

'provision that is open and accessible to all, and takes positive steps in removing disabling barriers, so that disabled children and non-disabled children can participate.' (Scott, (ed) in Murray, 2004:4)

A distinction is made between 'play' and 'play provision' with 'inclusive play' being an experience that could happen anywhere children spend time together while 'inclusive play provision' is something that providers have to actively work with to ensure (in keeping with the social model of disability) that it is made and remains barrier-free (Casey, 2003:2).

Research suggests that removing barriers to children being included in the same provision as non-disabled peers is still a necessary focus. In a Contact a Family survey of over 1000 parents and carers of disabled children across the UK (Shelley, 2002), 80% of respondents said that their children could not go to local clubs and that there were many barriers to using mainstream leisure facilities.

Pippa Murray's consultation (2002) with over 100 young disabled people found that:

'Lack of appropriate support (such as transport, personal assistance, and support to facilitate and/or interpret communication) was a major barrier to the participation of disabled young people in ordinary leisure activities. This was particularly apparent for disabled young people with complex impairments and high support needs.'

Murray (2002) also found that while opportunities to try out a range of leisure activities and pursuits are appreciated, it is the opportunity to be in mutually valued relationships that young disabled people identify as the key to their inclusion in mainstream culture. Whereas professionals viewed inclusive leisure as a means of learning life skills, increasing independence and/or self-esteem, young people focused on friendships and fun.

“Inclusive” leisure was widely understood by service providers to be something that is done to and for disabled people rather than something that benefits everyone. In sharp contrast to this, young disabled people described leisure as being about friendships and fun; being with people they wanted to be with, and who wanted to be with them.’

The literature outlined above points to two important but different ways of looking at inclusion:

- removing barriers to disabled children being included in the same setting as non-disabled peers;
- promoting the factors that can help a child to feel a sense of being included, something more than being in the same location as peers and perhaps more to do with friendships and fun.

One study, ‘Children’s Experiences of Disability’, did not explore play experiences and friendship in any depth but it did point out that children travelling outside the area to special provision had fewer friends in the neighbourhood and reported that ‘support’ provided by adults could be a hindrance to friendship development:

‘Several children, and some parents, were unhappy about their Special Needs Assistants. Some had an adverse effect on inclusion, for example, removing the disabled child from her/his peers at lunch and play times.’ (Connors and Stalker, 2002)

A related point was also picked up in a study by Jarvis (2003) ‘It’s more peaceful without any support’, which explored the views of young people with hearing loss on the support they receive in school. An interesting finding to emerge from the research was that some pupils felt over-supported, and were concerned about the effect the almost continual adult presence could have on relationships with their peers. The importance of friendships was a key topic and the benefits of good peer relationships were felt in terms of both social and academic inclusion.

Summary

The snapshot of research and reports presented here are suggestive of a few key points to bear in mind when developing support to inclusive play:

- inclusive play can take place anywhere - in any public space, or formal provision - providing barriers to doing so are removed;
- that children with and without additional support needs can encounter barriers to accessing outdoor play experiences;
- play or care provision can neglect some children’s play needs (with or without additional support needs);
- that children do have preferences for particular types of environments for play and desired features seem to be accessibility, safety, nature, places to socialise, adventure and flexibility;
- that friendship is a highly valued part of attending provision and is linked to a sense of being included;
- children may be valued by their peers for particular play skills, such as football playing, and accepted or rejected accordingly;
- children can feel over-supported and adults can be a hindrance to children and young people developing friendships.

The literature suggests that when developing support to inclusive play it is important to bear in mind all children’s general and complex play needs – these are not always met for both disabled and non-disabled children. Inclusive play is about more than removing disabling barriers to being in the same location as others – a sense of being included may be dependent on whether children are having fun and making friends. Adults may be able to help this along, if children are not over supported and the type of support that can make a positive contribution is offered.

A focus during Pinc Connections was the impact the type of support was having on children’s interactions, playmates choices and friendships. The findings tease out how alongside play these connections could be sensitively enabled, with consideration to the play environment and opportunities on offer and the supportive role of adults.

Part 2. Findings

Pinc findings are reported under three main headings related to the project aims.

1. Models of support.
2. Benefits to children, settings and communities.
3. Inclusive play.

It would be difficult to convey a sense of the ongoing learning process involved - this would involve much repetition of information. Therefore, the findings are more generalised across the various settings, although a sense of the process of development, and the issues relevant to specific settings, are captured where possible and useful.

1. Models of Support

In the early thinking about the project we considered the potential to support the development of inclusive play in different ways and within different settings – in organised provision, schools and clubs, through contact with families, or within informal spaces such as parks or streets. As it turned out, Pinc worked only with children in organised provision (schools and clubs), partly because working where other adults already did, facilitated a point of contact and an opportunity to test various models of support.

Once the project was under way, it became clear that a wide range of factors could impact on inclusive play:

- immediate influences such as the resources and play environment, the numbers of children and group dynamics and the type of adult support available;
- the organisational level of influence such as the skills and knowledge of adults, team styles of working, financial resources and time;
- influences from outwith the organisation such as architecture and design, values and attitudes and funding sources.

These factors, variable within each participating setting, also had influence on the scope for Pinc to effect change.

This raised questions around the levels of influence with which we could or should work. In keeping with the practical experience and approaches playworker-researchers could bring to the project, the main focus of support was at the level of immediate influence. We supported children's play directly and through this also touched on the organisational level by aiming to transfer approaches to participating staff and working through potential barriers such as time constraints.

In each setting we had a similar starting point of experience and ideas to bring. However, the support provided and issues discussed in each place varied. In settings that already had similar work practice, we could focus together on more complex issues, such as the effects of the environment on play, and the discussion time helped to pull out interesting and varied observations. Where the practice was different we focused primarily on trying out and discussing new approaches, working with whatever different experiences participants had to bring. With one organisation we also worked more closely on issues to do with funding applications, children's participation and the aims and set up of the provision. This approach felt relevant to that particular organisation.

A. Support to Children's Play

Supporting the inclusion of disabled, disadvantaged or marginalised children was the avenue into working with particular settings, although when involved we directed our support where we felt it was needed, which was not always related to additional support needs. We observed many occasions when children identified as having support needs were quite happily involved in play and friendships without adult involvement. We aimed to support inclusive play, which we took to be as much about supporting play as about supporting inclusion – inclusive play is about

every child's needs and interests. Therefore, most of the findings reported on here are about supporting play in a way that is inclusive, rather than about disabled children's play experiences specifically. The majority of participating children were between the ages of five and twelve, with many older children relishing the opportunity to play in an imaginative and flexible way.

Pinc Moment

A pile of cardboard boxes was used in a wide range of ways today. A group of children made signs saying 'save our trees' and tied themselves to a tree to protest, proclaiming to be hippies. Flower stickers on their faces added to the effect. Meanwhile other children pretended the cardboard tubes were saws and tried to chop the trees down!

One boy sat on the ground, stooped over a sign he had made saying 'homeless and hungry, can you spare some change?' He was delighted when the teacher reached into her pockets and put some change in his box.

This session was especially noteworthy because the children were from primary 7, an age group that many adults don't anticipate playing in this way.

'I liked getting to play like a six year old and not be made feel uncomfortable about it.' (Girl, P7)

Earlier in the project we grappled with defining what we meant by 'supporting inclusive play', to share the focus of our practice with participating settings. It wasn't until about a quarter of the way through that we felt able to pin down the following definition:

Enabling each child to play and express themselves in their own way and supporting children to play together when they wish to.

This arose from our reflections on how we were naturally working with children and drew on aspects of our underlying ethos that we hoped to see in action, such as valuing difference and adapting approaches to work with children as they are.

We felt it was useful to convey these values as we had experienced occasions where adults held the view that inclusion was best supported by all children taking part in the same activity together. While sounding like a worthwhile aim, we felt this was not a reflection of what play really meant to children, or what inclusion should really mean to our society. However, we also knew from experience that some children who tended to play alone could also enjoy playing with others when ready and if the right kind of support was offered.

This definition also helped to clarify that P.inc was not about changing behaviour that adults perceived as difficult.

The following headings are a breakdown of key elements of how we supported play, which came to light as useful, along with indications of why they seemed to relate particularly well to inclusive play:

- enriching the play environment through cheap flexible materials;
- tailoring the environment and opportunities;
- adults being sensitively involved as players;
- adults supporting children to play together;
- choosing the time for play.

The practical 'how to' is not covered in detail, as the handbook covers this in depth ('People play together more: A handbook for supporting inclusive play', available from www.theyardscotland.org.uk).

Enriching the play environment through cheap, flexible materials

The use of flexible materials for play follows from concepts such as compound (or combinatorial) flexibility which suggest that a child engaging with a flexible environment will develop greater flexibility, in terms of creativity and problem solving (Brown, 2003: 54).

Flexible resources are open ended items such as tyres, cardboard boxes, tarpaulin or plastic plumbing pipes which children can use in a myriad of ways because they do not suggest a particular purpose (and therefore children have to think for themselves about what to do with them). During P.inc, a simple blue tarpaulin was a dance mat one day, an ocean another and sometimes a surface to do junk art on.

'I pretended the tarpaulin was a vortex.' (Boy, P5)

'I liked the tyres because I could lift them and because I tied a bit of rope round it and got someone to drag me.' (Boy, P4)

In the first group of settings we worked with, we requested that they gather the resources (to encourage sustainability). On reflection we decided that P.inc should provide the resources so that participants could focus their time on working through the issues and ideas.

Flexible items were very much appreciated by the children.

'The stuff you bring you can make anything; you can find something you want.' (Girl, P7)

'I like the different materials, all the different shapes to make anything you want.' (Girl, P6)

We noticed that on introducing more flexible materials than some children were used to, and freedom to use them as they wished, there followed an increase in energy and movement, creativity and integration of play types (for example, children making objects to use in imaginary play rather than for the purpose of art alone).

Pinc Moment

Week 2 – At the club we set up junk, fabric, art bits and bobs and musical instruments at the back of the room with a blue tarpaulin providing focus, but everything just mixed up. One girl worked on a costume. Other girls took instruments into another room to work on a performance and sang a song on stage later. Then a boy did a strongman performance with a prop he had made resembling weights.

Week 3 – We set up similar to last week but this time the weights became oars in a cardboard box boat. This enticed some children away from the house corner to go on holiday!

Case study – a change in culture from a change in resources

When we first arrived at the club, some of the children (who had thrown themselves into the school play sessions with gusto, putting on the dressing up clothes without prompting) greeted us with suspicion saying 'Oh no you're not bringing the dressing up clothes here are you? You're not going to make us dress up?' At the club the focus was on hanging out, playing football or pool and dancing.

However, over the course of that night we were constantly approached by children we had met at the school asking us to bring the dressing up clothes to the centre. We said we were there to help introduce some new ideas and they greeted this prospect with enthusiasm.

A shift in atmosphere was felt over the course of eight weeks at the club, with increased observable 'outbreaks' of free play and much use made of the resources such as face paints, dressing up clothes, puppets, junk and art materials. The room that housed the play stations was also the focal point for the art materials. In the earlier weeks we were there, the children referred to it as the computer room, but there was a gradual shift, unprompted by us, towards the children calling it the arts and crafts room.

In terms of inclusion, flexible, junk resources seemed to be particularly useful because children could come to them with their own level of experience and ability and find a way to play with them. Each child could find their own meaning in the flexible environment – for example, children who understand what a costume is and who like that sort of thing can use fabric to dress up; another child may not understand the concept of dressing up but instead see the fabric as something to flap up and down, gaining enjoyment through the sensory properties.

