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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Walking, talking, playing: Children with disabilities' outdoor play in French mainstream schools

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ABSTRACT

Background: Children's right to play remains underexplored in French mainstream schools. France's inclusive education policies aim to include children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms, but this transition can create challenges hindering meaningful play opportunities. This highlights the importance of gaining a deeper understanding of children's experiences of play in school playgrounds.

Aim: This study explores children with disabilities' experiences and perspectives on their outdoor play in French mainstream school playgrounds.

Material and Methods: Walking and Talking tour interviews were conducted with thirteen children with various disabilities across six mainstream schools in western France. Data were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis.

Results: (1) 'I can(not) play': Environmental Barriers and Opportunities; (2) 'I have an idea': Children's Preferences for Enriching Play and Inclusion; (3) 'Learn to Hear Me Out': Strengthening Children's Participation in Everyday School Practices including Playground Redesign.

Conclusions and Significance: This study highlights the barriers children with disabilities face in French mainstream school playgrounds. It emphasises the need for collaborative co-design to create inclusive and playful environments. Findings have implications for occupational science, inclusive education, school-based occupational therapy, and urban design. Future participatory research should explore the co-design of school playgrounds, involving all relevant stakeholders.

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Inclusive education; mainstream school; participation; play redesign; school playgrounds; vulnerable populations

Introduction

Play is a subjective experience of joy and fun that evolves from engaging in freely, intrinsically motivated, and self-directed meaningful occupations that take place in the transactions between a child and their environment [1]. Play is a significant occupation in childhood [2] and has been found to offer children opportunities to feel included, exercise decision-making, and achieve meaningful goals [3–5]. Children's right to play has been acknowledged in many countries, with policies and legislation emphasising its importance for development, health and well-being [2,6,7]. This recognition dates to the Declaration of the Rights of the Child in 1959 and was reaffirmed in Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 [7]. Despite this, General Comment 17 of the United Nations (UN) published in 2013 noted a lack of implementation of the right to play [8], especially for vulnerable groups such as children with disabilities [5,8,9].

School playgrounds are one important place where children engage in play [10]. Thus, school playgrounds are a vital outdoor environment for unstructured play with peers and subsequently feeling included in their communities [11–13]. In France, school playgrounds are typically fenced spaces integrated within the school premises, not accessible for the community outside of school hours.

For this study, the relevance of focusing on outdoor play on school playgrounds is supported by

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inclusive educational developments in France. The shift towards inclusive education in Europe was initiated by the Salamanca Statement in 1994, which powerfully underscored the necessity for equal access to educational opportunities [14], encompassing vital occupations such as outdoor play. However, barriers arise when outdoor playgrounds lack the design and equipment to accommodate diverse play preferences and needs [15]. Playground design can restrict play for children with disabilities due to inaccessibility or low usability [15,16]. Subsequently, this can lead to exclusion from the school community and reduced friendships formed during break times [3,12,15,17].

There are an estimated 240 million children with disabilities worldwide, including 430,000 in France [18,19]. According to the United Nations' definition, children with disabilities have 'physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others' [20, p. 3]. Since the ratification of inclusive education in France in 2005, the number of children with disabilities in mainstream schools has tripled [21], marking a pivotal direction towards inclusion. With the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream French schools, it is now essential to consider the inclusive practices shaping their participation, including barriers and opportunities to outdoor play within school playgrounds. Despite legislative efforts, barriers persist in ensuring equitable access to inclusive play for children with disabilities throughout France [22–24]. For example, the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) noted ongoing discrimination against children with disabilities regarding their access to play at school, as highlighted in France's latest periodic report [25]. Similarly, in 2016, the CRC underscored a lack of policies to support inclusive outdoor play or facilities for children with disabilities in France, despite international guidelines [8,24]. This highlights the need for educational policies to holistically address children's well-being, including the provision of inclusive play opportunities in schools.

Systematic reviews have investigated the subject of playground provision for diverse users and identified a notable increase in studies over the past decade [26,27]. However, existing research mainly focuses on children with physical disabilities [28], and a lack of studies exploring the perspectives of children with diverse disabilities was identified. Additionally, most studies concentrate on community or specialised school playgrounds, with limited understanding of children's experiences in mainstream school settings [3,16,29]. Despite the growing body of research, few studies delve into children's perspectives on play [15,26,30,31], revealing disparities between their expectations and experiences [29,32].

