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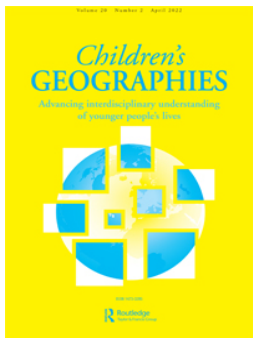
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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Navigating dis/ableist school playgrounds and toilets with geographic maturity: stories of young people with dwarfism from their secondary education

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ABSTRACT

Little attention has been paid to the experiences of disabled young people of school playgrounds and toilets in mainstream settings. Drawing on the qualitative, first-hand accounts of 19 young people with dwarfism, this paper explores how they make sense and navigate school playgrounds and toilets during their secondary education from a Critical Disability Studies perspective. The findings suggest that playgrounds are experienced as inaccessible, hierarchical, panoptic and unsafe. Moreover, several factors affect the choice of school toilet – disabled or gender-binary – including the in/accessibility of toilets, the regulation of access to disabled toilets, and the social meanings attached to them. I argue such experiences are the outcome of both spaces being dis/ableist, designed for and with the ‘normatively developing’ body in mind. Participants’ stories also illustrate how they are aware of and resist the spatial scripts of these spaces – how they are meant to be used and who is allowed to inhabit them. This paper concludes with the need to listen to and engage with disabled young people for inclusive spaces to be achieved.

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Dwarfism; school toilets; school playgrounds; geographic maturity; ableism; disabled young people

Introduction

Children’s Geographies is a field devoted to exploring how children experience, view and navigate different spaces, such as urban and rural spaces, neighbourhoods, and schools (Horton, Kraftl, and Tucker 2008). However, as Pyer et al. (2010, 1) note, Children’s Geographies are characterised by the ‘place(lessness) of disabled children in geographies with, for and of, children and childhood’, a gap which is linked with the underrepresentation of the experiences of disabled children and young people in the new Social Studies of Childhood (Liddiard and Slater 2018). Goodley and Runswick Cole (2015) also observe the lack of any reference to disability in Horton et al.’s (2008) reflections on the status and challenges of Children’s Geographies. Nevertheless, Pyer et al. (2010) and Goodley and Runswick Cole (2015) acknowledge the analytical potential for Children’s Geographies if they were to engage with disabled children’s spatialities. As Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2015, 53) maintain, additional research on disabled children’s ‘phenomenological, embodied and subjective encounters with space’ is required.

Drawing on the first-hand accounts of 19 young people with dwarfism, this paper explores their experiences in school spaces, recognising how such insights provide nuanced understandings of the relationship between the (disabled) body and space (Goodley and Runswick Cole 2015). As Holt

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(2004, n.p.) claims, ‘space is central to the construction of children’s identities as disabled or non-disabled’. Dwarfism is an impairment characterised by a stature of 4 feet and 10 in. (147 cm) or below and, often, by a disproportionate body size (Pritchard 2021a). Many terms have been used to refer to people with dwarfism, such as little people (prominent in the USA), people with restricted growth, short-statured people, and dwarfs, with each term holding specific connotations. Following Pritchard (2021a), the term used in this paper is ‘person/people with dwarfism’, which was also the term most participants were comfortable with.

The focus is on two school spaces: playgrounds and toilets. First, the experiences of disabled young people of these spaces have drawn less attention, especially from a research perspective that engages with their own stories rather than their parents’ or teachers’ (Stephens et al. 2017). Therefore, this article provides original insights into how such spaces are experienced and navigated by disabled young people. Second, Stephens, Ruddick, and McKeever (2015) propose that disabled young people’s experiences of school toilets differ from the experiences of non-disabled children and disabled adults. This is because such spaces are designed with and for certain bodies in mind: the ‘normate’ body (Hamraie 2017). Hamraie (2017, 20) contends:

A universal body has served as a template for the architectural user for centuries. This “mythic average norm” is not a neutral body but rather a particular, white, European, nondisabled, youthful, and often masculine figure whose features remain unmarked.

Similarly, Imrie (1999, 20) argues ‘ableist conceptions underpin architectural discourses and practices’ and ‘the built environment are simultaneously ableist and disablist by ignoring and/or denying the multiplicities of the human body’ (1999, 21). Consequently, Pritchard (2021c) and Kruse (2002) note that the spatial experiences of people with dwarfism differ from both people of an ‘average stature’ and people with other impairments.