'(Pinc helped support inclusion) more so than these manufactured toys which aren't really inclusive if you don't have the skill.' (Assistant Service Manager)

'Children would take away differing experiences from the same piece of equipment.' (Classroom Assistant)

Children often seem to have preferences for, and regularly return to, particular types of play. Children can really shine and find new qualities in themselves and others when the right opportunity is discovered (this is discussed further in section 2 'Benefits to Children' and section 3 'Inclusive Play').

'I liked the music because it was funky.' (Girl, P3/4)

'The zombie game was good. People were scared. I got picked to be a vampire.' (Boy, P4)

'It was great to see all the children find their niche; find what they want to do.' (Classroom Assistant)

Pinc Moment

Richie, who often doesn't mix with the other children and whom the teacher felt didn't relate easily with her, enjoyed making a robot outfit from a cardboard box and drawing different controls on it. The teacher helped him to create different actions and noises in response to the buttons being pressed.

He wandered around inviting other children to press the buttons and performed different actions like dancing or running around. This gave him a wonderful strategy for drawing other children to him. (Note - He revived this idea at other times, using dressing up and face paints as a way of connecting with the other children.)

The teacher pointed out what a breakthrough the session had been and how it had helped her to build on their relationship through play.

'There was something for every child like when we went out in the dark – it was brilliant, that was inclusion. They weren't all forced to do one thing. They had different things to do. You know, some people maybe liked swinging on or climbing up trees and things like that or other children went about with their torches. They all felt they could do something. I think that was apparent in all the playing stuff that I saw – there was something for every child to do and they weren't forced to do it if they didn't want to. (The playworker-researchers) made sure that every child was covered.' (Project Worker)

Tailoring the environment and opportunities

It was often possible to support particular children, or work with particular dynamics between children by tailoring opportunities in the play environment. Often tailoring opportunities had the effect of drawing children in to play together. However, this only worked when children were willing and ready to be together, there were no magic solutions. Key techniques amongst these were:

- building opportunities around individual needs and interests;
- introducing novelty and varying scale;
- trying out new space layouts;
- creating opportunities of interest to children with a wide range of abilities.

Building opportunities around individuals' needs and interests

Picking up on individuals' interests helped to ensure that play was interesting for all children and was especially useful for drawing in children on the margins of play.

Pinc Moment

We set up a garage in the corner, just flat cardboard with an old bike, some tools, tyres piled up and overalls. This set up was chosen to encourage Graham to mix more with other children as he loved the construction games but tended to play in quite a solitary way with small building blocks. The garage idea picked up on his interests but made it bigger and novel, to draw the other children in. He did go to this area and spent a lot of time taking the bike apart with a few other children. The props expanded on the construction opportunity and imaginative role play took place too. It was the most time we had seen him spend with others.

Girls and boys took part together so it also helped to break down stereotypical gender roles.

Thinking about how children communicate and what sort of props might help them to interact was useful. We noticed in one setting that most of the interactions were between children and adults and that children lacked confidence in communicating verbally. We felt that introducing resources to encourage non-verbal interaction would be supportive. Shredded paper worked very well, the children throwing it at each other, burying each other under it, laughing and making eye contact. The shredded paper was so suggestive of these sorts of uses, none of which required verbal communication, but which relied on interaction for the most mischief and joy.

A rope bridge put up at another setting also helped to de-emphasise verbal communication and allowed children to take part on an equal basis to each other. Tuning into the type of opportunities that would suit verbal or non-verbal communication was a key strategy in P.inc support to play.

Introducing novelty and varying scale

Introducing novelty, sometimes through varying the scale of opportunities (such as big outdoor art instead of art on a table), tended to shake up dynamics of who plays with whom. Novel resources drew children together to be part of the experience.

'I played with different people because we all wanted to play with the new stuff, so if someone had something, we'd all just join in.' (Girl, P7)

After becoming aware of this effect, we made more use of it as an intentional strategy.

Trying out new space layouts

The particular breakdown of the space available can have a significant influence on the ways in which children play, as illustrated by the following indoor examples and quotes.

- A club took place over three large floors with few divisions of purpose. There was a high level of bustle and noise. We reflected that this space would be difficult for some children to navigate and could be disorientating. Few children with support needs attended the club and certainly no children who were sensitive to noise. It was difficult to investigate further (we suspected that those factors may have contributed to the lack of disabled children although a low response to a parent survey meant we could not confirm it).
- In another setting space was defined by tables and chairs with little space or freedom of movement between them. Quite significant effects could sometimes be observed from changing the layout of the space so that play could flow more freely and children could combine different play types and resources from different parts of the room more easily.

'It's more difficult for children to get on together if they are at a table than if they have got a space because they can then sort of walk away or get involved with other children...whereas sitting at a table it tended to be quite competitive and that would lead to trouble. (The physical set up has an effect on how they interact) and it was something I hadn't realised before that was actually happening. When you are faced with it you can see where the conflict was because they were vying with each other at a table.' (Assistant Service Manager)

'There's more space to play, you have your own personal bubble and it doesn't feel crowded. Stuff doesn't fall off the tables.' (Girl, P6)

Resolving different needs for space was often part of our role during play. Some children, due to their preferences for quite physical energetic play, seemed to use more space than others, some preferred to work quietly away at something such as art, staying in the same place for most of a session. It was often surprising how many different needs could be accommodated within one indoor space, if the area was defined with sensitivity to how children wished to use it, but doing so did add extra dimensions to consider. At settings in which children who are very sensitive to noise mix with children who are noisy, this may be much trickier. Access to different rooms in an indoor provision would be ideal.

Pinc Moment

Today's indoor session was very energised and physically active. Kevin particularly was drawn to jumping up and down on the bubble wrap. He then got a cardboard tube and started spinning round and round, trailing the tube along the floor. A jumping game developed where the other children stood around him and jumped over the tube as it whizzed past.

Meanwhile some quieter art-based ideas were being developed on the tables at the sides of the room. It was tricky to resolve the different needs the children had for the use of the space and supporting this was very much part of the adult's role today.

It was possible to cater for Kevin's need for physical play indoors but it did highlight that being restricted to a smallish indoor facility is never going to be ideal for children's play.

Creating opportunities of interest to children with a wide range of abilities

In one setting children with quite complex needs mixed with non-disabled children. We were confident we could offer experiences that children would enjoy individually but wished to explore how we might encourage greater interaction across children with a full range of needs.

We noticed that, to interact, the non-disabled children had to follow those disabled children's responses and interests, as their range of play was more limited. This appeared to involve some putting aside of their own more spontaneous urges in play. From the outside it looked as if the non-disabled children were taking more of an adult-type role, which did not always come naturally. We wished to further encourage interaction, while ensuring that all children were gaining something personally from play. We developed sensory art options such as making musical or glitter shakers, which could then be enjoyed by the children who liked that type of play. This was a slightly more structured set up than we would usually go for although children were free to join in, make something else, or play whatever else they wished instead. Some further adult support was needed to encourage children to share what they had made with each other.

Case study – the importance of seeking children's views

When developing play opportunities we found it hugely informative to seek children's views – these were often quite different from how adults saw things.

One example of this was the day we placed flat cardboard scenery in the form of 'snow caves' around the playground (taking inspiration from children's interest in the film 'Chronicles of Narnia' at that time). They did seem to inspire imaginative play and children took different cues from them – some said they were monsters and ran away from them. Others picked up on the Narnia similarities and played at that.

After the session some staff expressed that they weren't sure what the point of the caves had been because the children couldn't play with them (physically). We thought this was an interesting point and decided to find out what the children had thought.

(Looking at photo of snow caves)

Playworker-researcher: What did you think of these?

Trudy: They were cool.

Playworker-researcher: Why?

Trudy: Because they were different. The playground doesn't usually look like that; it's usually dull and boring.

Other children, in thank you letters they sent us, wrote about their favourite play during the project. The snow caves were mentioned frequently. The follow-up questionnaire from the school said that children still talk about the snow caves.

'My favourite was when the playground was Narnia.' (Boy, P3/4)

'I liked Narnia because it looks like it's all real and cool.' (Boy, P3/4)

As well as showing the necessity of seeking children's opinions, it demonstrates the aesthetic awareness children can have of their playground, certainly when their expectations are raised.

'I'm drawing the dressing up clothes because it's more colourful when we have them. It's more fun because people have colourful clothes.' (Girl, P4)

Adults being sensitively involved as players

Debbie: It's better if adults join in with play.

Playworker-researcher: Any tips for how they can do that?

Debbie: Enjoy yourself and the children will enjoy themselves too.

Often children seek adult involvement in games, perhaps because they feel the need for a supportive presence, someone who will value and encourage them as a player. P.inc playworker-researchers have joined any sort of game in which children seem to need a bit of support, while also aiming to avoid being unnecessarily involved. Some children seem to need a bit of adult help to sustain and develop play, whether that is a traditional playground game with rules, art-based play or pretending (which some adults find difficult). With some children the effect is quite noticeable, with games disbanding and children returning to being distracted, alone or a bit stuck without an adult involved. Children have expressed that they appreciate these adult playmates.

'I like having more adults in the playground. When you've got more adults you feel safer.' (Girl, P5)

'I'm drawing Ivan (a Playworker-researcher) in the shelter. I like Ivan because he plays with me.' (Boy, P4)

Blair: You are good at your job.

Playworker-researcher: What makes me good at it?

Blair: You do what the children are interested in.

Pinc Moment

The teacher brought Ryan into the room with the shredded paper and puppets. He was very anxious about getting near the big pile of paper and said 'No, no I don't want the paper'. The teacher took him to a seat and then brought over a small pile of paper in her hand for him to feel and encouraged him to put a finger in it. He touched it briefly then took his finger away, repeating 'No, I don't want the paper'. Instead of backing off, the teacher, in a soothing voice, encouraged him to try putting his finger in again, which he did, while talking to him about what it might feel like. When Ryan finally seemed too anxious about the paper, she introduced him to the puppets by encouraging him to touch one bit at a time, such as the wizard's beard, talking about how it felt. When he protested she would take it away just for a moment then reintroduce it, moving round different textures on the puppet, until finally it was clear that he really had had enough as his verbal protests became more anxious.

Many people would be too worried about upsetting Ryan to persevere in such a way. It showed that sometimes you need to be brave and take a chance. It also showed how some children will need to be introduced to new things at a very slow pace.

Case study – children’s subversion

Adults supporting play may have to ask some difficult questions of themselves about the types of play they value, or perhaps even find uncomfortable. Play can often be quite subversive. A few examples from P.inc show some different situations that can occur, that may challenge adults.

1) There was a rule at one school that no toy guns were allowed. We worked within that rule while we were there. When junk art was available we saw some shapes being made that looked pretty much like guns. Out of curiosity we asked the arty children what they were making and they announced that their creations were toothpaste squirters. Amazingly the toothpaste still seemed to have the power to kill. This made us laugh as it was such a funny subversion of the rules.

2) At one school session children demonstrated clapping rhymes with quite rude lyrics. This sort of play raises tricky questions for adults – where do you draw the line? Does drawing the line too strictly reduce children’s trust in you and therefore your ability to support their play? Does it encourage them to rebel further? The main difficulty for Play Inclusive is that schools tend to draw the line much further forward than playworkers might and this forced us to decide whether to risk the disapproval of staff or the discomfort of changing our own approach. This was a decision to be made by instinct and a feel for the situation rather than hard and fast rules.