While existing research provides worldwide insights addressing barriers to outdoor play in community and specialised playground settings [13,16,33], the experiences of children with disabilities in mainstream school playgrounds remain underexplored. Moreover, the play participation of children with disabilities in school playgrounds in France remains unclear, as no studies have investigated this phenomenon. Therefore, this study aims *to explore children with disabilities' experiences and perspectives on their outdoor play in French mainstream elementary school playgrounds*. This study marks the first qualitative exploration of this topic in the context of France.

Material and methods

Study design

A qualitative descriptive methodology was applied to address the study's aim. A qualitative descriptive design was appropriate to closely reflect on children's everyday life experiences and allowed the collection of rich descriptions elicited from children [34–36]. This qualitative descriptive study was guided by a relativist ontology and a subjectivist epistemology [37], which values the perspective of participants as the experts of their own lives and occupational experiences [38].

Participants

Data was collected using purposeful sampling [34]. Children with disabilities are a diverse population, therefore, a maximum variation sampling was used. For instance, variation was considered in characteristics related to age and disability [38]. The inclusion criteria included children ages six years or older with a disability, as defined by the United Nations [39], who attended a mainstream elementary school and were capable of verbal communication in French. The exclusion criterion was being a client of the first author, as some participants were recruited from schools where the first author was providing occupational therapy interventions. This exclusion criteria was chosen as prior involvement with children could have influenced the research dynamics.

Recruitment began by contacting ten French elementary schools and informing headteachers *via* phone and email about the study's purpose. Interested headteachers were then met in person and given detailed study information. They were requested to

share study details with eligible children's parents using specially created information leaflets. Families interested in participating contacted the lead author to discuss the study and arrange data collection. All participating parents supported their child's involvement. Assent from children and written consent from parents was obtained [40] before data collection to address any open questions and concerns [41].

Thirteen participants agreed to participate in this study [42]. Parents were asked to provide information about their child's main disability, age, and gender *via* email. Pseudonyms were used to protect children's identities. Characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of participants.

	Gender	Age (years)	Main Disability
Archie	Boy	11	Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
Billy	Boy	10	Autism spectrum disorder
Cameron	Boy	6	Visual impairment
David	Boy	6	Autism spectrum disorder
Elizabeth	Girl	10	Language disorder (crutches user)
Frank	Boy	11	Developmental co-ordination disorder
George	Boy	9	Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
Helen	Girl	10	Hearing impairment
Isaac	Boy	6	Cognitive disorders
Janet	Girl	11	Autism spectrum disorder
Kyle	Boy	11	Developmental co-ordination disorder
Linda	Girl	12	Language disorder
Madison	Girl	10	Syndrome with cognitive and motor disorders

This research was conducted in six mainstream elementary schools located in western France. Characteristics of the settings are presented in Table 2. In reference to a 'school playground', authors include the entire playground area, any built or natural features, objects, and materials available to children within this space (See Figure 1 as an example).

Data collection

The first author collected data through individual Walking and Talking (W&T) tours [44,45], which lasted 20 to 40 min. All W&T tours were conducted within school hours during non-recess periods. Walking methodologies are valuable for outdoor-based experiences as they emphasise the importance of setting, embodied experiences, and relationships with the environment [46]. W&T tours were suitable and supported the elicitation of memory-triggered in-place experiences [44,45]. Specifically, they offered a way to gather information about children's lived play experiences and their relationships within their environment. These W&T tours were designed to be interactive, allowing

Table 2. Characteristics of settings.

