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## **Three playgrounds; researching the multiple geographies of children's outdoor play**

### **Preface: three playgrounds, two miles apart**

Playground A – Three swings, a slide, a modular Multiplay™ unit, BS/EN/1177-compliant impact-absorbing wet-pour™ rubber floor, timber BS/EN/1176-compliant anti-trap™ fencing, plus sign showing rules and regulations, in an East London recreation ground;

Playground B (two miles east) – Two swings, a slide, a modular Multiplay™ unit, BS/EN/1177-compliant impact-absorbing wet-pour™ rubber floor, red bow-top BS/EN/1176-compliant anti-trap™ fencing, plus sign showing rules and regulations, in a recreation ground;

Playground C (two miles north-east) – Three swings, a slide, a modular Multiplay™ unit, BS/EN/1177-compliant impact-absorbing wet-pour™ rubber floor, green bow-top BS/EN/1176-compliant anti-trap™ fencing, plus sign showing rules and regulations, in a public park.

### **Introduction**

In a range of geographical contexts, there exist wide-ranging debates about the significance of children's play in contemporary societies, and about a range of threats to the erstwhile freedoms that characterised children's play in previous generations. As we discuss below, some powerfully-normative 'rhetorics' of play espouse its value to human health, well-being, education and social cohesion, whilst claiming that children's play has become increasingly spatially limited. In this context, and against this grain, this paper seeks to open out geographers' and other scholars' engagements with children's play. It calls for more careful, combinative research to better apprehend the social-material, political and spatial constitution of children's play. Our arguments are based on a study into children's outdoor play, which explored the complex, multiple geographies of children's outdoor play in an East London borough. Drawing upon research with 1,200 5-13 year-olds, we analyse data focusing upon children's experiences of the three proximal, recently-refurbished and ostensibly very similar public playgrounds introduced in the preface. Despite their material similarity and locational proximity, we were struck by how differently these spaces were narrated, played-with, experienced and cared-about by local children. In the main body of the paper we specifically highlight: (i) how play was diversely valued and done at the three playgrounds; (ii) narratives, anxieties and urban myths which surfaced, in different ways, at the three sites; and (iii) some localised features and narratives which were unique to each playground. In so doing, we develop an argument that narrativised complexities, multiplicities and spatialities have too-often been effaced in social-scientific accounts of children's outdoor play. In particular, we contend that the complex, multiple geographies of these playgrounds require us to think critically about two common habits in the (by-now broad, well-established) study of play in geographical, sociological, educational and playwork research. For, as we argue in the following section,

researchers have often tended to begin *either* from a series of generalisations about the state and meaning of play *or* from particularities of specific, momentary playful practices. Our findings lead us to refuse the lure of either of these beginning places. Instead, we call for more careful, combinative modes of research, bringing together often-disparate modes of thinking, writing and doing play, in order to acknowledge the complex, multiple ways in which children's outdoor play is spatially patterned, politicised, interconnected, contingent, narrated, and co-constitutive of community lives. Our analyses thus offer several points of departure for future play scholarship and, by extension, for research in children's geographies and childhood studies

### **Starting points; the state of play *or* playful particularities?**

This paper contributes to an extensive multidisciplinary literature about spaces of/for children's play in diverse contexts. When writing in this context, it is almost customary to begin from one of two rhetorical-conceptual starting points.

On one hand, especially when writing about outdoor play, a great deal of extant research begins by reiterating a succession of rather generalised, apparently commonsensical truths about the state of contemporary play. Certainly, in western Europe, north America and Australasia – where social-scientific research about outdoor play is disproportionately located – several interlinked, ideological 'rhetorics of play' (after Sutton-Smith, 1997) are now so pervasive and widely-restated as to go almost unquestioned as starting points for play research (also Henricks, 2015). First, and foremost, studies of outdoor play typically begin by re-presenting a case that children's outdoor play and independent mobility are increasingly limited by societal turns towards automobility, exclusionary adultist public spaces, and risk-averse 'paranoid parenting' styles (Cole-Hamilton and Gill, 2002; Hillman, 2006; Gill, 2007; see Pain, 2006 for a critique) reactive to contemporary social-political panics about 'stranger danger', traffic risk and 'antisocial behaviour' (McNeish and Roberts, 1995; Cole-Hamilton and Gill, 2002; Hillman, 2006; Gill, 2007). A reported generational shift towards 'bubble-wrapped' and 'toxic' childhoods is extensively lamented (Cole, 2005; Romero, 2010). Second, it is therefore widely argued that many 'traditional', fondly-remembered forms of outdoor play and sociality have significantly declined and been superseded by more sedentary, individualised, technologically-mediated, screen-focused cultural activities (DCMS, 2006). Increased incidences of childhood obesity, social-behavioural issues, and 'nature deficit disorder' are reported outcomes of this shift. Third, many authors critique an apparent homogenisation of spaces designed for children's play. It is

often noted that a ‘sameness’ of outdoor public playspaces has resulted from heightened regulation and standardisation (e.g. with regard to health and safety legislation), and agglomerative, commercialised networks of equipment manufacturers, contractors and suppliers, and unimaginative, risk-averse, committee-ruled processes of planning and commissioning (Hendricks, 2011; McKendrick et al., 2000). The very similar newly-refurbished equipment and layout at playgrounds A, B and C provide, at first glance (see preface), one example of this sameness. Fourth, underpinning these anxieties, there is typically a conviction that outdoor play is, universally, a social, physiological and political *good*. Indeed, there is considerable evidence that opportunities for outdoor play afford all manner of positive developmental, psychological, embodied, behavioural, educational and civic outcomes (reviewed in Henricks, 2015). The preceding trends are thus widely positioned as significant, wide-ranging risks to the present/future wellbeing of an entire ‘generation’. Therefore, academic accounts of outdoor play typically begin from an explicit position of defending the principle – enshrined in the UNCRC (1989, article 31) – of play as a universal right for children. In the process, particular forms and spaces of outdoor play are valorised as affording children’s participation, agency and citizenship. In advocating this principle, many accounts of outdoor play often seem to begin from a kind of wistful longing for particular time-spaces where alternative modes of outdoor play are/were possible. This longing could arguably be critiqued as a generalised nostalgia for an imagined, idyllic ‘golden age’ of outdoor play: a just-gone time-space where children roamed freely outdoors, played authentic games, and participated in adventurous, emancipatory play and playwork practices. However, it is perhaps fairer to characterise this sensibility as generalised, politicised hope for, and fidelity in, the possibility of change contra the trends outlined in this paragraph. Work of this kind has been fundamentally important in constituting a demand for research and action in relation to children’s play and play-spaces. The above-listed political-conceptual positions have been bases for a rich, substantial body of empirical, conceptual and methodological work (Clark and Moss, 2005). We also note the remarkable, proliferating range of participatory playwork practices which have responded to this demand, and the considerable impacts of play- and youth-work academic-activists in mobilising (and, in some cases, critically reflecting upon) these arguments to carefully make a case for the importance of outdoor play within contemporary political-funding contexts (Ryall et al., 2013; MacLean et al., 2015). For instance, the refurbishments of the three public playgrounds featured in this paper were direct products of such mobilisation by local and national playwork academic-activists. However, we also begin from a concern with the way in which claims about the state or meaning of outdoor play are often