School spaces are designed for the ‘normal’ child (Holt 2003, 122), with education being ‘institutionally ableist, being underpinned by the assumption of a “normally developing child”’ (Holt 2003, 126). Ableism is materialised in school spaces through its physical structures, which are designed for the ‘normally developing child’. This paper examines how young people with dwarfism whose bodies do not conform with such developmental norms make sense and navigate dis/ableist school spaces that are not designed for them, conveying the messages that they are ‘in the wrong place’ or ‘out of place’ (Kitchin 1998, 345). The paper also reflects on how the gender of the young people impacts how they experience dis/ableist, gendered spaces, such as the school playground and toilets. Finally, it considers how disabled young people are cognisant of the spatial scripts of such spaces: how they are to be used and by whom. Drawing on this knowledge – geographic maturity – they navigate these spaces and resist their spatial scripts, developing their spatialities of resistance (Kitchin 1998).

Disability, school playgrounds and school toilets

Not only are playgrounds demonstrative of adults’ projections of children’s perceived needs, but they are designed for non-disabled children (Yantzi, Young, and McKeever 2010), indicating who has the right to play and who does not (or who embodies the ‘playful child’ and who does not). Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2010, 499) discuss how developmental psychology perpetuates ‘a dominant discourse of the disabled child as a non-playing object that requires professional therapeutic intervention’. This results in the exclusion of disabled children from the school playground, which has been reported in various studies (Barron et al. 2017).

Woolley With et al. (2006) identified three barriers that result in the exclusion of disabled children from the school playground: organisational, social and physical. Organisational barriers include, for instance, therapeutic interventions run for disabled children during break-time or the staff responsible for them being away for training. Social barriers involve the constant surveillance of disabled young people by adults, who spend more time with them than with their peers.

Physical barriers refer to issues around inaccessible playgrounds, such as surface areas of sand, which children in wheelchairs could not use, and inaccessible equipment (similar barriers were discussed in Wenger et al.'s research (2021)). Nevertheless, disabled young people are not passive towards their exclusion. This paper takes up Yantzi et al.'s (2010) call to examine how young people with dwarfism experience inaccessible playgrounds and how they navigate those spaces.

Although there is some research on children's and young people's perceptions and experiences of school toilets (Lundblad, Hellström, and Berg 2010), disabled young people's experiences have been marginalised in this body of literature. When their experiences are considered, it is either their parents/carers or teachers (Myers 2015) who speak on their behalf. Moreover, the discussion of such experiences often relies on medical, individualised lenses, through which disabled bodies are constructed as 'problems' (Milley and Cliff 2014), e.g. not being able to use the toilet independently.

According to Slater et al. (2019, 420), the gap in school toilet literature is the outcome of 'the ideological basis upon which most school toilet rests'. The ideology that permeates school toilet research, according to the same authors, is developmentalism. Developmentalism marginalises and excludes disabled children from school toilet research, positioning them as 'Other' by framing them as 'problems' and 'exceptions' (2019, 414). Consequently, disabled children's experiences of school toilets are deemed by school toilet researchers 'exceptional', justifying their marginalisation. Furthermore, Slater, Jones, and Procter (2018) note the narrowness of school toilet research regarding the inclusion of different identities and forms of embodiment that shape the live experience of the school toilet and call for attention to be paid to 'who the design and use of toilets includes/excludes, whose identities it confirms or denies, and the implicit lessons that children learn through toilet' (2018, 953). Addressing this gap, this paper considers which school toilets young people with dwarfism chose to use, the rationale for such a choice, and their experiences of those spaces.

Disabled young people's geographic maturity

Geographic maturity is a term coined by Disability Studies Geographer Michael Dorn (1998, 183). Dorn argues that precisely because disabled subjects have to navigate disabling and ableist spaces, they develop geographical maturity, meaning that they always remain 'attentive and responsive to changing environmental conditions' (1998, 183). Stephens, Ruddick, and McKeever (2015) draw on geographic maturity to explore how disabled children and young people navigate different spaces, such as the home, the neighbourhood and the school. According to the same authors,

Geographic "maturity" is an interesting concept especially in relation to disabled children and the question of agentic subjectivity: the decisions of disabled children face particular scrutiny because both disabled people and children are often considered "less capable" – or less mature – within a model of agency that rests on an autonomous and "rational" individual subject. (2015, 199)

Geographic maturity reclaims disabled children's agency against their construction as passive subjects (Davis and Watson 2002). As a concept, geographic maturity enables us

to move beyond a reductive focus on access (i.e. the presence or absence of a ramp) to incorporate the experiences of children, their joy or satisfaction, in response to a combination of built form, social regulations and cultural norms which enhance or limit the possibilities for action, self-expression and belonging. It also involves loosening our grip on our idea of what is "right" for these children, allowing space for multiple identities, multiple preferences and multiple "right" ways of doing things. (Stephens, Ruddick, and McKeever 2015, 200)

Furthermore, considering disabled young people as geographic mature subjects challenge their construction as 'immature' from a developmentalist perspective and it allows us to look into the 'spatialities of resistance' (Kitchin 1998, 352), that is, how disabled young people challenge the spatial scripts of how space is to be used or who is allowed to occupy it and who is not.