Schools	Physical Environment Features in the School Playground*	Participants associated with this Playground
School 1	• Open spaces (hard concrete surfaces with floor markings) • Designated sports areas (soccer) • Fixed natural features (trees with bulky roots) • Features not purpose-built for play (benches, tables, small garden with plants) • Manufactured tools and toys (books, balls)	• Archie • Billy • Cameron
School 2	• Open spaces (hard concrete surfaces with floor markings such as hopscotch, small patch of grass) • Designated sports areas (soccer) • Features not purpose-built for play (benches) • Manufactured tools and toys (balls, jumping ropes, stilts, hoops or cones for obstacle course, balls) • Fixed natural features (garden with plants)	• David • Elizabeth • Frank • George
School 3	• Open spaces (hard concrete surfaces, with floor markings such as hopscotch) • Designated sports areas (soccer and basketball net on a wall) • Paths and walkways (for bicycles use) • Features not purpose-built for play (benches) • Play equipment (overhead structure to climb, two swings, table-tennis table) • Manufactured tools and toys (balls, bicycles, stilts, hula hoops or cones for obstacle course) • Fixed natural features (several planted trees for shade)	• Helen
School 4	• Open spaces (hard concrete surfaces with floor markings such as hopscotch, patch of grass) • Designated sports areas (soccer) • Features not purpose-built for play (benches, tables) • Manufactured tools and toys (balls, bicycles)	• Isaac • Janet
School 5	• Open spaces (hard concrete surfaces) • Designated sports areas (soccer) • Fixed natural features (tree with bulky roots) • Features not purpose-built for play (benches) • Play equipment (table-tennis table) • Manufactured tools and toys (balls, jumping ropes)	• Kyle • Linda
School 6	• Open spaces (hard concrete surfaces) • Designated sports areas (soccer) • Features not purpose-built for play (benches, tables) • Manufactured tools and toys (loose parts such as balloons)	• Madison

*The Environmental Taxonomy of Outdoor Play Space Features has been used to describe the playgrounds' features [43].



Figure 1. Picture of a typical French elementary school playground.
Copyright: 'Une cour de récréation d'une école primaire dans le Val-de-Marne en 2000 ©Getty – Lily FRANEY' https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceinter/podcasts/la-marche-de-l-histoire/la-cour-de-recreation-2597484.

children to lead the way, showing the researcher the spaces where they played most frequently and discussing their interactions within those spaces. A semi-structured interview guide was created to gather relevant information to meet the study's aim (See Appendix A). The interview ended when the child had shown all relevant areas of their play environment, and the researcher had asked if there was anything else they wished to add before thanking them for their participation. After W&T tours, fieldnotes were written to reflect on the tour, and included first impressions, detailed descriptions of children's behaviour, feelings, and thoughts [42]. Before data collection, one pilot interview with one child without any disability allowed adjustments in the questions' formulation, supporting children's verbalisation process [41,47].

Data analysis

In the context of this research, it is essential to acknowledge and transparently present the authors' positionality to ensure clarity and credibility [48,49]. All three authors identify as European, having received occupational therapy training in the Global North. Furthermore, all authors are familiar with the inclusive schooling systems of the Global North in detail in France (CO), Austria (TM) and Switzerland (CS) and have worked with children of diverse abilities in the past. These positions as researchers trained in the Global North and our familiarity with specific educational systems may influence our interpretation of data and the research design. In addition, TM and CS bring significant experience in researching outdoor play occupations in playgrounds, which shaped their approach to this study.

Thematic analysis was used following the six steps of Braun and Clarke [48,49]. Step 1 included familiarisation with the data by transcribing, reading verbatim multiple times, and writing down initial ideas. Step 2 included initial open coding generated by the first author using sentences and keywords relevant to the research aim from each verbatim. Codes aimed to capture participants' points of view, perceptions, and experiences in their own words, facilitating an interpretation closely aligned with the data. In Step 3, codes were collated into potential themes supported by pertinent quotes. In Step 4, themes were reviewed concerning coded extracts and all verbatim to construct a mind map of the analysis. For step 5, the first author revisited codes throughout the analysis to define their specifics. Analytic notes were consistently written in a reflection journal. The final step involved the writing process, providing the last opportunity to review the entire analysis and ensure the alignment between the aim of the study and the associated background. All themes created were discussed with

all authors until the boundaries and relationships between them became clear.

Fieldnotes provided context, aiding in identifying patterns within the data. These fieldnotes grounded thematic analysis in real-world tour contexts, adding authenticity to identified themes. Writing fieldnotes also facilitated personal reflection and triangulation of data.

The Ethics Committee for Student Research of the Faculty of Health from the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (ECSO-FG) approved the conduct of this study under the number OCC2311.

Results

The study aimed to explore children with disabilities' perspectives on their outdoor play on mainstream elementary school playgrounds in France. The analysis led to three themes [1]: 'I can(not) play': Environmental Barriers and Opportunities [2]; 'I have an idea': Children's Preferences for Enriching Play and Inclusion [3]; 'Learn to Hear Me Out': Strengthening Children's Participation in Everyday School Practices including Playground Redesign.