restated in a rather broad-brush, universalising style in academic, policy and media discourses (see, relatedly, Tisdall and Punch, 2012 on taken-for-granted truisms within social-scientific studies of childhood). It is our contention that the positions outlined in the preceding paragraph are too-often re-presented with relatively little criticality, relatively little attention to local contingencies, and relatively little heed to the disclaimers, ambivalences and complexities which were actually present in classic, oft-cited evidential studies (e.g. Karsten 2005, p.288; Lester and Russell 2008, p.22). In particular, we worry that an unintended consequence of the important arguments sketched above may have been to permit a somewhat *aspatial* understanding of play-as-universally-and-consistently-shaped-by-contemporary-processes. This understanding may sometimes, problematically, constitute an erasure of diverse, multiple, local everyday processes through which *play-itself* happens and matters. We argue that this erasure limits understandings of how societal-political processes apparently ‘beyond’ play surface (after Lester 2010) and matter, in geographically-differentiated ways.

On the other hand, elsewhere, there is a large literature which habitually begins from the affecting particularity, vitality and immediacy of individual *moments or practices* of playfulness. This habit has become increasingly commonplace through several currents of scholarship: for example, via a turn towards (auto)ethnographic, phenomenological and/or participatory research in relation to play, and via calls for philosophically-*ludic* modes of social-scientific thinking-writing-research (Thrift, 1997; Aitken, 2001; Woodyer et al., 2015). Although disparate in their foci, we would argue that these modes of thinking-writing-research have been especially important in highlighting three key characteristics of play. First, they have drawn attention to the absorbing, microgeographical, multisensual, emotional-affective, contingent, material, imaginative doing of play (Lester and Russell, 2008; Curti et al., 2016). Through a focus on small-scale, momentary, circumstantial social-spatial factors which afford (or constrain) fun and playfulness, this literature attends to how play is a situational social and/or sociotechnical practice (and – importantly – not solely the preserve of children). Second, literature of this kind has been significant in recognising the challenges that ineffable, momentary playful practices pose for normative, representational, often-adultist modes of thinking-writing-researching about play (Thrift, 1997; Woodyer, 2012). For example, it is noted that children’s ‘point-less’, quotidian ‘fun’ frequently resists easy narrative categorisation (Horton, 2010). Third, a great deal of extant work emphasises the productive – particularly radical, therapeutic or performative – potential of momentary playful practices. For example, attention is drawn to children’s play as resistive of regulative adultist boundaries (Aitken, 2000; Thomson 2005)

Moreover, geographers and others have begun to articulate the subversive, playful creativity of a wide range of activist practices, and the latent hopefulness of resourceful playing bodies in situations of marginalisation, conflict or subalternity (e.g. Crossa, 2013; Lobo, 2016). Like Änggård (2016), then, we suggest that accounts of the *doing* of playfulness offer a rich conceptual resource which might productively unsettle longstanding approaches to children's outdoor play. However, we also feel that the foregrounding, and perhaps romanticisation, of microgeographical, momentary playfulness sometimes distracts attention from extensive social-political processes which impact upon and constitute play.

Essentially, then, we suggest that social-scientific accounts habitually make two kinds of cut across the heterogeneous processes of children's outdoor play: foregrounding *either* universalised, macrogeographical statements about play *or* microgeographical particularities of play-itself. As such, research about outdoor play refracts a broader, recently-critiqued tendency towards methodological-conceptual polarisation within social-scientific studies of childhood, which has inclined towards *either* detailed engagements with microgeographical everydayness *or* assertions of macrogeographical structural concerns (Miles, 2000; Ansell, 2009; Mitchell and Elwood, 2012). With regard to outdoor play, we worry that too much is habitually overlooked in the process, *inbetween* these commonplace modes of scholarship. Like Wood (2012; also Russell, 2012, Lester and Russell, 2008), we suggest that there exist a wide range of 'less-seen', but important, geographies of play that commonly elude scholarly attention. We agree with Skelton (2013a, 2013b; also Holloway 2014) that much key social-scientific research has permitted only a limited apprehension of how large-scale social-political processes and intimate, 'ordinary' geographies intersect, complexly and co-constitutively, with/in the everyday, playful lives of children. Specifically, we suggest that many accounts of outdoor play provide a somewhat underdeveloped understanding of how social-political limits to play and local particularities of play experiences are always already processually interconnected.

In response to these critiques, we argue that – and evidence how – generalised critiques of limits to outdoor play could productively be interrelated with particularised conceptualisations of play itself. We draw inspiration from, and significantly develop, a number of recent *calls* for innovative, combinative, comparative approaches to the conceptualisation of play (e.g. Harker, 2005; Rautio and Jokinen, 2015; Woodyer, 2013; Woodyer et al., 2015); to the “fine weave” of play and politics in children's everyday geographies (Katz 2004, p.61); to the “surfacing” of

social exclusions and inequalities in localised play-spaces (Lester, 2010; Thomson and Philo, 2004). A concern for intersections between momentary play practices and sedimented social-political geographies – as manifest in three designated ‘playgrounds’ – runs through the following analyses.

### **Researching multiple geographies of play in a London Borough**

The following sections examine data from a study of children’s outdoor play in north-east London, commissioned by a consortium of public and third-sector agencies, who specified a focus upon three adjacent wards that were said to have ‘outdoor play issues’: specifically, it was reported that each ward had recently received relatively substantial investment in public outdoor play provision, but refurbished play-spaces were poorly used. Over a twelve month period, we consulted with 1,243 local 5-13-year-olds. In each ward, research was conducted in two schools plus at least two out-of-school youth groups. In these settings, children were invited to participate in a range of research activities. This paper analyses data from two activities conducted across the three wards: (i) a detailed questionnaire survey completed by 1,243 respondents; (ii) a follow-up mapping exercise, completed by 360 respondents. Contextual information about research participants is presented in table 1: proportions of gender and age groups were similar in all three wards, whereas ethnicities of respondents varied, broadly in line with the overall populations of the three wards (see table 2). The questionnaire was designed to elicit responses to a mixture of closed and fairly substantial open questions about local outdoor playspaces. The subsequent mapping exercise was conducted with small friendship groups of participants, who were asked to annotate a large local area map. Qualitative discussions during all activities were transcribed.