Drawing on the concept of geographic maturity, I examine the choices and the rationales the young people with dwarfism make regarding what spaces they use for different activities, such as break-time and toileting, and which spaces they avoid and/or are excluded from.

Methodology

This paper draws on a qualitative study, which aimed to explore the secondary schooling experiences of young people (between the ages of 11 and 30 years old) with dwarfism in the United Kingdom. A narrative inquiry approach was utilised (Tamboukou 2013), with participants having the agency to choose their preferred mode of storytelling: oral storytelling (narrative, semi-structured interviews), digital storytelling (written storytelling on a private weblog and email interviews), visual storytelling (visual stories). This approach was aligned with inclusive research (Manning 2010), accommodating participants' needs.

Participants were required to have a diagnosis of dwarfism, be between the ages of 11 and 30 years old, and be/have been educated in secondary schools in the UK. The choice of this age group aimed at looking into how young people with dwarfism who are still in secondary education (11–16 years old) are making sense of their schooling experiences as well as how young adults (17–30 years old) reflect on such experiences in hindsight. Disabled children and young people are often excluded from research (Liddiard et al. 2019), partly due to the ethical complexities such research encompasses, such as 'the discursive construction of the disabled child as vulnerable' (Richards and Clark 2018, 201) in ethical guidelines due to their age and disability, as well as negotiating access with gatekeepers, such as parents/carers. Therefore, it was important to listen to young people's narratives who were still in education and not perpetuate their marginalisation.

Nevertheless, I still considered it crucial to include the retrospective narratives of young adults, who could reflect on such experiences from some distance to see how they made sense of them as adults. However, adults' narratives of childhood and youth experiences have been critiqued (cf Kraftl 2017), as 'adults reframe selected aspects of their childhoods in a manner that is refracted through adult frames of meaning and reference' (Harris and Valentine 2017, 506) or, put differently, 'adult constructions and memories of what it is/was to be a child are inevitably processed through adulthood' (Jones 2001, 177). Nevertheless, as Keightley and Pickering (2012, 57) argue, memories 'bring our changing sense of who we are and who we were, coherently into view of one another', indicating 'the meaning of the past in relation to the present'. Therefore, adults' narratives of past experiences provide an insight into how they perceive past incidents from a present perspective.

For access to and recruitment of participants, I contacted on Facebook Messenger and via email the charities and associations of people with dwarfism in the UK, namely Restricted Growth Association UK, Short Statured Scotland, Little People UK, Little People of Ireland, Dwarfs Sport Association UK, and Walking with Giants. The initial communication was to ask them to advertise the research on their social media pages and communicate it to their members, therefore, these associations were acting as gatekeepers. Out of the six associations, four shared or permitted me to share the relevant materials on their Facebook pages. This had to do with my positionality as a non-disabled researcher (I do not have a diagnosis of dwarfism), which meant I was not permitted to become a member of certain associations whose membership criteria included to either have dwarfism or have a family member with dwarfism. However, other associations were more flexible, allowing for people without dwarfism to also register as members. Similar was the case with Facebook private groups consisting of people with dwarfism, e.g. Achondroplasia, Dwarfism, with the majority requiring to be a person with dwarfism to become a member. Pritchard (2021b) highlighted the importance of positionality in recruiting participants via Facebook in terms of being permitted access to join such groups only if you identify as a person with dwarfism. Moreover, considering the mockery and violence people with dwarfism experience online by non-disabled people (Pritchard 2021b), such scepticism towards a non-disabled researcher was justified.

Membership in associations meant I could attend their annual events and conventions, during which I was able to meet potential participants in person. I attended two annual conventions and another event of one of the associations, which proved to be the most effective means of recruitment. During those meetings, I had the opportunity to discuss my research in further detail with potential participants, respond to any questions they had, and develop a rapport of trust with them.

However, similar to Kruse (2003), I am aware that my positionality as a researcher without dwarfism affected the research process, from the recruitment of participants to what participants felt comfortable sharing with me. For instance, Pritchard (2019) discussed how her positionality as a female researcher with dwarfism impacted participants' recruitment and also enabled her to relate to how her participants felt due to shared experiences. Despite this, I believe the findings and stories here are significant and highlight new issues that participants were comfortable to share with me due to the rapport and confidence I had built with them before discussing their experiences.

Moreover, my positionality affected how I experienced such conventions, as Pritchard (2019) highlights the challenges of recruiting participants at such conventions as a female person with dwarfism, e.g. issues of safety and harassment. Snowballing sampling (Bryman 2015) was another recruitment method, with one participant introducing me to other participants, who were interested in participating in the research and talked to me during the aforementioned events or contacted me on Messenger.