'I Can(not) play': Environmental Barriers and Opportunities

This theme explores the various experiences the participants have in school playgrounds, and how the environment shapes these experiences by presenting barriers and opportunities. It addresses physical, institutional, and social barriers faced by the participants, while also revealing opportunities for inclusive play.

The most prominent concern raised by participants, regardless of their type of disability, was the physical environment's inadequacy which included features provided or missing in the school playground, the size of the playground and the inaccessibility. For instance, they mentioned the predominance of collective sports grounds located in the middle of the playground or the presence of tree roots that take up a lot of space, therefore limiting their space for free play. Participants noticed that some areas in their school playground were overcrowded while others, mainly concrete surfaces, remained unused. Some areas lacked play equipment, such as built overhead structures while other areas were experienced as overcrowding, raising the risk of accidents. Participants with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or sensory processing particularities experienced the constant noise as 'hard,' if not 'impossible,' to escape from. Another challenge described was the play equipment unsuitable for some participants, such as basketball hoops which were 'too high' and therefore not playable for participants with motor difficulties. However, participants appreciated the size of the playground, saying it was big enough.

Participants also described institutional barriers, including restrictions related to playground regulations, with statements like *'we are not allowed to'*. Regulations limited the opportunities for participants to play freely. Some participants felt restricted as they believed that teachers underestimated their abilities and implemented overly cautious safety measures. For instance, a child diagnosed with Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD) described he was prohibited from participating in football games, ostensibly to prevent potential injuries, despite there being no such regulation applied to all children.

> 'Teachers are on the lookout for my every move, so I prefer to do nothing because at least I am not doing anything wrong.' David

Participants compared their school playgrounds to community playgrounds and kindergarten playgrounds. They strongly preferred playing in their local community playground over their school playground, citing a more supportive atmosphere for enjoyable play. Two key institutional barriers might explain this preference for community playgrounds over school playgrounds: first, the reduced level of adult supervision, and second, the comforting presence of their parents, who show confidence in their abilities. Additionally, participants reminisced about their experiences in kindergarten, where they found more equipment and enjoyed greater freedom of movement and adventure compared to their current elementary school playground. Nevertheless, some participants valued the presence of educational professionals in the playground as an opportunity for companionship during times when they could not participate in ongoing games such as sports activities.

The social environment also offered both barriers and opportunities for participants' school playground experiences. Participants emphasised the importance of having peers, both with and without disabilities, to play with, highlighting the positive influence of typically developing peers in supporting their skills development and enriching their play experiences. For example, when describing sport activities, a participant explained that typically developing peers showed him how to play on the collective sports ground when he thought that his abilities would only allow him to play as a goalkeeper. Concerning barriers, participants expressed frustration and distress

over instances of exclusion, mockery, and annoyance from their peers due to a lack of understanding about their abilities. Such experiences served as significant barriers to peer-based play, contributing to feelings of isolation. Despite this, participants expressed their desire for more inclusive occupations with typically developing peers guided by a need for greater social integration and acceptance in the school playground.

> 'Most often, I am alone (…) I would like to go with [typically developing] peers, but they do not want to.' Archie

Participants acknowledged adopting an adaptive strategy of adjusting their natural behaviour to fit in and engage with typically developing peers on the school playground to *'stop being different for once'*. However, their involvement in play occupations was often characterised by a sense of detachment, as showed by their use of the third person when describing the carried-out occupations in the school playground: *'well, there are lots of people playing and I can't* (Archie). Like Archie, five other participants consistently used the third person when describing other children's play, reserving the first person to describe experiences of exclusion.

In summary, the physical and social environment plays an important role in understanding barriers and opportunities that participant face. To effectively address these challenges, it is essential to explore both their need for change and the resources they rely on.

'I Have an idea': children's Preferences for Enriching Play and Inclusion

This theme delves into children's suggestions for transforming their school playgrounds to better suit their preferences and foster inclusivity. It highlights their call for diverse play opportunities and environmental adjustments to accommodate children with disabilities. This theme offers solutions to the barriers identified in Theme 1.