3) Outdoors at one session there was a big roll of paper stretched out on the wall with art material below it. A few of the older boys decided to draw pictures of body parts. Because of the younger children present, we were concerned about where this might lead but didn’t want to be too hard on the boys and their exploration either. We tried to make a joke out of it and said that we would have to censor their drawings and changed them into amusing animals, faces etc. The boys loved this idea and proceeded to censor their own artwork.

Adults supporting children to play together

Some approaches, in terms of hands-on support, worked well at supporting children to play together. Brief examples from the project are given below.

- **Modelling ideas.** Subtly modelling ways of playing in the presence of the children helped to give them some clues. This was particularly useful when children of a wide range of abilities were together.
- **Facilitating communication.** Children sometimes benefited from an adult ‘translator’ to pick up on their wishes and share these with other children.
- **Hold frames of play together.** Playful adult involvement often had the effect of helping to hold play together through supporting children to stay up to date with, and contribute to, new storyline developments or negotiate and choose roles. Sometimes a subtle non-leading presence in a game was enough and sometimes it helped to contribute more ideas of our own.
- **Starting a game with children on their own.** At one session, for example, a Playworker started up a game of throwing popcorn (a ball) into a pan (a box) with a boy who was on his own and stuck for something to do. This had the effect of drawing other children over to see what was going on and take part.
- **Observing and reflecting on play sessions.** These approaches to supporting play were made possible by the ongoing process of observation and reflection, noticing the types of play children like and how and when they interact with other children.

Pinc Moment

Noel was lying back and Shona and Jeanette came over to tickle him, bringing a big smile to his face. Games of anticipation and surprise were capturing his attention, such as hiding a soft toy then making it jump out at him.

The Playworker brought different toys over to the game or acted as a prompt for new ways the games could be played. Making the soft dog bark and lick Noel's face brought about an even bigger smile and Shona and Jeanette seemed pleased to have a new idea to try out, replicating this and laughing themselves.

Pinc Moment

Fiona played on her own for much of the session, enjoying dressing up. There was a large piece of fabric in the playground and taking inspiration from a snake Aisha had drawn, the Playworker hid under it and said she was a snake. Fiona indicated that she was interested in this new game by sustaining eye contact. The Playworker jumped out at her and tried to catch her in the fabric. She ran off repeating 'Oh no, oh no!' looking back with a glint in her eye, signalling that she enjoyed this and wanted it to continue. The snake chased her round the playground for a while and occasionally she would stop running, allowing the fabric to be thrown over her.

It was possible to draw Aisha into the game in a similar way, made easier by her interest in snakes that day. With a bit of encouragement, both Fiona and Aisha took turns at being a snake and chased each other. Ongoing Playworker involvement in the game was needed to support this interaction.

Choosing the time for play

Choosing when to support play was primarily relevant in school settings as in the other participating provision, play and leisure were the main focus in any case.

We facilitated most of the school play sessions in the playground at lunchtime. Supporting play at playtime and lunchtime felt ideal, as any difficulties children experience in playing and making friends would be experienced at those times.

However, a couple of related issues arose:

- the number of children;
- the balance of resources – too few and it is tricky to make the approach work and ensure that not only the most confident children can access them; to provide lots of resources is time consuming to find, to set and tidy up.

We discovered that providing some stimulus for play that was a little more fixed and could be accessed in larger numbers was useful. For example, music which reached a large number of children from one source, or cardboard 'scenery' such as snow caves or castles fixed around the perimeter fence which stimulated imaginative play even though they could not be physically interacted with. Supplementing this approach with some loose items such as art materials or dressing up worked well.

Although it was beneficial to offer Pinc support at lunchtimes, we sometimes felt particular children would benefit even more through playing in a smaller group:

- children, who although taking part more than before Pinc was involved, were still more on the margins than we would have hoped;
- children with a need for more behaviour support seemed to fare better in a smaller group as it was easier to direct positive attention their way.

On these occasions, taking one class out to play at a time was beneficial. We could resource the sessions more fully and focus our support where it was most needed. Learning from a smaller group fed into normal playtimes and increased our understanding of the children. It was also a valuable opportunity for teachers and children to learn about each other in a different, informal context (in Scotland, classroom assistants rather than teachers supervise playtimes).

Summary of support to play

- We defined 'supporting inclusive play' as enabling each child to play and express themselves in their own way and supporting children to play together when they wish to.
- Inclusive play can mean catering for difference, rather than all children taking part in the same way.
- Cheap flexible materials could open up new ways of playing.
- Flexible resources were identified as being particularly inclusive.
- Opportunities could be built around individual needs and interest, to make play enjoyable and engaging for all.
- Thinking about how children could most easily interact (verbally or non-verbally) was useful when tailoring opportunities.
- Novelty and scale were useful tools in shaking up existing dynamics and encouraging children to play together.
- Changes in the space layout could influence play. Opening out spaces increased the level of energy and movement children could express in their play and encouraged greater freedom of expression; breaking down areas could help children to understand and make use of the space.
- Adults being involved as players (in whatever sort of game children wished to play) could feel safer for some children and helped some to extend their play.
- Adult presence in a game helped some children to play together, through bringing ideas, facilitating communication, helping to hold together frames of play and starting up games with children on their own.
- Ongoing observation and reflection was necessary to develop and apply these tools in a way that would be useful to, and welcomed by, the children.

B. Support to Settings

Some discussion at a Pinc Think Tank revealed that although there are high expectations on staff working with children, they are often not given enough support to feel safe and confident about what they do and the environments they are in. Pinc aimed to provide hands-on support and this section covers some of the ways in which it did so.

In each setting, the support outlined below covered the approaches to play discussed in 'Support to Children's Play'. Of course, some of that material arose as we went along so the content of the support changed a little from network to network although the underlying approach to play was the same throughout.

'It was very useful. Any questions or feedback were really taken on board. The whole thing was really interesting. We work with children with challenging behaviour and it was an opportunity to see how they responded.'
(Project Worker)

Elements of support

Type of Support

Comments

Observation of settings before Pinc involvement

This helped us to tailor approaches in the way we felt would be interesting and useful to that setting (both to the children and staff), eg new ideas for the environment or discussion on 'what is free play?'

Play workshop

This was delivered to all settings, except one as there was not enough time. The workshop introduced P.inc ideas and previous experience of play to lead into trying out approaches.

Inclusion workshop

This workshop was delivered in about a third of the settings, where we felt that some discussion around what we meant by inclusion and inclusive play would help strengthen shared goals.

Play sessions

Hands-on support to play developed P.inc support to children and also modelled approaches for participating staff.

Discussion after play

Discussion after play helped us all to reflect on play and develop ideas for future. This was useful for transferring ideas and as a team builder.

Consultancy

Provided in one setting only to work through issues around funding applications, child-centred approaches to developing the setting, teamwork and planning.

Scenarios

Provided for one setting only, to help model different ways of working through text rather than play sessions – we were limited in trying things out as the club was quite structured and planned far in advance.

'It would be good if (P.inc) was part of the training that all playworkers are expected to do and then people would be approaching their work differently. I don't think it should be an option, we should all do it. At the moment the compulsory things are about health and safety and first aid but not about what you actually do with the children. If it was linked to CPD it could be helpful and important.' (Project Manager)

'I think P.inc could do a lot of training and it would be really beneficial to people. It would be good if it was certified.' (Project Worker)

It sometimes felt quite difficult to transfer P.inc approaches to involvement in play. Ideas for resources or tailoring the environment tended to be easier to get across than some of the more instinctive aspects of playwork, particularly when discussion time was limited or other topics took precedence. Part of the reason for this could have been simply different professional expectations of roles. Some of the areas that we observed as trickier for some adults, who were not used to P.inc ways of working, were:

- how to play (and therefore support) all types of games, from board games to imaginary play;
- how to follow children's lead;
- enabling the process of play to unfold rather than only using adult constructed activities;
- how to recognise an invite to play and how to respond.

These observations led us to suspect that it would be useful to use examples which broke down interactions between children and a supportive adult into steps. We tried this in the 'scenarios' document and the Project Manager involved found it helpful in illustrating approaches. For some people, detailed written examples could be a useful back up to the hands-on support. These observations led to the resource 'People play together more' containing more detailed explorations of P.inc playwork approaches.

Play and inclusion workshop

These workshops were often opened out to other professionals in the local area who joined the P.inc participants.

The inclusion workshop was primarily discussion based and aimed to open up different perspectives on inclusion and encourage participants to relate their thoughts to their work practice. The inclusion workshop was effective at getting people to talk about their concerns around inclusion and ways to work through them.

The play workshop covered:

- the background play context of P.inc – including play types and process over product;
- some input and discussion on rough and tumble play;
- previous P.inc findings on supporting play – particularly the environment and the role of adults;
- resource and play environment ideas.

These topics were covered through a mix of presentations, practical activities and discussion.

For the play workshop, the material on rough and tumble play was added after the first network as we found this play type to be a source of conflicting approaches – adults with different professional backgrounds tended to view play-fighting differently, some seeing it as a useful and fun form of bonding and others seeing it as aggressive, responding by curtailing the play.

A playwork perspective on rough and tumble play would be:

'To enable children to access experiences of the close encounter kind, which are less to do with fighting than with a normally hilarious interaction of touching, tickling, gauging relative strength, discovering physical flexibility and the exhilaration of display.

'Characteristics are: self handicapping, not using full strength, letting one's self be caught and the predominance of the play face.' (Hughes, 1996)

Research suggests that an adult's own value base determines whether they see play fighting as aggressive or as pretence. Additionally, men see it mostly as pretence, women see more of it as aggression and nursery teachers see most of it as being aggressive (Connor, 1991 in Sutton-Smith 1997).

Children have a different perspective of their own and after one session full of play-fighting with cardboard swords, told us they had enjoyed playing Lord of the Rings, knights and Jacobites.

'I had a good time playing with the stickers, jumping in the boxes and fighting with the tubes.' (Boy, P7)

During the play workshops we presented further research evidence to open up thinking on rough and tumble play (while recognising that some children find it harder to understand the boundary between play and real fighting and will need more support to do so). For example:

- Holland (2006) concluded that demonising rough and tumble may lead to a deeper fixing of the aggressor stereotype. Research findings showed that a relaxing of a zero-tolerance approach to this play type actually enabled more cooperative play, greater responsibility for behaviour and more opportunities for adults to help children direct imaginative play.
- Just 1% of play-fighting turns into real fighting (except among children with pre-existing aggression issues) whereas teachers over-estimate, expecting a third to turn violent (Connor, 1989).

Looking at perspectives on rough and tumble play with participants was sometimes a useful way into thinking about differing attitudes and values around play, which have a significant impact on our work practice.

'(The workshop) was really, really good. We came together as staff, as in the playground supervisors, auxiliaries who are out on duty and we also came out with the pupil council and we had the play leader (who is) in and out the school on different programmes. We had the slide show and the presentation and a few activities plus children...we were humbled to an extent because it broke down barriers where the children got their point over and we were sort of filling in the gaps with the children on their level. It was a real fun afternoon but very informative as well.'
(Classroom Assistant)

'I found the workshop useful as I have started working with a variety of disabled children with different needs. It has helped me gain confidence and ideas for each child.' (Anon, workshop evaluation)

Play Sessions and discussion afterwards

The way we approached play was responsive to children's needs rather than the adults. However the chance to observe different ways of working was consistently identified as the most useful type of support P.inc offered to adults. The discussions after play then related what had happened during play to the adult participants' experience, views and plans for the setting.