Nineteen participants opted to participate in the research, including 9 teenagers and 10 adults. The sample ended up being quite diverse, including participants of both sexes, different ages, geographical locations, conditions of dwarfism (with achondroplasia being the most common), socio-economic and educational backgrounds, and participants with parents of 'average stature' and parents with dwarfism (Table 1).

The table above illustrates some demographic information about the participants, without covering all aspects, e.g. type of impairment, socio-economic background, and race/ethnicity. This protects the participants' anonymity and confidentiality. As many participants are members of the associations that facilitated the recruitment process, certain information, such as their dwarfism condition or their educational qualifications, could make them easily identifiable. This was also an issue raised in previous studies with people with dwarfism (Pritchard 2021b). However, it is worth noting that these and potential other axes of power e.g. race/ethnicity, sexuality, etc. could impact participants' experiences of spaces.

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Sheffield (Reference number: 016308). The research adhered to the ethical guidelines of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC 2015). All adult participants provided and signed informed consent forms and, for teenagers, their parents gave informed consent first and then they assented. It was made clear to the teenagers it should be their decision to participate and not their parents' (Skelton 2008). Moreover, a chaperone – their mothers – was always present during the interviews. Furthermore, participants were

Table 1. Participants' demographics.

Pseudonyms	Age	Sex
Mary	16	Female
John	15	Male
Louise	16	Female
Rania	17	Female
Lynn	12	Female
George	12	Male
Harry	15	Male
Angela	13	Female
Christine	13	Female
Rachael	29	Female
Paul	26	Male
Nick	30	Male
Michael	29	Male
Alice	23	Female
Ryan	29	Male
Bill	29	Male
Nathan	27	Male
Patricia	30	Female
Aphrodite	19	Female

reminded of their right to withdraw from the research at any time (prior, during or after) and anonymity was compulsory for teenage participants and optional for adult participants because some had already published their stories on other platforms, e.g. weblogs. Pseudonyms were ultimately used for all participants. I also informed participants I would strive to secure the confidentiality, although it could not be guaranteed, considering that many people know each other due to the common spaces they share (associations, hospitals) (Shakespeare et al. 2010).

A narrative thematic analysis was used to analyse data manually (Riessman 2005). After familiarising myself with the data, I colour-coded it and then identified themes and sub-themes (Braun and Clarke 2006). The stories that follow consider where the participants chose to spend their break-time and which toilet facilities (gender binary or disabled) they preferred to use.

Navigating the ableist, gendered hierarchies of the school playground

The young people's responses to how they spent their break-time varied, with some stating they did similar things to their (non-disabled) peers, such as spending some time in the playground, and others who reported they stayed in other spaces than the playgrounds, such as their classrooms or other indoor school spaces.

Harry and Louise were among the young people who spent their break-time indoors, as the playground did not meet their physical needs:

Louise: I rarely went outside, cause I didn't really like it, cause it was just. My school didn't really have anywhere to sit, so I couldn't manage like the whole break. I am not just standing around doing nothing, cause even when you are not allowed on the grass, so you have to like be standing for about an hour. So, we usually went to classrooms, like me and my friends were going to the same classrooms and we just talked in there.

Harry: Normally in the main building, em, there's like a theatre and we normally go in the theatre, cause normally not many people are there.

Interviewer: Alright. And do you go to, does the school building have a school yard?

Harry: Em, yeah, there is a school yard, but I don't go there. Just because it's quite small and it's not really, it's not really very comfortable to sit down and stuff. Like usually they are playing football, which I hate football. Like I'd much rather just go and sit down in the office.

Louise and Harry mentioned they avoided the playground due to the lack of comfortable spaces for them to sit, as they could not stand for a long time, which has to do with secondary conditions associated with dwarfism. Such conditions constitute 'impairment effects', which are 'the direct and unavoidable impacts that "impairments" (physical, sensory, intellectual, emotional) have on individuals' embodied functioning in the social world' (Thomas 2012, 211). However, impairment effects are often ignored when it comes to people with dwarfism, as they are often seen just as 'small' and not disabled (Pritchard 2021a).

The absence of such spaces from the playground could be viewed as a physical barrier (Woolley With et al. 2006) in terms of the physical needs of these young people not being met by the available material structures. As playgrounds are designed with non-disabled children in mind (Yantzi, Young, and McKeever 2010), they are expected to be able to spend the whole break-time standing and engage in various activities.

Harry also referred to how the activities taking place in playgrounds – football – also contributed to his exclusion. Thomson (2005, 71) describes school playgrounds as 'prescriptive spaces', indicating how the material structures, e.g. the football pitch, designate certain gendered activities, such as football. School playgrounds have been described as gendered spaces (Paechter and Clark 2007), with boys usually occupying more space. Those who do not partake in such activities, such as disabled boys and girls, are relegated to peripheral roles (Martínez-Andrés et al. 2017).