[Table 1 about here]

These two activities produced data relating to play in more than 200 different outdoor spaces, including parks, playgrounds, streets, recreation grounds, alleyways, country parks, gardens, sports pitches, wasteground, footpaths, woodlands, school grounds, skateparks, graveyards, bridleways, tow-paths, rivers, reservoirs and drainage channels. Some of these other spaces are discussed elsewhere (AUTHOR REF); but our analysis here focuses upon just three sites which prompted considerable commentary: the designated, recently-refurbished playgrounds A, B, and C (see preface). Table 2 collates contextual details about the immediate neighbourhood

contexts of these three sites. Already, it should be clear that the apparent same-ness of the three spaces is illusory: despite their proximity and material similarity, considerably different social-economic geographies contextualised and constituted the three playgrounds.

[Table 2 about here]

The recently-refurbished playgrounds A, B, and C should also be understood as products of a particular political-historical moment (McKendrick, 1999; Gagen, 2004, Verstrate and Karsten; 2015), in several senses. First, the very presence of playgrounds within park-spaces extends a tradition of municipal park design in urban areas of the UK, typically rooted in nineteenth-century philanthropic and social reform movements. Second, the recent refurbishment of the spaces was an outcome of regional and national policy agendas that positioned outdoor play as key to neighbourhood child-friendliness, sustainability, conviviality and well-being, and thus recommended investment in play provision as a central component community regeneration programmes (DCMS, 2004; Mayor of London, 2004, 2012; ODPM, 2006). Third, procedurally, the refurbishment of the three playgrounds was overseen – as a single planning application – by a small team responsible for public realm planning within this Borough Council. Fourth, the similar materialities of the playgrounds reflect the prescriptive functional standardisation required by risk mitigation legislation (Thomson 2005, p.64), and the predominance of international suppliers of play equipment, offering a “set array of forms” (Hendricks 2011 p.162), regulatory compliance and ‘best value’ in this context. Fifth, the apparently limited usage of the playgrounds matched national trends whereby public playgrounds have become increasingly marginalised and under-used spaces for children’s outdoor play in many minority world contexts (Cole-Hamilton et al., 2002; Hendricks, 2011).

The remainder of the paper discusses three key themes which emerged in our analysis of qualitative and quantitative data from the survey and mapping exercises. First, we show how play was diversely valued and done at the three playgrounds, noting differences between – and social-geographical complexities across – the three sites. Second, we highlight a number of narratives, rumours and urban myths that recurred, albeit in distinctive forms, at all three playgrounds. Third, we detail some localised narratives that were specific to individual playgrounds. Presenting these data as a ‘tip of the iceberg’ – and affording considerable space to children’s *narratives* – we highlight these themes as part of the development of a broader approach to researching children’s



play that can better acknowledge the considerable, wider complexities and multiplicities of children's play in local contexts.

### **Multiple experiences of play and playgrounds**

The questionnaire included a sequence of open questions about usage/experiences of local playgrounds. Table 3 collates responses relating to playgrounds A, B and C. Despite the proximity and apparent similarity of the three playgrounds, we are struck by how differently these spaces were used and experienced by local children. Indeed, looking across the rows of table 3, we note just four broad commonalities between responses about the three playgrounds: (i) a minority of respondents 'regularly' visited their local playground; (ii) nevertheless, very few respondents had *no* opinion about playgrounds A, B and C; (iii) at each playground, dog excrement and litter were consistently reported as issues by one-in-five respondents; (iv) darkness and inclement weather were noted as key barriers to play by around two-fifths of respondents in each community.

[Table 3 about here]

However, we are most stuck by the *differences* between the three playgrounds. From Table 3, we infer some key differences between how play was done, experienced and valued at playgrounds A, B and C. These differences, which recurred in qualitative data, suggest the distinctive ways in which playspaces were spatially-constituted in/via the three sites (see also Thomson 2005, Russell 2012). When asked what they liked about playground A, for example, most respondents (of all ages) principally valued opportunities for fun-play-with-play-equipment at this site. Notably, too, the description of playground A as a space for *family* fun, with a 'friendly family atmosphere', was repeated frequently among children from community A.

"Good playground. Fun place to play in. really fun play equipment" (male, 10, community A)

"A fun and cool place to play. Loads of stuff and fun activities to do" (female, 11, community A)

"Good for families to play. Friendly family atmosphere. Lots of people we know"(male, 12, community A)

"Cool playground. Go there to spend time with family. Fun activities to do with family"(female, 10, community A)

Children's descriptions of the space also frequently highlighted its 'green'/'natural' recreational ground setting, which was evidently valued as constituting a 'lovely', 'restful' 'good atmosphere' for play.

“Nice place to play. It’s got green space and a natural feel. Good trees and environment”(female, 9, community A)

“Really love this playground – a restful place, great to unwind. You can see animals and birds. Nature and plants give a good atmosphere” (male, 12, community A)

By contrast, respondents in community B evoked a quite different sense of how their local playground was used and valued. Rather than family-play, the space was mainly used and valued as a ‘safe’, ‘joyful’ space for ‘sitting and chatting’ with friends.

“Spend ages here, messing about, sitting and chatting with mates”(female, 13, community B)

“A really nice place to go...Safe place to sit chatting with friends. Very joyful opportunity to socialise”(male, 8, community B)

Although the ‘green’/‘natural’ setting of the recreation ground was not typically mentioned, many respondents from community B did explicitly value their local playground as an opportunity to spend time *outdoors* ‘safely’ – reportedly in marked contrast to their everyday routines and mobilities (limited by local ‘problems’ and ‘gangs’, discussed in subsequent sections of the paper). Local children also evoked a strong sense of local pride in playground B, which was ‘loved’, despite its ‘bad sides’ and ‘whatever people think’.

“I just like it there. Space and freedom to be outdoors safely in fresh air. Can’t go many [other] places because of problems”(female, 10, community B)

“Chance to play in safe open space. This is a good place when there are no gangs in sight”(male, 12, community B)

“Really love the playground. It has bad sides, but we’re happy there” (male, 11, community B)

“Great to have place to play by our home. We like it, whatever people think” (female, 12, community B)

By contrast, again, respondents in community C articulated a sense of their local playground as a space for ‘hanging out’, often specifically valued as a space where one would not be ‘hassled’ by adults. However, frequently, and distinctively to community C, descriptions of playground C were underscored by a sense of boredom and disillusionment, wherein there was reportedly *nothing* to value or do in this play-space.

“Somewhere to chill and hang out and not get hassled” (male, 12, community C)

“CRAP playground. NOWT FOR US to do around here” (female, 12, community C)

“Boring place. Bad because there’s just nothing to do there. [Community C] is an awful place for kids” (male, 9, community C)

From Table 3, we also infer some key distinctions in how children experienced and encountered the similar *material* spaces of playgrounds A, B and C. In community A, for example, a relatively large proportion of

respondents reportedly disliked ‘nothing’ about the local playground, which was explicitly valued in qualitative data as a ‘nice’, ‘cool’, ‘respectable’ play-space.