'I think the hands-on part and seeing it working is the most influential and the most valuable but also the chance to talk it through and the chance to talk about how to make it happen backs it all up.' (Project Manager)

P.inc Moment

A pink tarpaulin tent provided a focal point for interaction. Gary and Hamish particularly enjoyed its sensory properties, running underneath it, through the pink glow, the fabric rustling and floating around them. The game developed, with one following the other like a shadow, under the tent and round the back to go under again, occasionally laughing or glancing at each other.

Staff commented that these children don't usually get along and never play together.

'I think that was probably the most useful thing. Looking at how they (the Playworker-researchers) related to the children, the relaxed way and the way they behaved with them. And also they provided a lot of resources, different things from what we had thought of.' (Project Manager)

The project was most successful in transferring ideas to, and developing ideas with, participating staff when regular discussion time was built in. Discussion time was essential to the success of P.inc and was valued by participants, particularly if discussion time was not part of their usual routine. One school in particular realised how much they need time to discuss playground issues.

'The playground wasn't segregated (by age) but you still had to have staff covering the different areas of the playground because the children could be utilising stuff from one area and bringing it round - they would still have to be supervised. So if you were down one side of the playground and missed out on what was happening down the other side, that exchange of information was invaluable.' (Classroom Assistant)

As time went on we became more confident about the issues to really challenge participants on and when to bend. It seemed more effective to avoid challenging on specific resources that were causing concern (playground chalk drawing in schools seems to be a common no go area, much to our surprise, due to a possible resemblance to graffiti) and focus our energies on challenging on more general points such as what children can gain from play. With each new setting we would wipe the slate clean as issues that arose in one did not necessarily arise in another. Discussion time provided a good opportunity to tackle issues around sustainability – from experience we discovered we had to build thinking around sustainability into our approach from early on with new participants.

- Thinking through how best to transfer control to settings where the approaches were very new (for example, by deliberately avoiding being around the resources we had provided to allow more scope for staff to get involved).
- Regularly asking participants how they would feel about trying out the newer ideas on their own (this was especially relevant in schools where the P.inc approach is very different from the usual way of working).
- Jointly working through issues arising from the above.
- At one school we encouraged staff to try out P.inc approaches without us being there – this was very successful as the next time we visited staff seemed more involved and natural with the resources.

Time for change

It became clear through the process of support that change happens at different rates for different people. Often change was only beginning to take root towards the end of a ten week block of outreach. More time would have been useful to follow up participants as their practice changed, offering support at various stages. One participant pointed out how useful this extra contact would have been. When setting up future P.inc work, it may be more helpful to provide less intense support spread over a longer period of time.

P.inc didn't always get it right

At one school we went down the wrong track but did not realise this until much later on. We focused our support on staff in the learning support base (who would be out in the playground with the children.) However, in the end it didn't seem realistic that staff would be able to put out resources, work one-to-one with the children assigned to them and support lots of play and interactions. The project would probably have been more sustainable if staff from other classes took responsibility for the playground and resources and we had worked more closely with them. However, working closely with the learning support base was useful and we did learn much from our time there.

Working with risk management issues

Different perspectives on risk sometimes emerged. Participating staff were often supportive of children's need to enjoy risk and challenge in play and we occasionally put up rope bridges or tyre swings with the children.

'Children aren't silly. They know if they can't do something. They're not going to climb up a tree if they know they can't do it or will hurt themselves. I think that's something we've taken away from them – they know their own limits and we take that away from them.' (Project Worker)

'I liked the rope bridge because it was wobbly but I managed to get across.' (Boy, P3/4)

Where differing perceptions did arise around the possible risks (or even just desirability) of particular resources, this had the extra benefit of highlighting issues around democratic process, in terms of the power adults have and the power children have in determining what is allowed. There can be a wide range of views amongst stakeholders but settings are often in the position of reacting to negative views while never getting to hear the supportive ones.

'I think Health and Safety regulations, which the school has to adhere to, are often destructive. They prevent many activities and equipment from being enjoyed.' (Parent)

A Think Tank discussion reminded us that risk is seen as acceptable in sport but not in play, an interesting tension to be aware of and seek to address. Another point raised was that it is often not the legislation itself but how it is interpreted that is the problem. There may be myths circulating around Health and Safety.

There were times when we felt the need to work with risk management issues in a way that would alleviate any concerns that settings had. This meant that at times we were more flexible on some issues than we have often been, but this was ultimately worthwhile as we learned new ways of resolving issues without denying children the benefits of certain types of play.

For example, in one school, to avoid any accidents in the playground with sharp objects, we restricted the use of some art materials to one of the shelters where they could be more easily supervised. Scissors, sellotape and pens had to remain in this area but once finished with them children were free to take their creations throughout the rest of the playground. With occasional reminding the children tended to respond to this rule. Flexibility was reasonably well maintained as the children could play with their creations wherever they chose to, it was only their choice of where they could create that was restricted.

We carried string and strong tape so that wherever we were in the playground if children needed these to fix something on we could provide them with materials, which then had to be handed back to us. This prevented the game we have often seen in school playgrounds during P.inc play of tying someone up so tightly that it takes about 20 minutes to unravel them from about 10 metres of tape! Interestingly, this is a game we have (so far) only seen happen in school playgrounds. At The Yard and indeed at after school clubs around the country, tape and string are available and yet we have not witnessed children tying each other up with it. It may be that the nature of school and the lack of control children tend to have whilst there encourages more subversive forms of play, as the children attempt to wind up the powerful adults. Or it could be that if there are not enough resources available, little else is going to win out against the first thing that jumps to mind to do with a ball of string.

Staff in schools sometimes felt that the resources produced a change in behaviour and concerns were raised about children's behaviour with equipment. It is interesting that this was an issue for schools more so than clubs, perhaps because clubs are already used to using resources of some sort for play, or perhaps because they tend to have fewer children.

'Children interacted more, although some children had to be watched with some of the equipment re behaviour.' (Classroom Assistant)

'Football causes hassle, P.inc doesn't.' (Girl, P6)

In one school we had more discussion time available to tease out these issues. It was difficult to pin down where the feelings came from. Staff felt there were many behaviour support issues on 'non-P.inc' days and some comments from children and staff indicated that on P.inc days there was a reduction in fighting and children were more engaged in positive play. Did their behaviour need to be watched anyway, without resources? It may be that resources just produced a slight shift in the type of support to behaviour that was needed. If children hit each other with their hands anyway, then is there much difference when they do it with a plastic bottle? We worked through these issues and although we didn't reach firm conclusions, the school did feel that the benefits of the resources meant that it was worthwhile working through the associated issues. We were careful after the first couple of weeks to avoid resources that could more easily lead to misunderstandings between children, such as the fake snowballs we put out the first week.

Sustainability

'I think Susan and Ivan were very supportive – that they went with the positive rather than the negative and I think it got to the point that the people that were going to carry the project forward are still involved with carrying this forward within the playground.' (Classroom Assistant)

'For me it was a very positive and rewarding programme and it opened my eyes and opened my horizons and the knock on effect is that I am very keen to drive it forward with the management of the school.' (Classroom Assistant)

At the time we visited settings to carry out P.inc, all had intentions to sustain P.inc ideas, in some way, beyond the action research. There was some variation in those intentions as each organisation took something different from the experience, for example, aiming to continue:

- particular resource ideas;
- new ways of setting up environments for play;
- new ways of thinking about the play environment in relation to children's needs and interests;
- to support more child-led free play and reducing direction by adults;
- to give more time and thought to play;
- to offer a wider range of opportunities.

Towards the end of the project, we approached all participants with follow-up questionnaires to find out about the long-term impact. Only four were returned, out of the nine separate organisations that took part, for various reasons – one of the clubs has since stopped operating, some people were too busy in the run up to Christmas and one batch of responses went missing in the post.

The responses received were very positive – each of those participants had sustained something of P.inc. Each felt P.inc had changed the way they see play.

'It helped to prove the value of play to learning and developing social skills and self esteem as well as the practical skills children learn from it.' (Project Manager)

Three settings identified a continuing impact on their work practice. For the one participant who did not feel this to be the case, their answer seemed to be about differences in the style of work – their club was more about providing set activities to achieve learning outcomes.

'It took time to develop our confidence once P.inc staff were not around the project any more, but we have learned to be more creative in our inclusive practice.' (Project Manager)

'I'm prepared to join in more with children at play then step back and let them carry it forward.' (Classroom Assistant)

Three of the settings have continued to use the practical ideas such as particular resources or opportunities, or now give children more freedom to decide what to do with the materials. One school hadn't been using resources in the playground because of staff shortages but still intended to take P.inc ideas forward at some point.

For future project development, it would be worth bearing in mind that follow-up work could play an important role in supporting organisations to sustain new ideas.

'It would be helpful to be re-visited by P.inc to give us their opinions of changes we have made and we would like to continue to share ideas for new experiences for the children.' (Project Manager)

2. Benefits of Support

Many of the descriptions of P:inc approaches under 'Models of Support', or in the P:inc moments, highlight the broad range of benefits that arose. This section covers some further benefits to children, settings and communities.

A. Benefits to Children

'People play together more. There's more happiness. People that don't play together have been and different ages playing together. You could see by people's faces they were enjoying it' (Girl, P6)

Some of the more frequently reported benefits, expressed by participating children or staff at the time and in follow-up questionnaires later on, were:

- children included in play who are not usually;
- some children more confident in play and interaction;
- more imaginative play than usual;
- a general reduction in fighting and frustration;

'When the playground is bare nobody is running around laughing and having fun, they're just swearing and fighting. There's less trouble in the playground (on P:inc days).'

 (Girl, P6)

- some children more active than usual;
- strengthening relationships between children;
- a greater variety of play occurring than usual;
- more to do;
- strengthening relationships between children and staff.

'It broke down barriers with the children ... "you're all human as well" one of the girls quoted to me, "you're more approachable."' (Classroom Assistant)

It is impossible to separate out whether it was a supportive, permissive adult presence, the type of resources on offer or more likely some combination of both, that encouraged play and interactions to flourish.

P:inc Moment

Week 3 – The large cardboard boxes inspired a whole variety of play and Lewis began making a magic box from one. He was full of ideas about a disappearing act he could perform with it. He carefully cut out flaps and Robert helped him to decorate it.

Week 4 – Lewis was working on the legs of the box today but was increasingly frustrated that they weren't strong enough and the box kept falling over, saying 'nothing I do works'. Although we acknowledged his problem, we were keen to give him the chance to figure it out for himself rather than 'rescuing' him from his frustration.

Week 5 - He figured out a way of making the legs stronger today and the magician's box was finished. He was really excited about this and worked with Robert on decorating a stage area, seating for the audience and dressing up for the performance. Three weeks of preparation culminated in a wonderful disappearing act, enjoyed by the rest of the class.

Some effects stand out as being a helpful support to inclusion; others are benefits we would hope to see arising from play more generally. Most of the benefits occurred across the range of settings. However some of the most noticeable changes could be observed in a school playground, as the contrast between P.inc and the usual way of approaching play was more pronounced. The following examples provide more information on a couple of the benefits, for which there were a noteworthy range of perspectives expressed. More detailed findings on P.inc influences on interactions, playmates and friendships are in Section 3 'Inclusive Play'.

More imaginative and varied play

'The change in the environment stimulated the children to change the way they played. They could be more imaginative.' (Project Worker)

P.inc Moment

The pizza boxes we had scrounged were used at first for imaginary play around pizza delivery then used as Frisbees, then for wings and costumes were made out of them. Hamish was a ladybird and Sophie coloured the wings in red. Some children pretended to be birds or Superman. A lot of imaginary play and interactions came from a very simple (and free) resource and a bit of adult help.