Paul also referred to how able-bodiedness and physical fitness dominated how one was perceived in the playground:

Paul: There's a full social hierarchy in the playground and that hierarchy is affective when somebody is high up in the hierarchy [...] You often find yourself at the lowest place in the hierarchy at that particular age. [...] I think at that age many kids are influenced by who is the strongest, who is the fastest, who is the most good looking, who is, yeah, the most able. That particular thing drives the hierarchy and when you have dwarfism, let's say, you're not gonna be the most fittest person around. You're not the most, you know, attractive person around too, because of the disability gets in the way. You're not the most talented at you know, running, you're not the most physically abled [...] And in that particular age that kind of strength is what drives that particular age and you often find it difficult at that particular age, because you were not one of the strong lions in this metaphor. You're one of the people that was probably more cut off and the weaker one than everybody. Yeah, I was thought as weak even though you weren't.

Paul's narrative did not only indicate how disability 'played out' in the playground in terms of his social positioning in relation to his non-disabled peers, e.g. as weak (Holt 2007), but it also pointed to the psycho-emotional disablism (Thomas 2007) disabled young people encounter. Paul dealt with being perceived in ways that he did not feel were representative of him. His narrative demonstrates how the ableist, gendered norms permeating the school playground resulted in his marginalisation.

Besides the male participants, female participants referred to how football led them to avoid using the playground:

Angela: I usually spend it with the group of friends I have at the end of the corridors. When you are in the main building, there's quite a lot of people standing around. But like at the end of the corridor there are not that many people. Like some will walk past to get to like a room, but they will not want to.

Interviewer: That's nice, that's nice. And does the school have a school yard?

Angela: Yeah, it does, it has a very big one. It's just boys playing football and then always there's that person who misses and he gets hit by someone.

Interviewer: Oh, I see. So it feels a bit dangerous to be out there.

Angela: Yeah.

Angela discussed the potential risk of getting hit by the football as a reason for not spending as much time in the playground. Mayeza (2017) refers to how girls are excluded from the playground due to boys dominating and policing the space through activities, such as football. Moreover, school playground designers also appear to ignore the perspectives of girls about the playground (Paechter and Clark 2007), meaning that school playgrounds are designed for the non-disabled boy.

Rachael also mentioned how she was a target to the comments or questions of peers who had not seen her before when she turned up in the playground:

Rachael: Em, probably, probably it did take place at playtime I would be in the big yard if you weren't in the classroom and then you'd be really visible. And I'd be with friends, but be really visible. So probably kids who hadn't seen me before that was gonna be the time that they would notice, em, and come and ask questions or shout something. [...] It wasn't so much in school. Eh, but if it was gonna be, like a new kid or something, maybe at break-time or lunchtime. Maybe they hadn't seen me before probably.

Rachael's story demonstrated how the school playground could be experienced as a panoptic space (Allan 2008), where bodies which 'are not supposed to be there' are immediately rendered visible, attract comments and gazes and are under constant surveillance. The concept of panopticism derives from the Panopticon (introduced by Bentham), a prison designed in such a way that inmates feel that they are constantly being watched (Foucault 1977). Foucault (1977) described schools as panoptic, referring to how students' bodies are disciplined through the adult disciplinary gaze. Allan (2008) discusses how disabled children and young people find themselves under constant adult surveillance, e.g. teachers or teaching assistants, in panoptic schools (for a discussion of how Foucault's ideas have been adopted in Disability Studies cf Tremain 2015). However, Rachael's story indicates how such surveillance of the disabled body is also enacted by the peers in the playground.

Christine also discussed how she avoided the playground in order to stay away from the drama and the bullying occurring there:

Christine: No, I get, em, if I have a teaching assistant, I'll get dropped off at D block and then I'll just wait until my friend come and then we'll hang out like in a classroom, where there's like no one there. We just talk and go to the computers. [...] Erm, we just spend it, it depends, like, it depends if we wanna walk around the school or if we want to sit in a classroom. Cause we sit in a classroom upstairs and we sit on the window sills and we just watch people, cause there's no one in that classroom. So yeah. But it depends on what we really want to do really.

Christine preferred to spend her break time in spaces such as a classroom, where she could be only with her friend and avoid any encounters with peers that bullied her. Playgrounds have been identified as a space where many disabled young people get bullied (Holt, Bowlby, and Lea 2017). Pritchard (2021c) also considered how people with dwarfism navigate public spaces and how they avoid certain spaces due to the unwanted attention and hostile attitudes they encounter in them.