“Nothing to change really. It is a nice, respectable place to play” (male, 7, community A)

“It’s cools, [playground A] is decent the way it is. We’re better off than most” (female, 8, community A)

In responses to questions about limits to play, it was evident that encounters with playground A were strongly framed and limited by parents’/carers’ rules about independent mobility. Adults’ anxieties about ‘strangers’ and traffic risk were widely normalised (and evidently mostly accepted) among children in community A.

“Parents say there is far too much busy traffic around [playground A] and I agree...[Playground A] is out-of-bounds without an adult because strangers might talk to you”(female, 9, community A)

“Would not go alone because of strangers and kidnappers. There are too many weird and inconsiderate people out there”(male, 12, community A)

In community B, experiences of the local playground were evidently contextualised by a range of community anxieties about gang-related activities, ‘drugs’/‘druggies’ and ‘bad people’. Although the playground was noted as a relatively ‘safe’ space in this context, it was often described as having a dangerous, underlying ‘feel’.

Encounters with playground B were again framed and limited by parents’/carers’ rules: but these were more frequently related to more specific (and apparently longstanding) anxieties about local gangs and criminalities, than the non-specified ‘stranger danger’ and ‘traffic risk’ reported in community A.

“[Playground B] feels dangerous. Like to play there, but maybe gangsters, druggies and bad people in area”(male, 10, community B)

“Parents won’t let me go [to playground B] at certain times because it can be dangerous. [...] There is history of gang culture and muggings, particularly in school holidays”(male, 12, community B)

“Playground can be nasty and out-of-bounds because of gangs hanging around. Too many armed people. In the past there have been stabbings there and gangs attack innocents” (female, 13, community B)

A further distinctive, set of responses was given by children in community C. Here, a relatively large proportion of respondents indicated that they disliked ‘everything’ about playground C, and a sense of local play provision as ‘boring’ with ‘nothing to do’ pervaded most qualitative discussions.

“Dislike everything about [playground C]. Boring, boring, boring! Unsurprisingly, there is trouble”(female, 10, community C)

“People are bored here. There is nothing much to do. You can really feel it”(female, 9, community C)

Relatively few respondents in community C described strict rules imposed by parents/carers. However, many respondents did indicate how they observed self-imposed spatial rules: notably, many children avoided playground C at particular times to evade ‘troubles’ posed by ‘teenagers’.

“I go wherever I want but avoid teenagers...Older kids with nothing to do hang around [playground C], getting into troubles, intimidating users of the park. They trash the place” (male, 9, community C)

“Avoid playground. It is teenager-infested...not safe to go alone. Bullies and teenagers hang out and make trouble. They hang around the park smoking, drinking and using foul language. Teenagers always hang out and spoil things” (male, 11, community C)

“[Playground C] is unkempt, with teenagers hanging around and dog mess...Teenagers are horrible. Loads of idiots every day.” (female, 13, community C)

These issues resonate with much previous research about children’s outdoor play (e.g. Cole-Hamilton et al. 2002; Veitch et al., 2007). We also note that barriers to play were socially patterned, in ways that correspond to many extant studies. For example, across all three playgrounds, it was the case that: parents’/carers’ rules were more widely reported by younger respondents; crime, gangs and drugs were more widely reported by older respondents; the outdoor mobilities of female respondents were more constrained by parents/carers than male peers; bullying particularly affected the outdoor play of minority ethnic respondents; the outdoor mobilities of female Indian, Pakistani and Somali respondents were particularly constrained by a wide range of factors, particularly parents’/carers’ rules (O’Brien et al., 2000).

However, we draw attention to the distinctiveness of data relating to these three proximal, ostensibly-similar playgrounds. Despite the apparent ‘sameness’ (Hendricks, 2011) and ‘monomorphism’ (Jones, 2000) of these design(at)ed play-spaces, it was evident that particular, localised practices and experiences of play were evident at each site. Although centring around common *kinds* of issues, these were also locally- and socially-variegated: from amorphous and vague senses of ‘stranger danger’ to the particularities of local gang cultures; and from atmospheres of fun and family-friendliness to those of boredom and a knowing, resigned sense that, ‘unsurprisingly’, the playground represented a microcosm of the ‘trouble’ that seems to pervade community C. We suggest, therefore, that the differential usage/experiences of the *playgrounds* can be understood as significant articulations, constituents and manifestations of multiple, cross-cutting, *local* geographies of childhood, community in/exclusion and childcare cultures (Holloway, 1998; Matthews and Tucker, 2007; Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2014; Visser et al., 2015). While social-cultural geographies of outdoor play have been widely evidenced in geographical scholarship (Thomson and Philo, 2004; Thomson, 2005), we are particularly struck by

the localised differentiation of play encountered in our study: such that quite distinctive social-material-affective geographies of outdoor play were evident at three similar playgrounds, just two miles apart.

### **Strangers, rumours and myths: *ZeGO* and the Gingerbread Man**

Throughout our research, it became evident that narratives, rumours and urban myths were constitutively central to the experience of outdoor play-spaces. Indeed, the circulation and reproduction of (typically anxiety-laden) narratives was part and parcel of play itself. Research about children's outdoor play has chronicled a wide range of contemporary societal anxieties, paranoias, and panics which constitute a normative apprehension of the riskiness of unsupervised outdoor play. Notably, much research about children's outdoor play in the UK has highlighted the considerable prevalence and effects of narratives of 'stranger danger'. However, we also note that local particularities and processes of 'stranger danger' narratives are relatively seldom detailed. Like Alexander (2009) and Horton et al (2014), we suggest that narratives of 'stranger danger' should be understood within, and as constitutive of, the context of local social-cultural geographies of narratives, rumours and urban myths, many of which endure in communities for generations. In our study, research participants described a remarkably wide range of rumour-ful, narrative anxieties, relating to particular or purported local incidents, places and personalities. To explore intersections between such narratives and children's everyday geographies of play, we highlight two sets of rumours which recurred in our research. These narratives concerned two shadowy, mysterious characters: *ZeGO* and the Gingerbread Man.

The graffiti-tag *ZeGO* appeared, multiple times at all three playgrounds. Indeed, it transpires that *ZeGO* is a rather prolific, celebrated graffiti-artist with an extensive spatial range in East London. However, our concern, here, is not with geographies of graffiti-ism per se, but with the ways in which *ZeGO*-related narratives were key constituents of children's discussions and experiences of playgrounds A, B and C. Indeed, he (*ZeGO* was invariably imagined/described as male) reportedly,

“appears all over. He is everywhere in this area” (male, 8, community B)

Strikingly, however, **ZeGO** was figured in quite distinctive ways in discussions of the three playgrounds. In community A, he was widely and explicitly positioned as a ‘bad guy’ and ‘stranger’, whose ‘antisocial behaviour’ was ‘ruining’ playground A.