Although this effect occurred at many of the settings, the biggest change could be observed in one school in particular, in which 100 children played in the playground. At the first P.inc play session at lunchtime, there did not seem to be much imaginative play occurring, even with the new resources, although children were showing off with the dressing up clothes. As the weeks progressed children extended the wearing of the dressing up into developing characters and were playing 'in character' more. Children also began to make more use of objects they had made with the art materials in their imaginary play.

The effect of one dose of P.inc play per week began to transfer to 'normal' playtimes. A classroom assistant pointed out that even on non P.inc days there was a greater variety of imaginative play occurring and less reliance on football than usual.

'I think children's thought processes are changing in play.' (Classroom Assistant)

The scope for transferability of P.inc play into other times and days had been raised at another school too, where a participant commented that one boy seemed to be playing more imaginatively with his toys at home since P.inc had visited.

It appeared that children experiencing enriched play even just occasionally could make use of those new skills and ideas elsewhere.

'Children got to take part in new play experiences that could be taken outwith the project into the community. They were using materials that were easily to hand – boxes, etc. It let them see just how easily they could use them.' (Project Worker)

Perhaps we can infer, in the absence of P.inc type play at schools, that children experiencing rich play elsewhere may be more able to bring transferable skills to the less stimulating environment of the bare school playground. Those who do not have access to rich opportunities in other places may find themselves disadvantaged.

Alongside the benefits of more imaginative and creative play, children in one school expressed a sense of simply having more to do.

Playworker-researcher: Is it different on days where there are things in the playground?

Girl: Yes because we aren't so bored and don't bother Mrs Newman so much. (Girl, P5)

'When you (P.inc) are there, there's emptiness in the toilets but usually people just sit in the toilets when you are not there because there's nothing to do.' (Girl, P6)

Increase in confidence at play and self expression

P.inc Moment

Week 1 – Thomas was very shy at this first play session. He clung to the hand of one of the support staff and was only comfortable interacting with them, avoiding the resources.

Week 2 – He began to show interest in the resources this week and with some adult encouragement had a go at rolling tyres and dressing up.

Week 3 – Today when we went to the class to meet the children, Thomas said 'I want to go outside.' Over the play session he showed increased confidence in interacting with us and even initiated play himself, getting involved in a cardboard tube/sword fight with some other boys.

Across all types of settings, there were some children who gained more confidence through P.inc approaches, particularly those who naturally tended to be a bit shyer or had fewer playmates. There was sometimes a sense of an opening up, of self expression coming out in new forms such as art, dancing or dressing up.

'The children that we work with are bright children but they have never really been allowed to express themselves...they don't know who they are. Because the dressing up wasn't specific; it was just bits of material, they could be who they wanted to be, and so it gave them a chance to know themselves really.' (Assistant Service Manager)

P.inc Moment

There seems to have been a significant increase in children's creative self expression over the weeks since we introduced flexible resources and encouraged the children's own ideas.

Today staff helped children to make masks which they used to play other games. Fiona made an ancient Egyptian style mask and went over to the CD player to dance like an Egyptian! She was confident and comfortable about dancing around on her own, making up new styles to fit the music and her ancient Egyptian theme.

B. Benefits to Settings

Any advantages experienced by the children, in terms of better play, increased confidence and interactions, or strengthened relationships must be taken as a benefit to the setting too, helping adults to achieve goals of interest and children to feel more connected to the life of a setting.

Participating staff also gained much from P.inc.

Ideas for play environments and resources

'It was like a team builder for us and really got us participating. We saw that we didn't have to use the same resources. The wide spaces – we tended to think before that they would encourage just running around but it showed how if you use space differently with interesting materials, they got involved in positive play through it.' (Project Worker)

'It was really good to be shown how to do things like rope bridges - and it would be nice to get more of that. Us and the children will do it again.' (Project Worker)

Ideas for how adults can support play

'It would open your eyes to just maybe go forward that little bit and engage with the child that you saw maybe just not quite joining in.' (Classroom Assistant)

Pinc Moment

In the playground today we set up a blue tarpaulin on the ground to mark out a dance area and placed a CD player, CD's and some musical instruments round the outside.

One of the Special Needs Auxiliaries really supported quieter children to have a go with the drum. She picked up on Jackie's curious look over and helped her to get some space at the drum, discouraging other children from jostling her out the way. Later she said that big smiles and being enthusiastic was the right sort of encouragement to offer Jackie to get her involved.

Meanwhile some other staff joined a fan club with children to cheer on the dance performances!

Greater confidence in supporting free play

'P.inc helped us to explore experiences that children could share without adult direction or interference and showed us how we could facilitate choice.' (Project Manager)

'Having seen the sessions in action, I now have the confidence to do it by myself.' (Teacher)

A fresh look at staff roles

Particularly in a school environment, the P.inc way of working is quite different to how people usually work. Staff in school playgrounds tend to have a supervisory role and are not viewed as being there to engage with play. When more discussion time was available, we talked through playground roles and tried to ensure staff felt that safety would be maintained in addition to being more involved in play. The Head Teacher at one school suggested that staff take different roles, for example, one person could stay with resources that need supervision such as art

materials (scissors, etc), one could float with an overall supervisory role and other staff could be free to follow different bits of play. This approach would help to utilise different skills within a staff team and free people up to focus on play, knowing that supervision is still taken care of. This shows that staff roles, particularly in a school, should be tackled in a way that acknowledges and works with current expectations.

'I just always thought and viewed my role in the playground that I was just there to provide supervision of the children and so acted accordingly. (Now) I am forever playing with the children in the playground either with equipment or with pieces of paper or hide and seek, and we have got gardens now that the children are involved with maintaining the plants and different things and so yes, it definitely has changed the way I see my role.'
(Classroom Assistant)

Ideas for supporting children's inclusion in the setting

'(Pinc) hit the client group for inclusive play, it really did work, that the children that need extra support or just to be seen or heard, they had a formula to work within that they were not singled out from their peers. I found it really rewarding and it did boost a pleasant feeling when you saw a breakthrough with the children. It was really wonderful to see different approaches when we hadn't got anywhere.' (Classroom Assistant)

Raised awareness of play, or new ways of looking at play

'One of the things I found useful about Pinc was a way of looking at things... Previously... well I thought it was lovely to see friendships but I hadn't really thought it was something I could write down – I saw that as a positive outcome for the first time. So that's another way coming to the club can do something for them. It's not just somewhere they can go.' (Project Manager)

C. Benefits to Communities

For several reasons, it was difficult to establish what the benefits of Pinc to the community of the settings could have been.

- Community is a difficult concept to define in a way that would allow the benefits to be investigated. The word implies something more than the sum of its parts (individual people).
- Contact with other individuals who had connections with the participating settings (parents and other professionals) was limited due to time and the difficulties in getting parents involved and they only saw bits here and there of the project.
- Different participating children could feel part of different communities – for example, in one network some went to the school but not the club we worked with and vice versa. The children that we did see go to both still tended to play with different playmates at each setting, reducing the feeling that there was 'a community' that could be investigated.

We did notice that people going past one school had a look to see what was going on at playtimes. One parent in particular was very interested in her child and how he was getting on and it provided an opportunity to see her son engaged in the playground in a more positive way than usual. This was certainly a benefit of the project to one member of the community.

The passers-by did remind us of how much a school is part of its community and we suspected that many people in the area feel they have some stake in what goes on, whether through worries about young people hanging out at night, because their own child attends the school or simply because they pay taxes. The headteacher in two schools pointed out that they were not keen on chalk drawing in the playground, due to the resemblance to graffiti and possible repercussions on the image of the school. While this raised issues around who should have control over the playground – the children, staff or the community – it also highlighted the difficult position schools can be in. We certainly felt under pressure and concerned about what passing parents might be thinking of the new lease of life in the playground.

Potential benefits to the community from P.inc play were discussed at a P.inc Think Tank:

- may reduce the frustration of excluded children and vandalism or negative behavioural expressions that worsen community relations;
- community can see the potential of children who have had a chance to show their particular skills and personality;
- making friends that they might not have eg children from special schools meet those in mainstream and others from their area;
- improve relationships between children and that transfers to the wider community;
- if schools and clubs adopt this philosophy and practice it can inform the wider community attitude.

Our interest in children's experiences and friendship across the range of settings they attend was the starting point through which the term community became embedded in the aims of the project. Leaving aside the concept of community, we did explore the connections children formed. Findings on this topic are presented in section 3 'Inclusive Play – Friendship, inclusion and play.'

3. Inclusive Play

Throughout the project, the various perspectives shared and observations made have led to a collection of findings, which although related to the previous sections on 'Models of Support' and 'Benefits of Support', can stand alone as discussion points under the broad topic of 'inclusive play'.

Differing perspectives on play

What is free play?

Participants sometimes identified that P.inc raised awareness or understanding of free play.

'We as a staff team learned a lot and would be more confident about being led by the children's play and letting them try, giving them resources to use their own way. It's not like setting up a house corner and then being led within that, but about really being led by them.' (Teacher)

P.inc playworkers doing hands-on playwork demonstrated ways of working with play that some participants were perhaps not aware of prior to P.inc, or perhaps lacked 'permission' to try.

'We looked at the underlying structure and have turned that around. It's semi-structured now I suppose and I know it's not free play but it's moving that way, it's freer. The free play was very useful. Before we thought we had to have that structure, that was the advice we were given.' (Project Manager)

From experience (some from outside of P.inc action research), we know that people can interpret the words 'free play' in quite different ways. One experience stands out, from a training event, of a playworker who said that their club did do free play, but the example given to back this up was of an adult-led activity with a pre-defined format to follow and ending in a planned product. A P.inc Think Tank participant expressed that play and activity get confused and people can see play as having a start, middle and end. Some people may use 'free play' as a term for offering a choice of adult-planned activities.

The P.inc perspective, drawing from an adventure play background, is that an essential ingredient for free play is that children can respond spontaneously to their surroundings (environment and other children), with no direction imposed by adults. Others share this perspective too – many adults remember the sense of control experienced in their own childhood play.

'I go back to the idea that when I played it was your own idea, so you owned your play and that's what's changed. And it's such a shame.' (Assistant Service Manager)

Pinc Moment

It was a very windy day so we brought along some small bin bags to make basic kites. This idea proved to be really popular and the children ran screaming with excitement as the bags caught the wind and flapped about. Nobody was interested in decorating their kites – the simple pleasure of the wind lifting them was enough for most of the children. One girl developed a game by saying that the bags are ghosts and if you are touched by one, you lose a life. The playworker helped by calling out the rules for her loudly so everyone could hear and understand and also tried to manoeuvre everyone closer to children on the margins of the game to involve them more easily. The rules were developed by a couple of children, with different rules for different levels. The playworker continued to support these developments by filling everyone in on the new rules.

Two issues arise from these perspectives:

- If free play is about responding to your surroundings, what sort of environment is appropriate for this end?
- What sort of role should adults have in free play (if any)?

What sort of environment is best for free play?

'The setting is a huge influence even when the Playworker's values are based on free, expressive play. If the environment isn't conducive then it constrains what happens.' (Think Tank participant)

P.inc has experienced indoor settings with very few play resources, due to a lack of financial resources or a perception of a lack of need. It was possible to see two effects arising from such a set up:

- opportunities available were fixed activities requiring little materials, such as adult-led games (the traditional playground sort), small scale art activities, playing football or dancing to music;
- children hanging out, or sitting around and chatting, not really playing in a wide range of ways.