This 'option' ('option', because participants were implicitly compelled to choose) to spend break-time elsewhere could be interpreted as a form of resistance to the exposure to dis/ableism, which permeated the playground. It was a sign of retreating into a safe space (Hodge and Runswick-Cole 2013), away from the peers' gaze and derogative comments for instance, as well as a demonstration of geographic maturity (Stephens, Ruddick, and McKeever 2015), meaning that the participants consciously adapted to spend their break-time where they felt safe and a sense of belonging. On the other hand, it is worth considering the implications that this 'option' had on young people. For instance, the participants did not get the chance to play in the space designated for such an activity, feeling they did not belong there, neither did they have the opportunity to represent themselves as 'playful' against the dominant, psychological discourse that depicts them as non-playing subjects (Goodley and Runswick-Cole 2010). Furthermore, playgrounds constitute a space where a range of identities are crafted and performed, such as gendered (Epstein et al. 2001) and sexual (ised) (Huuki and Renold 2016) ones. The exclusion of the disabled young people from the playground also equated with their exclusion from performing such identities, risking the perpetuation of an understanding of their bodies as genderless and asexual (Slater, Jones, and Procter 2018).

Negotiating the school toilet choice

Toilets don't just tell us where to go; they also tell us who we are, where we belong, and where we don't belong. (Rasmussen 2009, 440)

Participants' responses to which toilets – disabled or gender binary – they opted to use varied, with some young people using exclusively the disabled toilet or the gender binary ones and others using (or having used) both. My use of the term gender-binary toilets is made for two reasons: firstly, to show how disabled toilets are considered 'genderless' in opposition to gender-binary toilets and the implications for those who use one or the other (Liddiard and Slater 2018). Secondly, to consider gender-binary toilets as performative, productive spaces of the gender binary (Rasmussen 2009). The rationale(s) behind such choices are examined here, considering how toilets function as performative, relational spaces for dis/ability and gender (Wiseman 2019).

Some young people expressed their preference for disabled toilets, with the main reason being their accessibility:

Interviewer: And what about the toilets of the school?

Harry: Em, they are, in what aspect? Like the sinks and everything?

Interviewer: That's right.

Harry: Yeah. The sinks aren't lowered, but I can sort of use them, cause they have, erm, disabled toilets as well, so I can use some quite easily obviously similarly with the main toilets. The sinks, the sinks are just lowered any way, like I don't really have any problem, I don't have to climb up really in order to get to them.

Interviewer: And you don't mind using the disabled toilets if it's for your comfort.

Harry: Oh no, I'd much rather use the disabled toilets, you know cubicle and stuff.

Louise: In my school they let me use the disabled toilets, cause obviously they were wheelchair height, which is perfect for us, like sinks were lower and they actually put steps into the toilets. The steps were permanently there, so the steps, so I just use the disabled toilets.

Harry compared the gender binary toilets, to which he referred to as the 'main' toilets and which required him to put extra labour to wash his hands due to the inaccessible sinks, with the disabled toilets, where the sinks were placed at a height he could use them, without any extra effort. Similarly, Louise used the disabled toilet, as it accommodated her needs, e.g. lower sinks and steps. Other studies (Myers 2015; Stephens, Ruddick, and McKeever 2015) also report that disabled young people often use disabled toilets, with the rationale being their accessibility. Louise described the disabled toilets as 'perfect for us', with the 'us' referring to people with dwarfism because they were designed for wheelchair users. Such an argument has been contested by Critical Disability Studies scholars (Slater and Jones 2021), however, who argue that, because disabled toilets are designed for wheelchair users, they do not accommodate the needs of different impairments. Pritchard (2016) contends that people with dwarfism do not always find the disabled toilets accessible due to having been designed for wheelchair users. Specifically, there is a hierarchy of impairments in relation to access, as illustrated for instance when people with dwarfism get questioned for accessing disabled toilets because of not embodying the disabled body that is expected to occupy such a space (Pritchard 2021a).

Nevertheless, as Louise mentioned, the mere provision of steps in the toilets resolved any height issues. Therefore, minor interventions, such as the existence of steps, could turn previously inaccessible spaces into accessible ones. As reported in Stephens, Ruddick, and McKeever's (2015) research, disabled young people hold many ideas about how inaccessible spaces, including toilets, could turn into accessible, such as the inclusion of toilet grab bars, automatic sink taps, etc. However, they are rarely listened to, ending up relying on the support of adults, such as teaching assistants or their peers.

On the other hand, some young people expressed their preference for the gender-binary toilets:

John: For me it's just, I always go to the cubicle toilets, cause I can't reach the urinals and everything. Like, other than that, it's fine for me. Like I did get told that I could use the disabled toilets, but for me I'd rather not use the disabled toilet. I'd rather go like into just the normal toilets and kind of not being seen as different.

Mary: Yeah, I am the same with John. I just use the toilets, which are normal.