“**ZeGO** is a really bad guy. Inconsiderate people like him ruin our playgrounds. It is antisocial behaviour”(male, 10, community A)

“Bad man called **ZeGO** causes criminal damage. It is stupid. Graffiti makes [playground A] scruffy and spoils it for everybody. Absolutely disgusting!”(female, 12, community A)

In this context it was widely asserted that **ZeGO** tags should be cleaned, ‘scrubbed’, expunged or painted-over to maintain the playground’s appearance, appeal and ‘hygiene’.

“**ZeGO** graffiti is messy and needs a clean. Get rid of it!” (male, 9, community A)

“**ZeGO** is bad because it makes [playground A] look ugly. It should be scrubbed to improve hygiene” (female, 11, community A)

Discussions of **ZeGO** tags at Playground A also frequently prompted broader reflection upon the state and behaviour of ‘some people’ in the Borough: the phrases ‘something should be done’ and ‘why do they always have to ruin things?’ were fairly typical.

“Something should be done about people like **ZeGO**. They’re vandals. There is no excuse for vandalism” (female, 10, community A)

“Some people’s behaviour is uncaring. People work hard to keep the park nice. Why do a few bad people like **ZeGO** always have to ruin things?”(male, 10, community A)

In community B, however, descriptions of **ZeGO** had a very different tone and content. For example, mentions of **ZeGO** graffiti in local playgrounds were often surrounded with a preponderance of smiley-faces and exclamation marks. For some, **ZeGO** was a ‘hero’ or ‘legend’. In this context, many participants attached a sense of pride and local identity to **ZeGO** graffiti in playground B. Some participants apparently revelled in local/insider knowledges about this mysterious, secretive character, and tantalised us with hints about **ZeGO**’s identity.

“**ZeGO** = [Community B] legend ☺☺!!!!!!!” (female, 10, community B)

“**ZeGO** is a hero, representing [Community B] all over...He is talented. It takes dedication to be so good” (male, 13, community B)

“I know **ZeGO**’s true name and where he lives. But not telling you!!☺”(male, 9, community B)

In community C, respondents articulated another, different sense of **ZeGO**: as a ‘dodgy’, feared, fugitive, masked figure. There were numerous stories of having glimpsed this shadowy character in or near playground C: typically at night-time, at a distance, and often with the outcome of ‘running a mile’ away.

“Dodgy ppl like **ZeGO** jump out at you...He wears a black mask and lurks around the park at night” (male, 12, community C)

“Me and my mate saw **ZeGO** graffiti-ing near [playground C]. He turned around and saw us. We ran a mile! We went so fast!”(male, 10, community C)

Notably, in this local context, **ZeGO** was explicitly labelled as an outsider: ‘not from around here’.

“**ZeGO** is a dodgy character. He is not from around here. He is going to get killed one of these days” (male, 13, community C)

“**ZeGO** comes from [name of estate] and doesn’t belong here. He should stay out of [Community C]” (female, 12, community C)

A second mysterious character, the ‘Gingerbread Man’, was also widely mentioned in data relating to all three playgrounds. Many respondents described the rumoured presence of a red-haired sex-offender lurking in local parks. It was clear that these narratives constituted anxieties, and framed engagements with play-spaces, for respondents of all ages.

“After dark [playground B] is frightening because the GINGERBREAD MAN is here” (female, 10, community B)

“You can’t go in [woods] at night. The Gingerbread Man lives in the trees...He was born somewhere around here but he was abandoned in the woods. He has red hair and false teeth...He’s got a big knife. You could easily get raped” (male, 12, community C)

As an aside, a local historian and a Police Officer independently detailed how the Gingerbread Man ‘urban myth’ stemmed from an incident during the 1960s, when a red-haired man was arrested for indecent exposure in community B. While, in our view, this provided a credible, well-evidenced explanation, we are less interested in ‘debunking’ the Gingerbread Man ‘myth’ than in considering how these longstanding, intergenerational narratives constitutively affected local children’s experiences of outdoor play-spaces (see Alexander, 2009). For, strikingly, the rumoured proximity of this character was evidently cause for considerable, contagious anxiety (even fifty years after the ‘real’ Gingerbread Man’s crimes). In all three communities, anxieties about the Gingerbread Man

coloured, and sometimes limited, many participants' engagements with local playgrounds. Again, however, we were struck by the way in which rumours about this probably-mythical figure surfaced in quite distinctive ways in/around the three playgrounds, demonstrating how longer-durée anxieties and politics were folded into the immediately-local scales and preoccupations at these three playspaces. In community A, for example, the Gingerbread Man was evidently one of many dangerous strangers – or 'bogeymen' – evoked by parents/carers in regulating children's outdoor play and mobility. Here, the Gingerbread Man constituted part of a panoply of threatening 'others' within adultist narratives of 'stranger danger'.

“Not allowed to go to [playground A] on my own because druggies, strangers and perverts like the Gingerbread Man are all over the place...Dad says ‘the Gingerbread Man will get you!’”(female, 9, community A)

Notably, in community A, children themselves were frequently complicit in co-constructing understandings of independent play and mobility as risky (also Nayak, 2003; Benwell, 2012), particularly via peer-group gossip, as they narrated the bodily and existential threats posed by the Gingerbread man and other strangers for lone children at playground A.

“I heard he chops your hair off and rapes you...He lurks by the park” (female, 9, community A)  
“There are rumours around that he is watching children playing and wants to kill in the holidays” (female, 11, community A)

In community B, the Gingerbread Man was articulated in a quite different way by research participants. Notably, rumours about the Gingerbread Man were often attached to very specific built and environmental features.

“Gingerbread Man is seen hiding in the big bush [near playground B] waiting for chance to grab a child” (female, 7, community B)  
“Alleyway [near playground B] is dark and scary and the Gingerbread Man is rumoured to look through gaps in fence...so we go the long way [avoiding alleyway]” (male, 9, community B)

Uniquely, and extending our earlier discussion, a number of participants in community B described how they felt relatively 'safe' from the Gingerbread Man because of their *community* and *friendship* relationships: there was a sense, *here*, that the Gingerbread Man could not get 'us'.

“In this area people look after each other so we feel safe...The Ginger Man can't get us”(male, 12, community B)



“There is close community – adults and children. Children go around together and play together so there is less danger from strangers like the Gingerbread Man”(male, 13, community B)

By contrast, the rumoured presence of the Gingerbread Man in/around Playground C was often figured as part of a *wider* sense of the decline and marginalisation of Community C. Indeed, the Gingerbread Man’s presence was sometimes cited as evidence that ‘they don’t care’ about Community C.