It made us think about whether it is possible to put children in an empty room and call what takes place free play. The rhetorical question has implications for how we define free play and communicate this to other audiences.

When attempting to convey ideas in a succinct and easily digestible way, the play sector may leave its ideas too open to interpretation.

We addressed issues around good environments for play (in the sections 'Models of Support' and 'Benefits of Support'.) Although P.inc action research cannot rule out other types of play resources or approaches, it has demonstrated that children enjoy the resources and approaches used by P.inc and many positive benefits arise from that sort of opportunity. In all situations where P.inc approaches were quite different from the setting's usual way of working with play, children consistently expressed that they preferred P.inc and were sometimes concerned about what things would be like after P.inc left.

P.inc Moment

It was a really windy day and so we hung fabric from the trees. The floating, opaque fabric had entrancing sensory properties, blowing in the wind with the light shining through. Carol especially liked these and watched them for a while, getting really excited when playworkers took the fabric over to her. This prompted staff to assist the children in making more windy things out of plastic packaging material filled with air pockets, bits of fabric and cardboard tubes. The children loved running, walking and twirling with their creations blowing around them.

What sort of role should adults have in free play?

'There is a dilemma in trying to provide freedom when there are inherent restrictions in provision.' (Think Tank participant)

A P.inc Think Tank discussion highlighted the inherent tensions in trying to provide for 'free play'. The very presence of adults who have defined the provision, to some extent, will place parameters on what is possible for the children. However, there can be a great deal of freedom within those parameters, if adults are aware of the effect of how they set up for play and of how they interact with the children during play.

The words 'free play' can lead some adults to interpret that they have no role in play, that children ought to be left to their own devices. This worthwhile goal will work in favour of the many children who do not need our help to play.

'Most kids only need light encouragement and then there's no holding them back. Some need a bit more, but enjoy themselves when they get going. There are always one or two kids who prefer to be on their own just watching but this is their choice.' (Project Worker)

From Pinc, we know that some children would like to be more involved in play but are unable to, perhaps due to lack of confidence, previous bad experiences, having no playmates or because they find it difficult to join in with and sustain games. Perhaps being on the margins is not always a choice, something that may be quite difficult to determine, unless adults offer some sensitive involvement to see what happens.

Pinc Moment

Puppets helped Graeme to express his play in a more external way that the other children could recognise and join in with. The playworker built on this by introducing more visual cues which tied in with the theme of the king and princess puppets. She started off a drawing of a castle, which other children joined in making. This helped provide a focal point for bringing children together and making the game easier to join as the frame containing the game became clearer to all involved.

It was really inclusive as it incorporated art as well as imaginative social play, providing a range of ways the children could take part. It was also really nice that the game was played out sitting round a table in the classroom, emphasising that you don't need lots of room and large resources to have a really inspiring play session.

Not all adults find it easy to engage with free play and this may be another reason some prefer to stay uninvolved. Further barriers to adults finding a role in free play are:

- an adult preference for structure – knowing what is going to happen from start to finish;
- some play types, that occur when children play freely, are not always valued by adults, such as rough and tumble, or play that is seen as aimless or silly. Adults often show most regard for play that ends in a product such as a drama show or a piece of art.

Adults use all sorts of words to describe their role in play. Some of the words used by participants in Pinc were 'assist', 'join in', 'encourage' and 'supervise'. One adult said their role was to 'permit and allow, to encourage.'

Each of these terms could lead to quite different implications on styles of working. Even a phrase as suggestive of freedom as 'To permit and allow, to encourage' implies that the very presence of adults means that those adults must actively engage with what it is 'to allow' – how it is we signify to children that they are being given freedom.

During Pinc, a participant, in the spirit of debate, challenged why we were trying to encourage one girl on from the favourite game that she returned to each week. We did so because we wanted to find out if it really was her preference or if it could be a lack of confidence holding her back. The discussion was very helpful as it made us aware that our approaches could be interpreted as a justification to control play, rather than to quietly test the water to see if support is wished for.

Teasing out these perspectives on free play raises dilemmas for adults working where children play:

- adults opting out of a role in play may leave those needing more support on the margins of play;
- adults involved in play risk dominating or controlling, if not sensitive.

If we hope play will be inclusive (in the sense that all children are enabled to enjoy enriched experiences and to play together when they wish to), adults may have to step into play, but not to force ways of playing.

Pinc demonstrates a balance, a way of leaving play as the unadulterated culture of the children as much as possible, while still supporting those who would otherwise be disadvantaged. Describing this balance and the need for self-reflection requires more detail than could be covered in this report. However, the approach is woven throughout the 'People play together more' handbook.

'The creativity is in the children – we just needed to know how to bring it out.' (Project Manager)

Pinc Moment

In the first play session at the after school club the children appeared to need quite a bit of help to hold their play together. They were used to a club where set activities were provided so perhaps lacked confidence in their own ideas.

The children developed a game of cops and robbers, were keen for us to play with them, and looked to us to help resolve disputes over roles and what should happen next. Some of the children were robbers who snuck into houses at night and stole clothes and handbags. The cops chased the robbers which led to heated arguments over who was actually caught or not.

When we felt that the game was so heated it was threatening to disband entirely we suggested the robbers should go to court. The children liked this idea and we helped set up a courtroom and decide roles.

(Note – Over the weeks that followed the children seemed to gain confidence in their interactions and we were able to withdraw from their play, only occasionally feeling that they needed or wanted our support.)

'We made up a story, some bad people and some good. I was a bad person but not now we are at home.' (Girl, P3)

Case study – children figuring out adult roles

'All children robbers and all the adults cops.' (Girl, P5)

The children announced this at the end of a game of cops and robbers, early on in the outreach, which had involved only two out of five adults available. It seemed to be an interesting strategy to test out the adults and see who would and who wouldn't wish to join in their games. This was very observant on their part as we were all new to working together and adult roles were at a stage of shifting and reconfiguring – they were obviously very aware of the differing roles being taken.

Staff in different settings may view play through a filter of the goals and interests unique to their profession, leading to different ways of supporting children – some that are free play based and some structured with particular outcomes in mind.

Different organisations may work with quite different understandings of play or perhaps even none at all; some work with children focuses on 'group work' or 'improving communication' albeit in a play-related context. At times, there may be a mismatch between what children think a club or service is for and the purpose the staff have in mind.

Although P.inc did not set targets for children, through responding to needs and interests in the ways reported, benefits did arise quite naturally. It was not necessary to plan specific activities to support 'self-esteem' or 'positive group work' – sensitively supporting free play achieved both and more, with elements of structure brought in only when useful to move children onto playing freely. One participant identified that this was particularly supportive for the children.

'Eventually there would be an outcome but that wasn't defined in the first instance. I think that took the pressure off the children as well because sometimes we adults have this picture and we are trying to get it across and the children are focusing on our perceptions and not their own.' (Assistant Service Manager)

Is there a need to think more about how different children's services can align adult goals and interests with those of the children and develop a more holistic view of children and play?

Perspectives on inclusion

Several observations led to much discussion on inclusion.

- At the very start of one block of outreach it was difficult to find out what provision disabled children attend (either organised provision or informal opportunities such as local parks.) We couldn't find anyone who knew the overall local picture for disabled children.
- When observing children at the clubs with set activities it was clear that differences between children were often highlighted by staff in a negative way because of the need to pull children back to the activity.
- Some children at the clubs didn't seem so interested in the activities on offer but seemed to appreciate the social opportunity.
- Although some clubs aimed to be inclusive, parameters on who could attend arose from the level of understanding required to take part in the set activities.

The idea that led to the P.inc Connections project is that if children are to really experience inclusion then they must have access to a range of local opportunities for play. Play is children's culture so inclusion in play must be considered as a key part of childhood.

'Play is an essential part of children's culture and quality of life...Culture is understood as ways of life encompassing values, traditions, beliefs, conflict and coexistence, engagements born of free choice, and the meaning and values we ascribe to activities.' (Playlink, 2005)

The difficulty we had in finding out the local picture for disabled children in terms of accessing opportunities is out of step with a wider sense of inclusion, eg the whole picture from a child's point of view

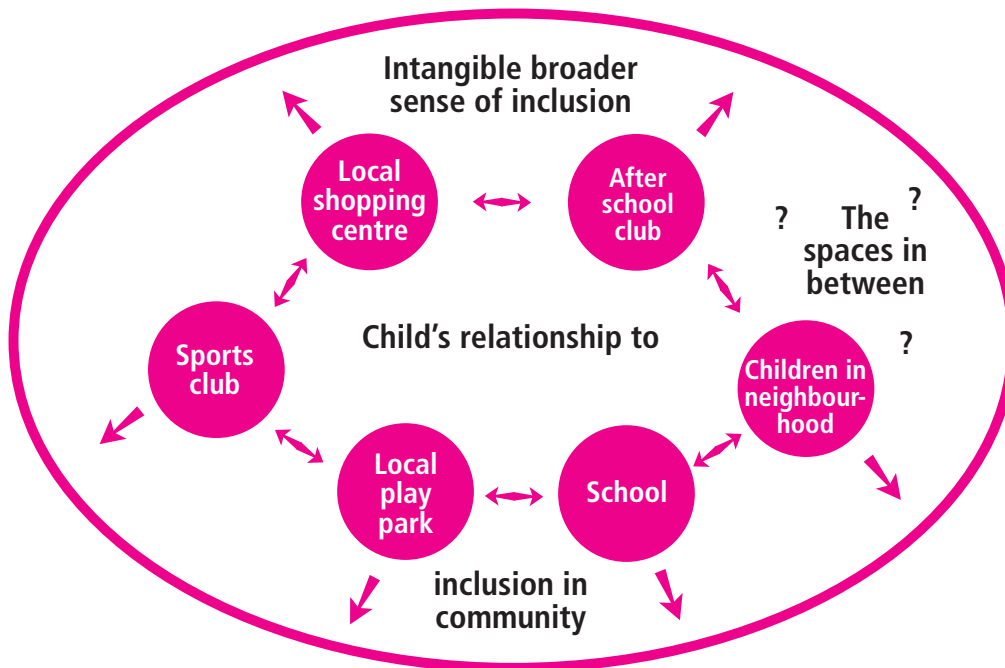


Figure 1: Sense of inclusion

There is inevitably a responsibility on each organisation to be ready to accommodate as wide a range of children as are interested in attending. The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA) brought in laws to end discrimination against disabled people (including children). The DDA is 'anticipatory' which means that services will need to show that they are planning and acting to remove barriers and to develop inclusive settings and services. The relationship between these organisations also needs attention – if the sports club excludes children who do not understand rules or the concept of sport, is it succeeding in being open to as broad a range of children as possible? What other opportunities are there for those children? Perhaps we need to engage with inclusion at the level of the individual setting and at the community level so that there can be balance overall in the opportunities available.

Our observations of the parameters activities placed on who could attend some clubs raised interesting questions around how inclusive any one organisation can or should be. A venture with a specific purpose may exclude some people because not everyone will understand or be able to fit with the purpose of that organisation. It is still possible for each setting (including informal settings such as park facilities) to aim to be as inclusive as it can be within the purpose of the setting. This may require being aware of and stretching the parameters created by that purpose. With organised activities, to what extent should the activity take priority and leave attendance to 'natural selection' and to what extent should the provision alter to fit the children who are excluded? Even if individual provision engages with these issues, the question would remain of where the gaps are in provision and which children are not accessing opportunities. There could also be a lack of attention to other areas that may be important to children such as whether or not they get invited round to playmates' houses for tea.