Participants suggested how to overcome the environmental barriers faced in their school playground. For example, Frank and Kyle, participants with DCD, who often experience difficulties with motor skills, coordination, and balance, expressed a desire to replace the concrete surfaces which were described as causing physical injuries such as scrapes and bruises, and suggested instead using softer surfacing such as grass or soft fall surface. As another example, Cameron, David and Helen, participants with ASD and/or sensory processing differences explained how they manage the overwhelming noise in the school playground. They employed compensation strategies, such as noise-cancelling headphones or sough quieter and less crowded resting spots. Also, suggestions emerged to make equipment more usable for everyone such as adding contrasting colour around the playground to help children with visual impairments, such as a coloured hopscotch. For some ideas, participants saw the added value of using generally more colour in the school playground which could benefit everyone.

> 'The hopscotch helps me because it is in colour. If we coloured everything, it would be like hopscotch. We absolutely must keep the hopscotch. And it is good for everybody when it is coloured!' Cameron

Participants favoured diverse play opportunities over engaging in similar play repeatedly, supported by comments such as *'During recess time, I don't have enough choice'* (Billy). Specifically, they made varied suggestions for adding equipment to the school playground. For example, participants highlighted the sufficient presence of collective sports equipment but revealed missing playground features for individual physical active occupations (e.g. bicycles, scooters, full-size trains), and restorative occupations (e.g. car toys, game cards, benches). According to some participants, particular attention should be paid to varied occupations offering being active such as *'climbing trees'* (David) or *'riding a scooter over ramps'* (Kyle). From participants perspectives, these occupations were very important because they offer *'enjoyment'*, *'freedom'*, *'adventure'*, and *'energy release'*. For instance, participants suggested many novel equipment such as slides, swings, trampolines, built overhead structures, tree houses, and ramps. Moreover, they desired larger and higher play equipment to have more intensive and engaging play opportunities, as highlighted by Billy:

> 'My dream playground is that here there will be a large sandbox that will be at least this size [shows a large area], a large slide which we are going to climb. (…) There, instead of the other table, we are going to add a giant trampoline and we can put five people in it.'

Participants openly expressed feeling bored in the school playground and expressed a desire for a wider range of occupations and the wish for new experiences. Participants with motor impairments frequently encountered barriers in engaging in sport activities with their peers. Participants diagnosed with attentional and behavioural difficulties struggled to find suitable occupations during recess due to the lack of diverse play opportunities offered. They described

having problems to join the dominant sport activities (e.g. ball sports, table tennis, cat and mouse game) often played in larger groups of children. To balance this, they asked for more opportunities where they can be creative (e.g. drawing, creating things), cognitively engaged (e.g. reading, imaginary games) and have access to nature (e.g. looking at plants). Many participants also wished they could do things their way, choosing what and where to play during recess whenever they wanted. Therefore, they made suggestions such as the presence of different zones in the school playground (e.g. arts and crafts, physical activity, reading).

> 'In the school playground, I would love to read and invent games, card games for example (…) because I would be free to choose what I read or invent, not like in the classroom.' Elizabeth

In this theme, participants offer ideas to improve school playgrounds, focusing on making them more inclusive and offering a wider range of play opportunities. Their suggestions promote creative, cognitive and in-nature occupations alongside regular physical play to tackle boredom and more freedom.

'Learn to Hear Me Out': Strengthening Children's Participation in Everyday School Practices including Playground Redesign

This theme underscores the importance of actively listening to children's voices in everyday school practices, including redesigning the school playground and implementing changes based on their desire to promote their participation in occupations.

All participants emphasised the significant role the school playground plays in their lives, expressing various emotions such as joy, sadness, and anger in relation to their experiences there. They described the playground as essential for activities like '*having fun*,' '*playing*,' '*taking a break*,' and '*getting some fresh air*,' indicating their meaningful emotional connection to this space. This strong emotional bond underscores the significance of incorporating children's perspectives and experiences into the redesign process, as their feelings and insights are directly tied to their daily lives in this environment.

Despite their meaningful connection to the playground, participants often felt excluded from participation in decision-making processes. They described instances where their voices were overlooked and side-lined. They requested opportunities for creative expression and thoughtful reflection to overcome this obstacle and enable their participation in the redesign process. For example, David suggested organising another W&T tour using the school map and a miniature playground model to help visualise his ideas. Participants expressed the need for more time and space to develop and articulate their thoughts and ideas:

> 'The problem there is that I need a little more time to think. (…) So, I would like us to do another session because, uh… it's going to be difficult for me to think quickly.' David

Participants expressed the desire to *'be listened to by the headteacher'* and the teachers. They said that they wanted to be taken seriously in their everyday life including making decisions about the duration of the recess time based on their needs, sport activities or the possibility to learn outdoors, for example. While some of the participants thought that teachers would take their ideas into consideration, others viewed them as potential obstacles to being heard.