While John was offered the choice to use the disabled toilets in his school, he opted to use the gender binary toilets instead. The reason for this was that he did not want to be seen as 'different', a discourse also brought up in other studies with disabled young people (Myers 2015). This view resonates with a perspective of toilets as a relational space and as a space for belonging/not belonging (Wiseman 2019), in terms of how toilets contribute to how we see one another. By entering a disabled toilet, one is immediately constructed as the 'disabled subject', with all the meanings, connotations and implications this brings about in the context of school. For instance, disabled toilets reproduce discourses of disabled people as genderless and asexual (Liddiard and Slater 2018). Both Mary and John referred to the gender binary toilets as the 'normal' ones in opposition to the disabled ones, meaning that they also maintained this binary between 'normal' and 'disabled' toilets, with the latter signifying some sort of difference.

Nevertheless, within the space of the gender binary toilets, John was limited to use the cubicle toilets, as the urinals were out of reach to him. As Pritchard (2016, 192) argues, children's toilets are 'designed and constructed for the average sized, able-bodied child', and, hence, the urinals are staturised (Kruse 2002), meaning that they are designed for the average sized, able-bodied boy. While urinals constitute a performative space for hegemonic masculinity (Del Rosso 2011),

cubicles have been linked with discourses of privacy and femininity (Slater, Jones, and Procter 2018). Therefore, John found himself in a liminal (toilet) space: he avoided using the disabled toilets, but he could only use the cubicles within the gender binary toilets.

Meanwhile, some young people initially used the disabled toilet, but then shifted to use the gender binary ones:

Patricia: Em, I think again when I first started and I was in a wheelchair, I used the disabled toilet, just because it'd help me more with reaching that kind of thing. But once basically I got rid of the wheelchair, I just used the normal toilets, like anyone else really.

Patricia used the disabled toilet initially because she was moving around with a wheelchair in the first year of her secondary school due to surgery and it was the only accessible option. However, in her second year, she did not use the wheelchair anymore, which triggered a shift in her choice of toilets. Similar to the above stories, Patricia referred to the gender-binary toilets as the 'normal' ones, which indicated that those were the ones used by everyone. When I prompted Patricia to explain further what triggered this shift, she shared:

Patricia: I think again it was just like independence really. I just thought I just wanna use the one that all my other friends use, the normal toilet, do you know what I mean? Em, and a bit that, like girls always go to the toilet together, so yeah, yeah. So it was just kind of like where the gossip would happen and I just wanted to be part of it more than anything else, so. [...] You just want to be part of it all really kind of thing, so yeah. So it was definitely quite good to be in there. And I think also, do you know what I mean, when you kind of get into make up and stuff like that you wanna do your make up in the toilets and things like that.

Patricia linked her choice of toilet with independence, which was embodied by her friends and was performed through the use of the 'normal' toilet. The independent, self-contained toilet user is also the desired one in the school discourse (Liddiard and Slater 2018). Secondly, Patricia's story indicated toilets as both social spaces, where other activities than just urinating take place, and gendered spaces (Ingrey 2012), where the female subject was produced by performing 'stereotypical' gender-related activities, such as gossiping or doing their make-up (Rasmussen 2009). Unlike John, who could not use the urinals in the male toilets, Patricia performed femininity in the female toilets, which gave her a sense of belonging (Wiseman 2019). Nevertheless, such gender performance was also enabled by an accessible environment:

Interviewer: And were the girls' toilets accessible in terms of reaching the sink and the soap and stuff like that?

Patricia: Yeah, they were actually quite good. I could reach it quite well. Em, it wasn't like particularly low, but it was low enough for me to reach. Em, and I kind of don't usually struggle with "normal" size toilets anyway. If it was too high up, then I'd probably struggle, but it's just like everyday toilets I can kind of do. Em, but yeah, it wasn't much of an issue really.

Angela was another young person who used the disabled toilets in the beginning, but then started using the gender-binary ones. However, the reasons for this shift differed from Patricia's:

Angela. Eh, I only used the disabled toilets very rarely, but now the teachers have started locking them, so you need the key to get in. So, it's kind of annoying. Cause say on the very top floor where the ICT rooms are, there's only one toilet up there, and then you have to go down all the stairs and go down to the corridors to go to toilet. So, I was like oh, yeah, I'll just go to this one. And then, you needed the key.

Among the reasons that prevented Angela from using the disabled toilets were their location and the fact that she had to be provided with the key to unlock them. Teachers acted as the gatekeepers to the disabled toilets, as they were the ones who held the key to them. In Stephens et al.'s (2015) research, disabled young people also referred to having to get a key from an administrator, which increased their stress. As Wiseman (2019, 799) maintains,

A toilet, under surveillance, locked and monitored, subjects disabled people to the indignity of unnecessary help, to the willingness and/or priorities of anonymous, non-disabled others. What is a key or a locked toilet door if not a clear sign of being "locked out", a clear sign of unwelcomeness.