From these observations and discussion we came to suspect that in terms of experiences and activities, free play is a particularly inclusive opportunity in which children can take part. We have seen that free play in an enriched environment naturally accommodates different ways of being and doing. Where there is a set purpose there is always the chance of highlighting differences in a negative way – some children will find the activity difficult to complete. In free play spontaneity is welcome and children can value qualities in each other that adults wouldn't cater for or sometimes even value; silly faces, running around after floating bubbles or being cheeky to adults. Support from sensitive adults can also help ensure that each child's contribution is valued and that individuals are supported in the things that are priorities to them. The flexibility in free play allows playworkers to support one child's friendships, another's desire to build a den and another's wish for a game of football. This is not to say that other activities can't be inclusive to some children but that the range of opportunities allowed for in free play and the flexibility to respond to individual need has far wider, or no parameters on who can attend, if well provided for.

'You have to be good at football to be good at football but you don't have to be good at play to be good at play.'
(Think Tank participant)

Although this discussion-based section does not provide answers, the points raised during P.inc felt worth reporting, to stimulate further thinking on these areas. There is also a resonance with points raised in the literature context.

Some key points that we considered were:

- viewing inclusion as something that is experienced by a person and how to support that in a way which matters to them;
- the need to engage with inclusion at the level of individual settings and at the level of the relationship between the opportunities in an area;
- even if barriers to access are removed, other factors in the provision could affect a child's sense of inclusion;
- provision with a set activity has narrower parameters on which children can attend than a flexible, responsive provision such as that which is free play based;
- the importance of seeing inclusion as not just about formal provision but about playing with friends in the neighbourhood.

If the above factors are in fact important to a sense of inclusion, it does look as if there may be a role for an individual or team in each local authority area to work with these issues. Some tasks which the above discussion has suggested would be to:

- map where disabled, disadvantaged or marginalised children are geographically and what provision they are accessing;
- map children's provision in the area, including local authority and voluntary sector based opportunities and un-staffed opportunities such as local green spaces or parks;
- liaise with all provision and support them to open their doors to a wider range of children;
- look for where the gaps are in provision and advise local authority and other service providers in the area of recommended provision development (this would have the extra benefit of supporting organisations in fundraising or budgeting as the evidence for need would be there);
- work with individual children and families to support their own aspirations, whether it is to visit their local park or their friends' houses; and to do this with an underlying view of inclusion and play as holistic and broad as has been suggested by participants in P.inc.

This type of engagement with inclusion would help ensure it is not left to chance.

Friendship Consultation

At the outset of the project we wondered what effect P.inc would have on children's friendships and playmate choices. We realised this would be difficult to explore, as children may define their relationships with each other in quite different ways from an adult observer. For this reason we ran a friendship consultation to find out more from children and young people. It was a small scale consultation, so the results do not allow generalisation but in conjunction with the next section 'P.inc and friendships' they do clarify some P.inc thinking around friendship, inclusion and play.

Nineteen children took part, a mix of non-disabled children and children with additional support needs. Some children took part in groups and others were consulted individually, to help them to share their thoughts. A mix of puppets, drawing, questionnaires and interview styles were used, depending on what the children preferred. Samples of the comments are given here, grouped into loose categories (a few relevant quotes from other P.inc consultations are also included with these results).

Play

'I like my friends because...they are nice. I like playing with them.' (Girl, age 5)

'I like my friends because they play with me.' (Boy, age 5)

'I didn't invite Michael to play because you've got to be big and brave. Well, he is a little brave but you're only allowed if you are big and brave like me.' (Boy, age 6)

(P7 girl, making a puppet of her friend)

Viv: I have other friends.

Playworker: Are some friends more important than others or are they all the same?

Viv: All the same but sometimes I play with some of them but not others, it depends what they are playing, if it is something I don't want to play.

'(Friends are important) because they are good people to play with if you are lonely.' (Girl, age 7)

'I don't like it when she says she is going to play with me and then she isn't, 'cause I feel sad.' (Boy, age 7)

Although many comments associated friendship with play (including particular games played such as tig, houses or computer games), another issue mentioned frequently was keeping in touch, either by phone or instant messaging. This was raised particularly in reference to friends who had moved away.

Another play related factor associated with friendship was having a laugh. There was a strong sense of informal time spent together, joking and laughing.

'We just kind of kid around really.' (Girl, P6)

The nature of friendship

'We share the same interests.' (Girl, age 10)

'(Friends) are really special because I really, really, really like them because they are cool and look cool.' (Boy, age 6)

A friend is...

- ...someone who is kind to you. (Girl, age 7)
- ...a person who looks after you. (Girl, age 10)
- ...someone who agrees with you. (Boy, age 7)
- ...someone who keeps you company. (Girl, age 10)
- ...somebody that you play with. (Girl, age 6)

One girl, (P6), spoke of her friend, who is a real friend, not just someone who plays with her then goes away. They look out for each other and cry together when they are sad. They live near each other and met on the street.

One girl seemed to associate the concept of friendship with everyone she had a positive relationship with, both adults and children, in all the different places she spent time. She did not differentiate these relationships.

'He says "Can we play buses?" and I say no. Jim suggests army games. We always play what he suggests. He likes to be boss.' (Boy, age 10)

'We need to know them much better so we can go round to their house.' (Girl, age 6)

One girl, (P7), said she had more in common with the boys and preferred playing with them, but has been picked on for it. When the group was asked, all girls said that they also had friends who were boys. One girl thought they were a different kind of friend, another thought it depended what you liked, if you both liked trains for example.

'When they need the toilet we stop the game and when they come back we start again.' (Boy, age 6)

How do you look after friendships? 'Loyalty and stop them getting in trouble.' (Girl, age 10)

Distinction between a friend and a best friend

Some of the girls began talking about best friends.

One girl spoke of a friend, Reese, who moved away.

Playworker: How did you feel about Reese moving away?

Frances: Very sad.

Playworker: Do you still feel sad?

Frances: Yes because I've only seen her twice since she moved away.

Jo: But you have a new friend now, Ruby.

Frances: No, Sue is my new best friend because she's funny too like Reese.

Playworker: Were you friends with Sue before Reese moved away?

Frances: Yes.

Playworker: But she wasn't a best friend then?

Frances: No, because Reese is funnier.

Playworker: Do you only have one best friend at a time?

Frances: Yes, friends and one best friend.

Playworker: Do you have a best friend?

Danielle: Yes, two.

Playworker: And do you have other friends who are not best friends?

Danielle: Yes.

Playworker: How do you choose who to play with in the playground?

Danielle: Well if someone asks to play with me I say ok but I have to find my best friend.

'With other friends you fall out but with best friends you just laugh if they say "I hate you".' (Girl, P7)

'My best friend moved away. And I had known her the longest and then I didn't have any friends. We still write but it's not the same, "phone friends".' (Girl, P7)

'(She's my best friend) because I've known her the longest and we went through growing up together. We're the exact same age so we can talk about stuff, we're going through the same things.' (Girl, P6)

'I practically fall out with my friends, not my best, best friends.' (Girl, age 10)

Ambiguous relationships

George: Paul and Gary are bullies.

Playworker: So are they not your friends?

George: They're my annoying friends. Sanjay is my magic friend.

'I'm drawing Rachel. She's my friend but she's my baddest friend because she doesn't play with me and goes off with Jill.' (Girl, P2)

Different friends in different places

One boy who spoke of his friend at one play setting, they played together all the time. But at school he played with different children, even though his friend was also at school.

A boy commented that he plays with his friends at home, but not at school because they play football and he is not good at football so they don't let him play.

One girl had friends whom she saw at school and after school club but not usually at home. She also spoke of a best friend from nursery, who is not at her school now but she still sees at weekends.

Reasons for falling out with friends

'I fell out with Leon today 'cause he wasn't being really nice...because I wanted to play with others.' (Boy, age 6.)
He explained that the playground supervisor sorted it out by making them say sorry and shake hands.

'(Fall out because of) taking games and playing too seriously – we make up when the game's over.' (Boy, age 11)
In discussion, both boys and girls agreed that boys often take games too seriously and this can lead to problems.

How do you make up?

'Smack each others bottoms, then we burst out laughing.' (Girl, age 7)

'Apologise and make up.' (Girl, age 10)

Playworker: How much do you have to like someone before they're a friend?

Rhianne: 100%.

Playworker: Do you ever fall out with friends?

Rhianne: Sometimes.

Playworker: How much do you like your friends when you fall out with them?

Rhianne: 0%, I dinnae like them at all.

Playworker: How do you get to be friends again?

Rhianne: Get back up and then that's 50% and then if we start playing with each other and keep getting on then that's another 50%, that's 100%!

Barriers to friendships

A boy who attends a special school spoke of a friend whom he didn't get to play with much because he wasn't allowed out at playtimes. He thought this was because his friend swore, but didn't think this was fair as it was another child's fault for teasing him and saying that he couldn't walk.

Friendship (or playmates) and P.inc

Some of the consultation results strike a chord with observations from P.inc. For example, we saw children play with different children in each setting they attended, even when they had access to the same playmates across settings. However, some friendships do seem to transfer across settings or transcend them (children staying in phone contact with far away friends).

Children identified a range of different types of relationships:

- children who they played with but who weren't friends;
- children they played with who were friends;
- a choice of who is played with is sometimes dependent on what is being played;
- a sense of loyalty and connection to your best friend(s);
- children valuing particular personal qualities in each other;
- children sometimes commented on what adults may see as a negative relationship with another child, but still classed them as a friend.

Often children appeared quite different in different contexts, such as the same child seeming shy and quiet at a club, while at school bouncing around displaying much confidence. Different qualities showed themselves in different situations.

All of these factors suggest that it may be misleading to hope to encourage children's friendships to transfer across settings (at least for primary school age children), as P.inc was initially interested in. It seems that children will find their own niche in the different settings they attend and this can involve different playmates or friendships. (However, it may be the case that being introduced to a new club alongside an existing friend could help a child to feel confident and settle in.)

Leaving aside the possibilities of friendships transferring across settings, there did appear to be an effect from P.inc on the level of interaction and who played with whom. Due to the complexities in defining friendship, our findings highlight changes in interaction and playmates choices, rather than friendship.

Some of the most noticeable effects were in school playgrounds as the opportunities that P.inc brought were so different to the usual way of working. The greatest effects could be seen in one school in particular and the school was not large, therefore resources could be shared around fairly easily.

It was reported under 'Benefits of Support' that P.inc approaches often brought about a greater level of interaction and better relationships between children. The initial trigger seems to be the greater number of opportunities available through the play environment, the scope for self-expression and exploration in different forms. Children could link up with others with similar interests.

Playworker-researcher: Tell me about who you play with.

Fiona: I play with new people now. I play with Niamh. I didn't used to.

Niamh: We weren't friends.

Playworker-researcher: Why do you like playing together now?

Niamh: We like the same creative play, it's brought us together. We started talking more.

Fiona: We both like making stuff and we started talking.

Playworker-researcher: What about on days when there isn't art stuff out (in the school playground)?

Fiona: We don't play together when the art stuff isn't out.

Playworker-researcher: Why?

Fiona: Because there's nothing to play with, you just do your own thing.

Through finding new ways to play, children often saw new qualities in each other and found new avenues on to appreciating and valuing a child who before they perhaps took no interest in.