“[Community C] is a scruffy wasteland which needs help and investment. The amount of rubbish, glass, dog dirt and perverts (e.g. Gingerbread Man) all around is quite shameful but they don’t care about this community” (male, 10, community C)

“This is a quite an isolated, unsafe place and things get worse...Nobody does anything about teenagers and perverts like Gingerbread Man” (female, 10, community C)

“We have to play out with the Gingerbread Man...No-one cares about us” (male, 13, community C)

Whatever their ‘truth’, narratives of *ZeGO* and the Gingerbread Man surfaced in discussions of all three playgrounds. Indeed, it is interesting to note how spatially-extensive these rumours were, in both percolating within and cutting across community ‘boundaries’. However, although these figures recurred widely – and although they could be read as widely-familiar tropes and memes of ‘stranger danger’ – it was notable that they were discussed, and *mattered*, in quite distinctive ways in each of the three communities. As such, these rumoured, regionally-specific figures intersected with the outdoor play, and everyday geographies, of children and families in spatially-differentiated ways (Ferré et al., 2006; Holt et al., 2015). Through the ghostly figures of *ZeGO* and the Gingerbread Man, contemporary anxieties about anti-social behaviour, gang culture, ‘stranger danger’ and sexual violence were articulated, with constitutive force, in and around these playspaces. We thus note how globalised or nationalised discursive constructs like ‘stranger danger’ are experienced, constituted and lived-with, in distinctive ways, with/in particular everyday, playful spaces, habits and childhood cultures (Aitken, 2000; Katz, 2004). Moreover, it was evident that, even across the proximal spaces of playgrounds A, B and C, notions like ‘stranger danger’ were articulated in subtly-differentiated ways, always constituted by and constitutive of neighbourhood social-cultural geographies, and formative of local social-political differences between the three playgrounds (Lester, 2010; Thomson and Philo, 2004).

### Site-specific playground narratives: ducks, needle-spotting and smashed glass

While *ZeGO* and the Gingerbread Man recurred throughout our study area, we also encountered many features, narratives, anxieties and myths which were uniquely-associated with the three sites. In this section we highlight three key features which were distinctive to playgrounds A, B and C, respectively. Again, we present these anxieties as evidence of the complex, multiple geographies and experiences of outdoor play. We note that these features and narratives were not only site-specific, but also site-*productive*. Thus, we note how features as diverse as waterfowl, needles, shattered glass, slides, gates and dog-litter bins *produced* – in their particular, momentual congregations – some notable narrative and experiential differences between the three playgrounds (Prout, 2005; Harker, 2005; Rautio and Jokinen, 2015; Woodyer, 2013). These narratives suggest an expanded sense of the materialities, practices and (often under-the-radar) users that constitute play-spaces.

First, a number of play-spaces in the Borough were located in parks or recreation grounds with attendant waterfowl. However, it was only at playground A (and particularly on the playground's slide) that ducks themselves were figured, frequently, as key sights, features and companion species co-presences (Taylor, 2013).

“Good play things and nice ducks [in Playground A]...Ducks like to hang out with us!”(female, 8, community A)

“[Playground A] is a fun place. I like the ducks who dig and hop around the slide”(male, 9, community A)

The ducks were typically described affectionately (as ‘charming’, ‘friendly’, ‘funny’) by participants in community A. Indeed, some participants drew attention to named, individual ducks, fondly describing their distinguishing characteristics and personalities. Thus, the playground itself was sometimes referred to as the ‘duck place’ (or similar), in recognition of their ‘special’, constitutive presence.

“Look out for Donald the Duck [in playground A]! He is the biggest and friendliest!!”(female, 12, community A)

“We call [playground A] the duck playground – good thing because people enjoy watching the ducks”(male, 11, community A)

However, a number of participants also recounted particular incidents where ducks had constituted physical barriers to play at the site, and particularly on the slide. Learning to move around/with the ducks' bodies, excrement and habitual movements was sometimes described as key to playing at the playground. Moreover, playing at playground A was often described as one element of visiting the wider recreation ground, alongside

regular, playful routines of feeding and ‘seeing the ducks’ in what – as we discussed above – was figured as a vital, vibrant, ‘family-friendly’ space in the community.

“You have to wait ‘til there’s no ducks [on the slide] before sliding!!” (male, 8, community A)

“Need to check for duck poo and lazy ducks [when playing at playground A]” (female, 10, community A)

“Go with dad at weekend to walk doggies, feed ducks and go to playground” (female, 8, community A)

Chasing or ‘upsetting’ ducks at the playground were widely described as ‘rude’ or ‘bad’ behaviour. Adults who ‘allow’ children or dogs to pursue the ducks were widely subject to moral critique: such behaviour was widely described as evidence that they were ‘bad parenting’ or ‘irresponsible dog owners’. Such local moral geographies were unique to playground A.

“Rude children sometimes chase the ducks....Disgusting! Parents who allow this sort of rude behaviour are bad parents IMO” (female, 12, community A)

“Irresponsible dog owners sometimes let dogs upset the ducks. No excuse for this bad behaviour. Leave the ducks alone!” (male, 11, community A)

Second, in community B, many participants described a specific issue, and set of anxieties, relating to the presence of used hypodermic needles in playground B and surrounding recreation ground. Particular sites (notably in a flower bed and around a litter bin) were repeatedly highlighted as particular places to ‘spot needles’.

“The playground could be nicer – make sure there’s no needles” (male, 9, community B)

“So many needles in [playground B].Always spotted in the flowers and by the dog [litter] bin” (male, 10, community B)

“Me and [friend] spotted a huge needle sticking out the ground next to the bin. It was frightful” (female, 11, community B)

Occasionally, ‘needle-spotting’ was described as kind of absorbing game, or ‘challenge’, in itself. More typically, however, the ability to spot and avoid needles was recommended as an important, habitual part of staying safe while playing on the playground. The reported presence of needles in the playground was closely linked to anxieties about risks posed by drug dealers and users (‘needlers’). ‘Needle-spotting’ was thus described as a kind of ‘early warning’ to avoid coming into contact with either of these deeply-feared groups, which we discussed in more detail earlier in the paper.

“It is a challenge to count how many needles you can spot around [playground B]” (male, 11, community B)

“The most me and my brother saw was five in one day. Truly!!” (female, 11, community B)

“Needles mean needlers are near, so be careful. Parks can be very unsafe. There are druggies around [playground B] and no-one around to be witnesses” (male, 13, community B)

We should note that local park wardens’ data about disposals of hazardous waste recorded that 0-2 hypodermic needles were found in the recreation ground, as a whole, each year. However, again, we are less interested in debunking local children’s narratives, than in registering the considerable and diverse anxieties constituted by the *possible, rumoured* presence of needles in the playground.

