

Championing and Implementing the First Inclusive Play Space in Hong Kong

Chris H.C. Yuen

Playright Children's Play Association

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Abstract

This field report shares the experience of organizing the Playright UNICEF Inclusive Play Project between 2012-2016, which concluded in 2018 with the opening of the first inclusive playground in Hong Kong. Inclusive play means that all children and youth can play with each other or alone as they wish, in a rich environment that supports their play needs. Inclusive playgrounds are places where children with and without disabilities or impairments can play together. Advocacy began in 2012 and after two years of work with the community through inclusive playground education, a playground users' needs survey, universally designed outdoor play environments training, and the UNICEF Inclusive Play Space Design Ideas Competition, the project to create inclusive play environments for all children in Hong Kong was established. The Leisure and Cultural Services Department reviewed the entries from professional designers and design students and selected a design to be implemented for a pilot playground project in the Tuen Mun district. An award presentation and opening ceremony of the design competition exhibition marked the completion of this phase of the project. Public participation followed in 2015 and 2016 and included initiating a pilot Junior Playground Commissioner Incubation Programme, through which children participated in the design and development of a community play environment. 2018 saw the opening of the first inclusive play space in Hong Kong.

Keywords: children's right to play, participation, Hong Kong, inclusive playgrounds, inclusive play space guide

Introduction

This field report shares the experience of organizing the Playright UNICEF Inclusive Play Project between 2012-2016, which concluded in 2018 with the opening of the first inclusive playground in Hong Kong. Inclusive play means that all children and youth can play with each other or alone as they wish, in a rich environment that supports their play needs. Inclusive playgrounds are places where children with and without disabilities or impairments can play together. Playright Children's Play Association is a non-profit organization that advocates for children's right to play. Established in 1987, Playright helps people of all sectors appreciate the value of play. With clear vision, Playright commits to make play a part of every through a fourfold approach: advocacy, play resources, play outreach, and play environments.

Advocacy began in 2012 with two years of work with the community through inclusive playground education, a playground users' needs survey, universally designed outdoor play environments training, and the UNICEF Inclusive Play Space Design Ideas Competition that included professional and student entries. From the competition, a design was selected to be implemented for a pilot playground project. Public participation followed in 2015 and 2016 and included a pilot Junior Playground Commissioner Incubation Programme, through which children participated in the design and development of a community play environment. 2018 saw the opening of the first inclusive play space in Hong Kong.

The timeline of the project is presented below, followed by a description and illustration of each of the phases of the project.

The Timeline of Stages and Activities in the Project

Stage One Phases

1. July 2012 to June 2013: Direct Playground Experience – inclusive play opportunities were provided to over 1000 children with special needs, parents and teachers at different public playgrounds and on Playright's playday.
2. July to November 2012: Play Space Education – inclusive playground workshops were organized for a total of 126 parents and teachers from partner schools and a "Play for All Symposium" held for 145 professionals.
3. October 2012 to July 2013: Playground Users' Needs Survey – a qualitative survey was conducted by Playright with 126 parents and a quantitative survey was conducted by The Social Sciences Research Centre of the University of Hong Kong to collect parents' ideas on inclusive play at public playgrounds. A total of 164 questionnaires were received.
4. April 2012 to December 2013: Guideline Development – the first local playground guidelines were drafted based on other international inclusive play space guidelines, users' needs survey results, the options from focus group workshops and reviews from an overseas expert group. Two focus group workshops were successfully organized in late November 2013, joined by 40 delegates.

Stage Two Phases

1. February to May 2014: Play for All Training Programme and Family Inclusive Playday – two different levels of professional training sessions on “Design of Children’s Play Environment” were provided by Susan M. Goltsman¹ for professional designers and design school students to adopt the Universal Design Principles in playground design and teach them design of outdoor inclusive play spaces. The *Play for All* design guidelines were introduced to 106 professional designers and 67 design school students. The first “UNICEF Family Inclusive Play Day” was successfully organized in mid-May at Tuen Mun Park, attracting 500 children and family members.
2. May 2014 to May 2015: Inclusive Play Space Design Ideas Competition – the first playground design competition (with both professional and student categories) was organized to collect creative design schemes to develop a truly inclusive playground at the competition site, the children’s playground at Tuen Mun Park in Hong Kong. A total of 25 entries from the professional category and 29 entries from the student category were received.
3. May to November 2015: Public Exhibition of Inclusive Play Space Design Ideas from the Competition – the concept of universally designed outdoor play environments was showcased, engaging over 4,000 children and parents in the exhibition activities, facilitating knowledge exchange between professional designers, government officials and stakeholders. The most promising ideas were selected for implementation.

Implementation Stage Phases

1. November to December 2015: Project Publicity and Feasibility Study by the Government Department – interviews were provided to various media to promote the project objectives. Advice was provided on the design scheme prepared by designers from the government department.
2. April to July 2016: Design Finalization and Public Engagement by the Government Department – stakeholders provided options on the design scheme during facilitated engagement workshops.
3. October 2016 to December 2017: Junior Playground Commissioner Incubation Programme by Playright – pilot project was organized with a series of child-led activities in schools, public playgrounds and an architect’s office to promote the participatory approach in the development of inclusive play space and engaged children living in Tuen Mun district to rethink and design their community playground.