'Simple equipment opened up a diverse arena for them to engage with, either imaginatively, creatively or physically – the children learn new qualities about themselves and see differences in others.' (Classroom Assistant)

'Shuyu is normally gloomy but not when she is making stuff. She used to just sit around on her own. You can see a smile on her face; her whole face has changed. She gets bullied on other days but not on Wednesdays (when Pinc visits) because people ask her what she is making.' (Girl, P6)

'For a couple of children it broke down barriers. That hadn't previously happened. They became involved and others embraced their ideas creatively.' (Classroom Assistant)

Children, when asked at a group consultation, answered 'yes' simultaneously – that they had been playing with different children since Pinc had been visiting. They found it difficult to explain why, but the quotes above do suggest it was due to the range of opportunities on offer and the opening up of new ways for children to connect.

Engaging with these possibilities strategically, by building opportunities around individual needs and interests, was also useful, as reported on in the section 'Models of Support' and may have helped to increase this effect.

'Yes, I noticed children who before, there was always conflict, who came together and helped each other.' (Classroom Assistant)

'(Pinc) allowed different types of play. It was lovely to see children being involved in different ways from usual – the big scale, helping each other. On reflection what we offered previously maybe didn't give them a chance to help each other in that way.' (Project Worker)

The chance to play together in new ways, express hidden depths and see qualities to value in other children potentially could lead to new friendships, or at least to positive new relationships.

'They were at least getting the chance with those other children, who they didn't particularly get along with, to see them in a different light. And working together, not competing. I could also see that the more they were given the opportunity of that play the more a relationship would develop.' (Assistant Service Manager)

The play environment is therefore an important factor in the relationship between friendship, inclusion and play. When given flexible, stimulating materials and sensitive adult support, whole new possibilities for engagement were opened up – not only for the children, but for the adults who hope to support inclusion.

Part 3. Research Methods

Research cycle

Figure 2 illustrates the ongoing learning involved in the second block of outreach as an example of the Pinc action research process. A similar process occurred in each of the networks with the core action being the support provided (mainly through play sessions), recording observations and reflective planning for the following week. Use of other research tools, such as consultations, fed in to the process at various points. Figure 3 illustrates the overall project cycle with learning from each block of outreach feeding into the next.

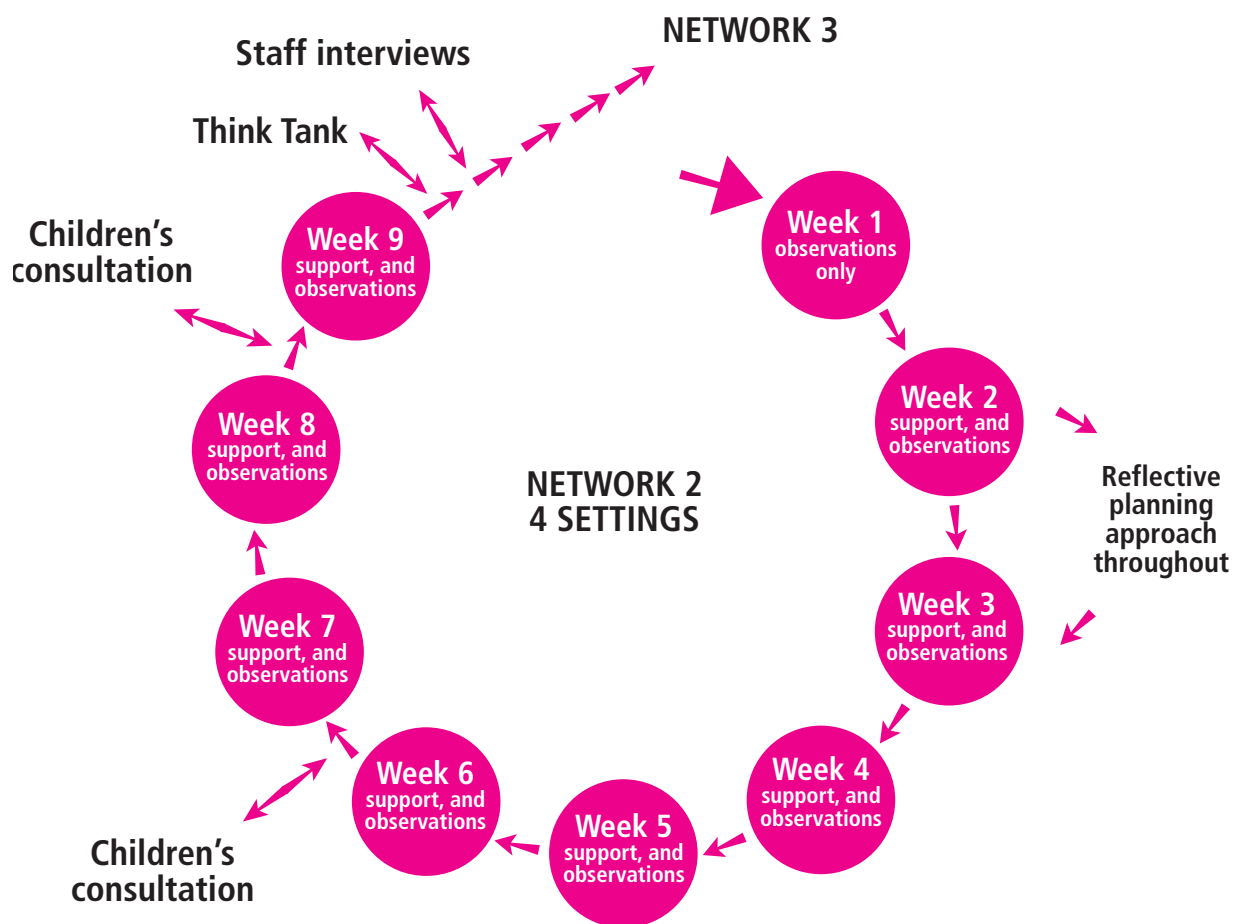


Figure 2. Action research cycle for a network

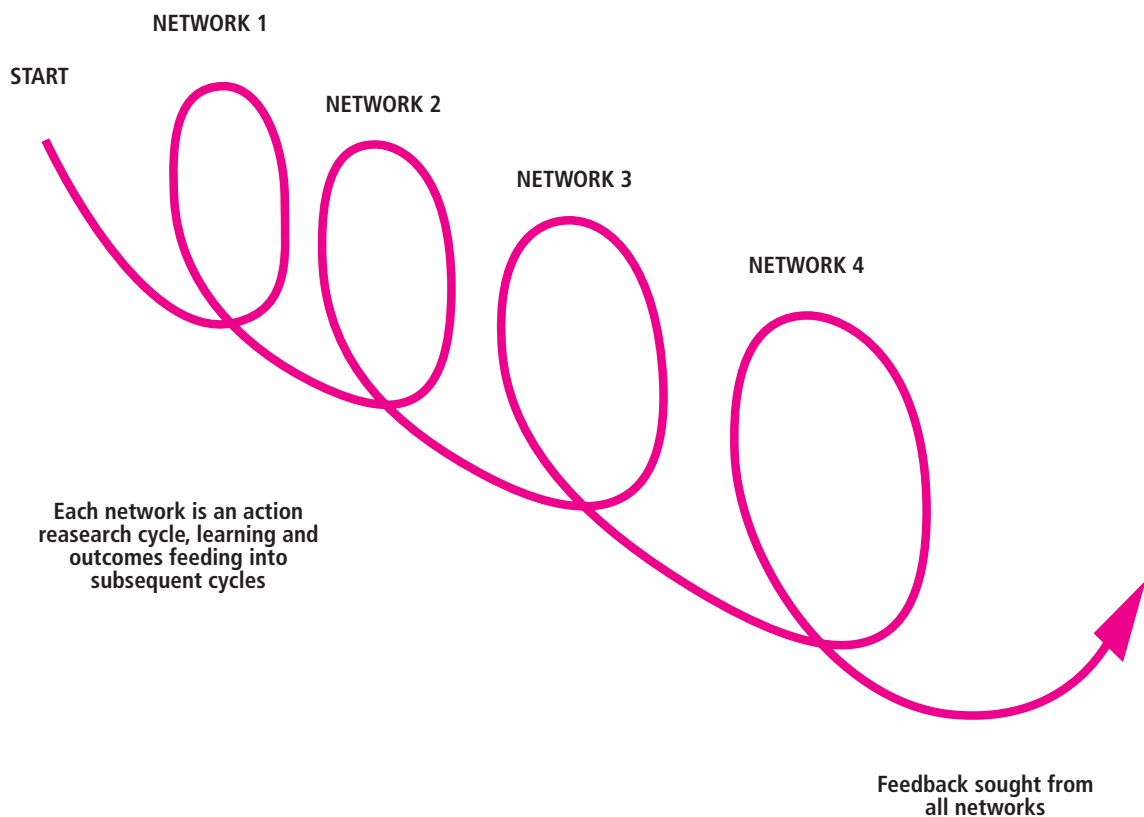


Figure 3. Overall project cycle (Theresa Casey 2004)

Research topics

A series of topics helped to focus our thinking and observations on areas of interest. We then used the topics as a guide to developing the research tools in whatever way was most appropriate, for example, in deciding on the categories on the observation forms or the questions to ask in consultations and interviews.

The core topics used were:

- 1 Models of support to the development of inclusive play.
- 2 Identify and document the benefits to children, settings and communities.
- 3 The general effects of P.inc support on children, settings and community.
- 4 Playwork processes - how do adults support play and inclusive play?
- 5 Children's views on play and friendships.
- 6 Children's views on P.inc support to play.
- 7 Adult participants' views on all aspects of the project, including P.inc support and the information provided.
- 8 The effect of the context on the success of implementing Play Inclusive.
- 9 The effect of the context on children's play and playmates.
- 10 Investigating inclusion issues at the setting level and at the wider community level and identifying the reasons for these issues and where possible seek to address them

There is one sample observation form in Appendix A.

Guiding documents

In addition to the research topics, the development and implementation of each P.inc Network was guided by two other documents: project objectives and an ethical statement.

The objectives tied in with the overall aims and ways of working. Some of these related to the research process and some were about how the project would run more generally, such as, 'establish two methods of regularly obtaining children's views' and 'support the volunteers through one support and supervision session half way through the network'.

The ethical statement set the standards to achieve in the project and covered the main issues of:

- information about the project – who should have it (children, staff and parents), in what form, ensuring accessibility, etc;
- consent – for photo permission, for recording and publishing participants' words in consultations and addressing issues around children's play being documented;
- confidentiality and data protection;
- how we would ensure participants, comfort when using research tools such as consultation.

Analysis

The information gathered during P.inc has been read with regard to:

- pulling out details on the core 'action' – the practical support we provided and any resulting effects, including participants' views;
- pulling out other wider themes of relevance to inclusive play.

This analysis was carried out after each block of outreach support to a network of settings. P.inc Think Tanks were used as an initial method in identifying and reviewing main themes. This was compiled into a comprehensive report which helped to look at, and think about, what had taken place and to point towards changes that would be beneficial to the next network. At the end of the project, all information was re-coded. This was necessary as themes and categories were redefined in the light of the whole experience of P.inc.

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Appendix A – Sample Observation Form

General observations of play

Describe the resources available, the set up of room and what happened

What types of play could be observed? Has this changed from other weeks?

How did the children interact? Were there any inclusion issues? Has this changed from other weeks?

What support was given to children?

Environmental support – resources, set up etc

How was this set up chosen or tailored to the group?

How did adults support play or inclusive play during the session?

Where there any other things which were supportive to the children?

What were the effects/benefits of the support given to children?

Environmental and adult support

Any comments from the children?

Based on this what can we build on or change for next week?