“Young people could accidentally touch needles [in playground B] and become needlers and drunk perverts” (male, 13, community B)

“People are drunk and do drugs in our park – this must stop... There may be needles. Small children could get blood poisoning and be killed” (male, 9, community B)

Clearly, many of these anxieties profoundly unsettle any imagined idyll of children’s outdoor play: it is tempting to adjudge that things should be otherwise (or, perhaps, that things were better in the past). However, our concern here is to note how this preponderance of narratives evoking materialities of intravenous drug use – and associated risks of piercing, ‘poisoning’, addition or contagion – formed part of children’s vernacular constitution of this playground. It was precisely through these haunting, localised needle narratives that children encountered and lived-with this particular assemblage of play equipment, and the local community’s attendant, intersecting fears of sexual violence or anti-social behaviour.

Third, in community C, discussions of outdoor play frequently included discussion of very particularly-described kinds of shattered glass. The apparently commonplace presence of shattered glass in the playground was usually narrated in terms of the behaviours and alcohol-consumption of teenage ‘vandals’ and ‘rudeboys’.

“Messy messy playground – always too much little pieces of GLASS. Clear it up”(male, 10, community C)

“The amount of glass, dog dirt and rubbish in [playground C] is shameful. Small bits of sharp brown glass are strewn all over” (male, 9, community C)

“Bench [at playground C] bad because teenage rudeboys smash bottles and it’s dangerous” (female, 7, community C)

The glass was often anxiously described as a threat in two senses. For some participants, the glass was principally narrated as a physical hazard to playing bodies in playground C. Reports of how glass – ‘thoughtlessly’ or

‘deliberately’ left on/around play equipment – had caused injuries were sometime narrated in lurid, visceral, thoroughly materialised terms (compare Rautio, 2013, on stones).

“Broken glass everywhere because of thoughtless older kids. One little kid got glass stuck in his hand and blood was all over [playground C]” (male, 10, community C)

“Teenage gangs deliberately leave glass and smash up the playground. Glass on the slide has caused serious wounds. Need to stop teenagers and make [playground C] cleaner” (female, 10, community C)

For other participants, the glass was understood as risky inasmuch as it denoted proximity to particular, intimidating local ‘older kids’. The playground was thus often considered out-of-bounds by local children keen to avoid these feared, named individuals. The broken glass was also often described as part of a broader culture of habitual vandalism among ‘teenagers’ in community C. Although participants were overwhelmingly critical of vandalism, many children narrated playground vandalism in terms of a lack of provision for local teenagers. Thus, the presence of broken glass in the playground was figured – once again – as evidence that there is ‘nothing to do’.

“Tend to avoid [playground C]. Always broken glass...Play areas are used by much older teenagers who make a mess. This makes play areas intimidating for younger children and spoils things for everyone...The older youths needs somewhere of their own” (female, 12, community C)

“Deal with teenagers, please. Big kids hang around and vandalise play areas. [...] Give them something to do!”(female, 12, community C)

We suggest that these locally-situated narratives (see also Ferré et al., 2006) were key constituents – along with complex, assemblages of materialities, play practices, populations and social-cultural geographies already evoked – of the three playgrounds. These kinds of narratives were, in part, productive of distinctive play practices, habits, identities and experiences at playgrounds A, B and C, and formative of processual social-cultural distinctions between the three sites (Harker, 2005, Aitken, 2001). Indeed, we note how so many of these narratives of/about play constructed feared or demonised *others*: whether ‘irresponsible’ dog-owners, ‘bad parents’, druggies, needlers, drug-dealers, teenagers, ‘rudeboys’, ‘perverts’, ‘drinkers’, or the *they* who ‘don’t care about us’. Through our research, we came to recognise local narratives in/of play as among the most tangible, report-able differences between apparently similar play-spaces. Again, we call for further, detailed research to investigate the constitutive character of narratives, rumours and urban myths – and of processes of dis/identification and othering – in, through and of play.

## Conclusions

In this paper, we have argued for a more careful, combinative and comparative approaches to the study of children's play. Our analyses offer several points of departure for future play scholarship and, by extension, for research in children's geographies and childhood studies. While our specific empirical focus here has been on three English playgrounds, the following points should constitute an openness to consider a much wider range of play spaces/practices, and constitute a more internationalised field of study (see Punch, 2000, Katz, 2004), than has habitually been the case in extant geographical, sociological, educational and playwork research.

Firstly, we have sought to overcome a strong tendency in play research to constitute *either* macroscale anxieties about children's play (and the structural factors that enable or inhibit it) *or* more celebratory readings of the very microscale, for-the-moment and, in the most recent research, more-than-human entanglements through which 'play' emerges. Rather than downplay the importance of either approach, we have argued that play scholars must develop methodologies that can better witness both how these apparently polarised scales are combined, and that there are spaces and intersections *in-between* that warrant considerable further attention.

Secondly, then, in this paper we highlighted the importance of a focus upon the articulation of playgrounds with, in and as *local* urban 'communities', wherever they may be located. A focus on the local scale enabled us to demonstrate how three playgrounds – that in design terms were materially similar, and that were geographically proximate – were experienced, felt, used and situated in sometimes profoundly different ways. In some cases (like playground A), children's reflections upon their playgrounds articulated 'positive' feelings about their wider communities – such as an atmosphere of 'family-friendliness' that seemed to pervade. In other cases, the playgrounds seemed to represent a discursive pivot for rather more 'negative' feelings – most notably in playground C, where a range of human and nonhuman others (glass, needles, teenagers) evinced much wider and longer-standing senses of marginalisation, criminality, gang-violence, boredom and community decline. Our argument is, then, for more combinative studies exploring how playspaces constitute important sites at which some key, social-geographic processes in urban communities are felt, disclosed and materialised. Implicitly, through the paper, we have suggested that the localised social-economic, demographic and classed geographies

witnessed in Table 2 are always-already profoundly intersecting with contemporary spatialities and narratives of play(spaces).

Thirdly, however, we are mindful of critiques about an insistent focus upon ‘the local’ in children’s geographies and childhood studies (e.g. Ansell, 2009). In response, our approach has differed in two important ways. On one hand, we have paid far more explicit attention to the *entangling* of the macro- and micro-concerns of previous play scholarship by witnessing how – for instance – pervasive but amorphous discourses about ‘stranger danger’ are materialised and localised within three urban communities. In so doing, we identified how such discourses centre upon particular, mythologised characters (*ZeGO* and the Gingerbread Man) that circulated widely in each community. On the other hand, and just as significantly, these characters exemplified the value of a *comparative* approach. Thus, we were able to identify that some concerns – like fears around *ZeGO* and the Gingerbread Man) – were actually felt *across* the three communities, and beyond, rather than being necessarily contained within them. More generally, however, prompted by an initial focus on the three playgrounds, a comparative, multi-site approach enabled us to identify a range of similarities and differences between the three communities that mattered, profoundly, to the children who lived in them. Consequently, we not only advocate an approach to children’s playspaces through which local societal-political processes surface, but call for more systematic, comparative studies that might witness how the *purportedly* uniform, commercialised, standardised microgeographies of contemporary playgrounds could offer analytical points of departure for understanding convergences and divergences in the social-political lives of proximate urban communities. Through this account of three playgrounds, two miles apart (but narratively and affectively *worlds-apart*) we have suggested how the inequitable social-economic geographic patterning of local communities must be understood as inseparably constitutive of play-itself and playspaces-themselves.