> 'I do not like the playground like that today and I would like to change things, but adults will never say yes, that is for sure!' Kyle

Participants expressed a wish to co-create and redesign the playground to enhance its playfulness and inclusiveness. They suggested collaborating with all stakeholders, including the headteacher, teachers, and peers, to ensure the playground meets the diverse needs of all children. Some proposed gathering ideas from other children and presenting them in meetings, emphasising the importance of collaboration to create an inclusive playground where *'all children, with and without disabilities, could join in the fun' (Frank)*.

This theme highlights the necessity of empowering children's voices in everyday school practices including the redesign process. By listening to their perspectives and ensuring their active participation in decision-making, stakeholders can create environments that truly reflect the needs and aspirations of all children, fostering a more inclusive and empowering school experience.

Discussion

This study aimed *to explore children with disabilities' experiences and perspectives on their outdoor play in French mainstream elementary school playgrounds*. Playgrounds are important outdoor environments for children at school [11–13] and must, therefore, be suitable for children with diverse abilities despite the complexity of including children with and without

disabilities in the same space. Extending previous research on community playgrounds [12,15,16] to mainstream school playgrounds, this study is the first in France to explore children's perceptions of their school playgrounds and outdoor play.

In the present study, children with disabilities faced many inaccessible design features such as the layout of areas and the lack of and usability of equipment which limited their play opportunities. Participants addressed a feeling of disconnection and boredom by advocating for alternative options to sport activities, such as diverse cognitive, creative, and physical play opportunities. This aligns with previous studies suggesting that school playgrounds often lack variety in occupations, promoting diverse physical engagement and sufficient equipment and natural features to accommodate children's diverse abilities [16,50]. This study adds to previous research that the physical environment could be an avenue of evaluation that provides practitioners with an understanding of the potential of play affordances available for a greater diversity of children [43]. Children with disabilities who participated in this study made suggestions to address their own and their peer's play needs, both now and in the future. This awareness developed from their personal experience of having a disability, as suggested by Wenger and colleagues [13], but also from children's interpersonal experience of being together with peers with and without disabilities in the mainstream school playground.

This study supports the importance of the social environment, including peer play within playgrounds, which was raised in previous research [13,16,51]. Despite the importance of typically developing peers in supporting the play of children with disabilities [50], our findings show a nuanced picture. On the one hand, children with disabilities express a desire for greater participation in peer play, emphasising their sense of social exclusion because of peers' unfamiliarity with disabilities. On the other hand, children's experiences also reveal instances where typically developing peers supported play, such as engaging in sport activities. This suggests a multifaceted interplay between peer interactions, where support from typically developing peers can be beneficial but may also unintentionally contribute to social isolation in other situations.

In France, school playgrounds and community playgrounds are separated. Our findings indicate that children with disabilities prefer community playgrounds over school playgrounds. This preference is attributed to the less stringent rules enforced by adults who are familiar with their disabilities. This is consistent with previous research highlighting institutional barriers, such as teacher overprotection, which can lead to reduced play experiences for children with disabilities in the school playground [50,52,53]. This study adds that children with disabilities associate the teachers' fear with being misunderstood regarding their abilities. Combined this suggests first having a clear understanding of play hindering institutional regulations. Second, the need for teachers to reconsider their role of understanding children's play preferences to create environments maximising play opportunities, as suggested by Morgenthaler et al. [26]. The children in this study articulated greater free play within their playgrounds during kindergarten years, below 6 years old. Future research could compare how children with disabilities play in mainstream kindergarten and elementary school playgrounds. This could help us understand what affects their play and how play differs between kindergarten and elementary school.