The location of the toilet and the need for access to a key gave to Angela mixed messages: disability is welcomed, hence the accessible toilet facilities, yet disability is under surveillance and control, as access to the disabled toilets is mediated by the non-disabled (Titchkosky 2008).

When prompted more, Angela explained why she avoided the disabled toilets:

Angela: Em, it was cause they, I used them once or twice, but I kind of felt awkward, just like the one door and just going in, and then like, cause they were like open, they didn't have a separate corridor for them. So the teachers gave me looks and stuff like that. "Are you supposed to be in the room?" Yes.

Interviewer: And were the other toilets accessible, was everything at a level of reaching? The sink and stuff like that?

Angela: Yeah, they were all accessible, just sometimes you had to climb on the cabinets to get to the soaps.

Not only Angela's access to the disabled toilet required her to have access to the key (which meant that the person who held the key should also be available), but she also had to deal with teachers' mistrust towards her, who questioned her right to be there. This feeling of mistrust was also reported by young people in Lundblad et al.'s (2010) research. Such mistrust was noted by Pritchard (2021a) too, who discussed how people with dwarfism are often questioned and challenged when accessing disabled toilets, as they do not fit the stereotypical image – a wheelchair user – of a disabled person. The use of toilets was regulated by teachers, who had devised and imposed on the young people the rules about access to toilets. The above reasons led Angela to start using the gender-binary toilets, which required her to put extra labour to perform basic activities, such as washing her hands.

These stories are indicative of the participants' geographic maturity (Stephens, Ruddick, and McKeever 2015), whose choice of toilet is the outcome of thorough consideration of toilets' affordances, not only the physical ones in terms of accessibility but also the social ones in relation to their dis/abled, gendered identities. Toilets are understood as performative, relational spaces, focusing on the performance of disability and gender.

Conclusions

This paper examined how young people with dwarfism experience and navigate dis/ableist school spaces, specifically school playgrounds and toilets. The playground was experienced as inaccessible, panoptic, hierarchical and unsafe. Such experiences led many participants to retreat into other spaces to spend their break-time, such as school classrooms and corridors. These alternative spaces function as 'safe' spaces. However, the exclusion from the playground meant that participants did not play in the allocated space for such activities, neither did they craft their gendered and sexualised identities there. On the other hand, those participants who attempted to use the playground found themselves in peripheral roles due to the gendered, dis/ableist norms that permeated this space. These stories provide nuanced understandings of how disabled young people experience those spaces, moving the discussion beyond a consideration of the barriers they encounter in this space (Woolley With et al. 2006) and issues of accessibility, which has often been the focus of literature. They highlight 'the complex and multifaceted microspatial processes of young people relationally becoming (dis)abled within the powerfully performed spatialities of school playgrounds' (Holt 2007, 789).

Participants' stories of school toilets also demonstrate that the choice of school toilet – gender binary or disabled – is not a neutral one, as it comes with certain implications. There is a range of factors that affect their decision of which toilet to use, including the in/accessibility of toilets, teachers regulating the access to the disabled toilets, and the social meanings attached to them, with gender binary toilets signifying normality and the disabled ones signifying difference. Toilets function as sites of belonging/non-belonging, where disability and gender are performed. Similar to the playground stories, those stories indicate that the design and organisation of school space are not a neutral choice, but it is instrumental to the hierarchical division of bodies and their conformity and normalisation (Foucault 1977).

Moreover, disabled young people are aware of the spatial scripts of such school spaces, which they negotiate accordingly. They act as

mature geographic subjects, navigating environments (literally and figuratively) with insight, generating their own multiple subjectivities, adapting their identities to changing environments to generate the best possible fit in that given time and place. (Stephens, Ruddick, and McKeever 2015, 206)

In navigating those environments, they develop their spatialities of resistance, meaning that they defy their spatial scripts by their very presence in spaces they are not supposed to be, such as gender-binary toilets or corridors during break-time. Nevertheless, such resistance should be not romanticised, as it comes with certain implications, such as the missed opportunities for participants to socialise in school playgrounds, for instance.

On the whole, these stories stress the need for listening to and engaging with and disabled children's and young people's views if inclusion and inclusive spaces are to be achieved (Jørgensen and Allan 2022). For instance, in Senior's (2014) research on school toilets and Pearson and Howe's (2017) research on school playgrounds, children played a central role in re-designing these spaces, resulting in more positive experiences for them. If disabled children were to act as consultants in the design of such spaces (Stephens, Ruddick, and McKeever 2015; Woolley 2013), their experiences would also enhance.

To conclude, this paper offers a critical insight into the relationship between the disabled body and space, contributing to the field of Children's Geographies by bringing forward disabled young people's viewpoints and addressing the 'need for theoretical resources that are responsive to the everyday details of spaces that might seem inclusive but continue to exclude' (Goodley and Runswick Cole 2015, 54).

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