Fourthly, we have presented in this paper a range of myths, rumours and stories that have ranged from the humorous, banal or (apparently) nonsensical to the poignant, affecting and troubling. Our approach has been neither to dismiss, nor to celebrate, nor to judge the relative ‘truth’ of such narratives. Rather, we argue that such myths and rumours are absolutely central to the constitution of the *local* meanings of the three playgrounds, and, recursively, of key social-political concerns in the communities in which the playgrounds are situated. Although

persuaded by the merits of ‘nonrepresentational’ children’s geographies – and despite our focus upon the more-than-human materialities of glass and needles in the final part of the paper – we seek here to (re)emphasise the importance of talk, narrative and storying in constituting the social-material lives and everyday politics of communities. Assuming that children’s (talk about) play is intra-active and not merely representational (MacLean et al., 2015), we suggest that a focus upon children’s myths, rumours and stories might be a particularly effective one for research that can more systematically articulate the two distinct scales of extant play scholarship (macro and micro). To do so would require the kinds of detailed, intensive, comparative, mixed-methods approaches we have deployed in this paper, as well, perhaps, as greater attention to the seemingly ever-more-powerful role of social media in propagating such rumours. And to do so would not only ‘upscale’ research on play and children’s geographies spatially (through comparative analyses), but *temporally* and *politically* (Mitchell and Elwood, 2012). For, as we have shown, some of the rumours and myths that co-constituted playgrounds and communities were not merely ephemeral, passing concerns, but woven deeply into the fabric of stories, hopes and fears in urban communities that have persisted for generations. Therefore, we anticipate that future scholarship might engage in more systematic analyses of myth, rumour and storying in the politicised co-constitution of playspaces with, in and as the local communities in which they are situated.

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**Table 1**      **Characteristics of research participants**

	<b>Survey</b>		<b>Mapping exercise</b>	
	Frequency	Per cent	Frequency	Per cent
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	596	48	97	54
Female	647	52	83	46
<b>Age</b>				
5-7 years	209	17	0	0
8-10 years	490	39	75	42
11-13 years	544	44	105	58
<b>Place of residence (see table 2)</b>				
Community A	238	19	120	33
Community B	582	47	120	33
Community C	423	34	120	33
<b>Self-defined ethnicity</b>				
White British	310	25	52	29
Indian	138	11	12	7
Pakistani	125	10	11	6
Jamaican	116	9	5	3
Somali	67	5	15	8
Kenyan	62	5	7	4
Polish	48	4	2	1
Bangladeshi	28	2	6	3
Not indicated	356	29	70	39

**Table 2 Neighbourhood statistics for communities A, B, and C**

Community	Key neighbourhood statistics
A	An area of predominantly large, relatively high value housing stock. Among the 40% most affluent communities in the UK: fewer than 25% of households are deprived in one or more dimensions defined by UK Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD). 60% of resident population are white British; 10% are Polish; 5% are British-Indian. 86% of population were born in in UK. 16% of population are aged 0-17 years. 78% of residents aged 16+ have 2+ A-levels or degree-level education. 57% of working-age residents work in ‘managerial’ or ‘professional’ occupations; 2% have never worked.
B	An area of predominantly nineteenth-century terraced housing. Among the 10% most deprived communities in the UK: 79% of households are deprived in one or more dimensions defined by IMD. 12% of resident population are white British; 18% are British-Pakistani; 15% are British black African; 10% are British-Indian; 9% are Bangladeshi. 20% of population have been resident in UK for fewer than 10 years. 37% of population are aged 0-17 years. 22% of residents aged 16+ have no qualifications. 25% of working-age residents work in ‘routine’ or ‘semi-routine’ occupations; 22% have never worked.
C	Part of a large post-war social-housing estate. Among the 20% most deprived communities in the UK: 75% of households are deprived in one or more dimensions defined by IMD. 63% of resident population are white British; 8% are Polish; 6% are British-Indian. 77% of population were born in in UK. 22% of population are aged 0-17 years. 34% of residents aged 16+ have no qualifications. 25% of working-age residents work in ‘routine’ or ‘semi-routine’ occupations; 10% have never worked.

**Table 3** Participants' experiences of playgrounds A, B and C

	Playground A (Responses from Community A)		Playground B (Responses from Community B)		Playground C (Responses from Community C)	
	Frequency	Per cent	Frequency	Per cent	Frequency	Per cent
<b>Usage of local playground</b>						
Regularly visit playground	95	40	116	20	152	36
Have visited playground in last year	112	47	146	25	85	20
Have never visited playground	10	4	117	20	106	25
<b>What like about local playground</b>						
Green space / nature	76	32	69	12	0	0
Playing / having fun	71	30	0	0	0	0
Play equipment	52	22	70	12	55	13
A 'family place'	19	8	0	0	0	0
Peaceful	18	8	0	0	0	0
Being outdoors	12	5	134	23	30	7
'Sitting and chatting'	0	0	144	25	0	0
'Hanging out'	0	0	94	16	105	25
Not 'hassled' by adults	0	0	0	0	111	26
'Nothing'	0	0	0	0	106	25
Don't know / no opinion	0	0	70	12	21	5
<b>What dislike about local playground</b>						
'Nothing'	90	38	0	0	0	0
Strangers	50	21	0	0	0	0
Dirt, poo, litter	47	20	104	18	76	18
Teenagers	19	8	28	5	76	18
Graffiti / vandalism	14	6	69	12	0	0
Bad behaviour	12	5	58	10	0	0
'Bad people'	0	0	117	20	42	10
'Gangs'	0	0	105	18	0	0
Bullies	0	0	46	8	0	0
'Druggies' / Drugs	0	0	41	7	0	0
Dogs	0	0	29	5	0	0
'Everything'	0	0	0	0	100	24
Boring / nothing to do	0	0	0	0	93	22
Don't know / no opinion	5	2	12	2	38	9
<b>Barriers to play at local playground</b>						
Parents'/carers' rules	167	70	240	41	40	9
Strangers	162	68	233	40	89	21
Traffic	148	62	58	10	34	8
Darkness	110	46	231	40	147	35
Weather	94	39	218	37	159	28
Bullies	36	15	50	9	106	38
(Fear of) crime	29	12	270	46	157	37
'Nothing to do'	14	6	151	26	169	40
Gangs	0	0	268	46	0	0
'No money'	0	0	0	0	51	12
Teenagers	0	0	0	0	173	41
Graffiti						