From a play rights-based perspective, the lack of consideration of all stakeholders in decision-making regarding school playgrounds undermines children's right to participate fully in play [8]. In this study, participants described that their opinions were often overlooked in decisions designed to influence their occupations. Findings, therefore support previous research indicating the need for greater attention towards children's perspectives in decision-making processes to ensure the implementation of their rights [30,54]. There is an increasing recognition of the importance of exploring children's perspectives, and specifically on providing them opportunities to contribute to developing legislation, policies, and services designed to ensure the implementation of their rights (e.g. consultations on recreation policies and play opportunities at school) [55,56]. In this way, children suggested their involvement in the co-creation of school playgrounds using visual methods (e.g. paper maps, miniature objects) to ensure that their voices are listened to and that the redesign is understandable at their level. Even if the purpose of the study was not to redesign the school playground, children in this study suggested many ideas for the school playground adaptation. They even proposed to collect peers' ideas and share them during meetings to include more voices in the process. Therefore, it supports existing research indicating that children's desire to make improvements to the school playground is greater than that of any adult [51,55].

This study highlights the physical, social, and institutional barriers that children with disabilities face and points out that their voices are often not heard.

It focuses on the lack of access to play for French children with disabilities in mainstream elementary school playgrounds, which leads to occupational deprivation. Aligned with existing research, play is restricted in school playgrounds for children with disabilities, leading to exclusion from the school community which is a case of occupational injustice [17]. This study findings suggest that overcoming occupational deprivation through collaboration including children regardless of ability could be fruitful. This study aligns with existing research advocating for children's rights as facilitators and the need to propose collective actions involving other stakeholders [51] such as teachers, headteachers, playground professionals, occupational therapists and occupational scientists to create inclusive and high in play value school playgrounds. More research and practice involving children and other diverse stakeholders through participatory and playful methodologies might improve school playgrounds design.

Our findings have implications for occupational therapy practice. This study addresses the need for country-specific, school-based research [55] highlighting the unique factors influencing children's experiences in France. It aims to provide insights into potential changes in service delivery and development pathways, drawing on the experiences of other countries [e.g. 10,50,55]. This study presents some difficulties to such collaboration in the context of France. Children with disabilities often feel unheard, teachers may not fully grasp their strengths and environmental barriers and typically developing children might also lack understanding of disabilities, leading to limited peer play. This study adds to previous research that demonstrated that playground professionals have limited knowledge about play, disability, and inclusion to address the essential requirements for children with diverse abilities [12]. Consequently, a need to foster effective collaboration among users and stakeholders is needed. By combining knowledge of environmental barriers, disability and play as an occupation, occupational therapists could play a pivotal role in this complex landscape [13,15]. Some of the occupational therapist's interventions such as addressing playground equipment and changing teachers' attitudes, have been highlighted in previous studies [50,52]. This study raises the mission of improving typically developing peers' understanding towards disabilities to enhance peer play and strengthen school playground communities. Therefore, it shows the potential role of occupational therapists in improving mainstream school playgrounds to promote inclusive education in mainstream schools and raise children's right to play [8]. It reinforces the necessity for implementing contextual approaches to fulfil community participation needs identified in previous research [12,57]. This would entail occupational therapists extending their role beyond clinical settings to collaborate with all stakeholders in schools for the development of School-Based Occupational Therapy [12,13,58]. The Partnering for Change (P4C) model could be considered as a means to effectively collaborate [57] altogether as suggested by children in the present study. This approach focuses on fostering partnerships between stakeholders to ensure that all voices are heard and contribute to decision-making processes [43,57]. Future research should explore the co-design of playgrounds through collaboration between all stakeholders, including children, parents, education professionals, and occupational therapists, to create inclusive play spaces that meet diverse needs. Studies could explore the impact of participatory design on children's inclusion and well-being, as well as the effectiveness of involving children with disabilities in the process.

Methodological considerations

This study stands out as one of the few exploring children's perspectives of school playgrounds using a child-friendly methodological approach. The combination of qualitative descriptive design and W&T tours was a suitable approach for investigating children's perceptions of a significant environment [44] and led to findings that closely reflect everyday experiences regarding play [34]. These methods provided rich descriptions of in-place experiences and emotions, offering valuable insights through *in situ* interactions [45], while aligning with the call for context-sensitive methodologies [44]. This method fosters a collaborative dialogue, allowing participants to engage more naturally by showing and discussing meaningful places, making the process more engaging and allowing children agency [44–46]. A strength of the study was the diversity of participants, which provided a rich range of perspectives and experiences. Regarding transferability, findings could be relevant to other studies investigating school playgrounds, because mainstream elementary school playgrounds generally involve children with a large range of disabilities.

The heterogeneity of the participants group, the data collection on different school playgrounds and the use of W&T tours combining verbal and visual information contributed to obtain a multifaceted picture of children's experiences. However, interviewing and observing during W&T tours was challenging and intensive for the first

author, who must maintain conversation, record responses, and navigate the environment simultaneously [45]. It was nevertheless necessary to guide participants' thinking and collect relevant data. The fact that only one interview was conducted with each child could be seen as a limitation of the study as some children requested a second interview.

Ethical considerations were consistently followed throughout the research process. Various strategies, such as maintaining a reflective journal and seeking supervision were undertaken to enhance trustworthiness [38]. Furthermore, quotations from children's voices were used to illustrate the findings. Data collection, transcription and analysis were performed in French – the language of the first author and all participants – to reduce data loss in translation [56]. Nevertheless, the quotations' translation from French to English might have influenced data analysis and subsequent findings. Additionally, since English was not the participants' native language, no verification was conducted regarding the final themes [56].

Conclusions and significance

This study contributes to the understanding of outdoor play for children with disabilities in French mainstream school playgrounds, revealing barriers that hinder their play, an occupation essential for their well-being. Participants expressed a desire for a physical redesign and equipment provision, providing stimulating play opportunities and embracing their diverse needs. Children also described experiencing of exclusion from play by their typically developing peers and being misunderstood by their teachers. They call for a social environment more aware of their capabilities to foster connections and enhance peer play. This research underscores the importance of school playgrounds in inclusive education and calls for a re-evaluation of the roles of headteachers and teachers in addressing institutional and fear-based restrictions. Enhancing awareness of the possibilities of children with disabilities and carefully considering their suggestions can promote their play and better support the implementation of their rights.

As the first study of its kind in France, it also contributes to understanding the country's progress in implementing international guidelines on inclusive education. It suggests that occupational therapists could play a role in addressing these gaps by applying a contextual approach considering the dynamics of all children within the school community. Collaboration efforts among stakeholders, as suggested by the P4C model, could improve current conditions for play in mainstream elementary school playgrounds.

This study offers a unique contribution to health science and occupational therapy research by employing the W&T method. This method is particularly valuable in this field by providing a more context-based and engaging way to capture the contextual dimensions of children with disabilities' lived experiences. Moreover, focusing on play as an essential occupation within schools and adopting an inclusive perspective, this study holds significance for occupational science, inclusive education, and school-based occupational therapy. It allows us to envisage a future where mainstream elementary school playgrounds truly embody the principles of inclusion and provide a space for all children to thrive.

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Author Contributions

The following author contribution is specified following the CRediT guidelines [60]. Conceptualisation: [CO, TM, CS]. Methodology: [CO, TM, CS]. Formal Analysis: [CO, TM, CS]. Investigation: [CO]. Data Curation: [CO]. Writing – Original Draft: [CO]. Writing – Review & Editing: [CO, TM, CS]. Visualisation: [CO, TM, CS]. Supervision: [TM, CS]. Project administration: [CO].

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Appendix

Appendix A. W&T Tour Interview Guide.

Opening of the discussion	Why did you agree to participate in this research?
Starting questions	How much time a day do you spend in your school playground? What's going on there? How do you feel in the school playground? Why is this place important to you?
The school playground	For you, what does it take to have a good time in the school playground? Can you tell me about a good time you spent in this space recently? For you, what does it take to have a bad time in the school playground? Can you tell me about a bad time you had in this space recently?
School playground activities	What activities do you like to do in the school playground? Why? Do you do these activities as much as you want? If not, how do you feel? What are the things you wish you could do in the school playground? Have you ever been unable to play in the school playground? What happened? How did you react? How did you feel? What activities do you dislike doing in the school playground? Why? What drives you to do them anyway? How do you feel when you do these activities?
Barriers and facilitators of the play participation	Do you encounter obstacles that you encounter to playing fully during recess? What are they? What resources are available to you for playing in the playground?
A school occupation	If you had to keep one thing in the school playground, what would it be? If you had to delete one thing in the school playground, what would it be? If you had to add one thing in the school playground, what would it be?
Projection	How do you imagine the school playground of your dreams?
Conclusion	We talked about a lot of things. Would you like to add something, related to playing in the school playground?