The Process and Critical Moments

In April 2012, Playright made the critical decision not only to consult relevant professionals regarding improvements in play equipment and structures but also to involve potential users during the earlier planning stages. This idea developed into the concept of including educational training on inclusive play environments and holding a playground design competition and exhibition open to professionals and tertiary education students.

There were critical moments in each stage of the project that were important in raising public awareness on public playgrounds and advocating for every child's right to play. These critical moments included:

- parents participated in needs surveys and provided recommendations for the guidelines
- invited parents highlighted the difficulties for children with special needs wishing to play in a public playground at a press conference organized to share the survey results
- professionals and stakeholders participated in focus group workshops and offered views on the development of the guidelines
- government officials participated in a Family Inclusive Playday and observed children's play
- children, parents, design professionals and government officials participated in the production of a documentary video
- senior government officials participated in the design competition award presentation and exchanged knowledge with the winners
- Playright participated in engagement workshops initiated by the government department and suggested that the inclusive play space designers involve children in the design process.

Playright's strategic approach to the project was to emphasize the process—to enable various stakeholders to share their views on inclusive play by engaging them in different activities. The result was the design and building of an inclusive play space that allowed everyone to observe and learn about Hong Kong's children's play needs, desires and interactions regardless of ability levels. Direct experience and participation were significant factors in making sustainable changes and connecting all stakeholders.

The Impetus for the Project

Playright recognized the need to raise public awareness about inclusive play in public playgrounds. This stemmed from a 2009 research study (Playright Children's Play Association and Rehabilitation Alliance Hong Kong, 2009) that indicated a low awareness of inclusive play. Additionally, a mother publicly expressed the difficulties she faced when accompanying her child with special needs to a playground (Figure 1). Playgrounds in Hong Kong can be found in public open spaces managed by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD), as well as non-LCSD venues that are mainly outdoor facilities in public housing estates provided by the Hong Kong Housing Authority. At the end of April 2017, the authority managed 179 housing estates, of which only 30 (17 percent) included swings (Legislative Council of Hong Kong, 2017). LCSD currently manages 640 leisure venues with outdoor children's playgrounds. The mother complained through the media about her disappointment about having to remove her 24-year old son from playing on the swings in public playgrounds (Legislative Council of Hong Kong, 2017). Hence, Playright began the inclusive play project by making parents the key beneficiaries of a public awareness-raising campaign that included organizing direct playground experiences for children in a temporary inclusive play space, holding a

symposium, conducting a playground users' needs survey, and developing a design guide.

Figure 1. Swings on a playground in a Hong Kong Housing Authority public housing estate



Parents' Participation Starts a Playground Revolution

Playright collaborated with special schools, kindergartens and community child centers with integrated programs to implement the project. Parents and their children with special needs were invited to experience playground activities. The parents observed how their children played in public playgrounds that were equipped with inclusive play provisions. Through focus group workshops, they shared their own childhood play experiences and the obstacles they now faced with other parents. All parents expressed similar difficulties after visiting the public playgrounds and commonly asked the same question, "The designs of existing playgrounds in Hong Kong are obviously far from a real inclusive playground—why"? The users' needs and their recommendations to improve playground design were systemically analyzed and then conveyed to the media at a parents' sharing forum at a press conference (Figure 2). A guest parent, the father of an 8-year-old child with autism, requested the government department provide more swings in public parks as he really found it hard to find a suitable one in the community. Not only did Playright announce the survey findings, they then combined these findings with researchers' recommendations together with a publishing schedule for a design guide. In addition, the parents' sharing inspired some organizations to think about sponsoring Playright to design and build an inclusive playground for Hong Kong... a partnership with UNICEF HK had emerged.

Figure 2. In the press conference conveying the users' needs survey results, a guest parent requested that the Hong Kong government provide more swings in public parks



Stakeholders' Participation in Creating a Better Playground

With the aim of drafting the first inclusive play space guide, focus group workshops were organized to engage various key stakeholders—parents, design professionals, academics, researchers, play practitioners and government officials. This platform opened up the dialogue between them on the design, safety and management aspects of inclusive playgrounds. In the discussions, the participants not only shared their childhood play experiences but also learned from each other regarding the difficulties and limitations in creating the best community play spaces (Figure 3). Their support and insights gained from the discussions were reflected in the publication of the much-desired design guide for inclusive play spaces. Prior to December 2017, there had been no official design guidelines of any kind for decision makers who were involved in creating public playgrounds in Hong Kong. The government officials commented on the draft guidelines and responded that they were rather more like a research report than a design guide. One senior government official directly shared with Playright, “a design guideline should provide some technical recommendations on the type, size, space and materials, etc., for play equipment so that they can be easily adopted and followed.” Playright received other constructive feedback from individuals, professional bodies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) including the Hong Kong Committee for UNICEF, and universities, on the draft and finally decided to change the title from “Inclusive Play Space Design Guidelines” to “Inclusive Play Space Guide.” This guide made an important impact, inspiring the government’s Architecture Services Department to begin a study in September 2016 to review the design of existing public playgrounds and playrooms in Hong Kong. The Department is aiming to issue their first playground implementation guide in 2018.

Figure 3. In the focus group workshops for guideline development, key stakeholders shared their difficulties and the limitations they perceive in creating better community play spaces in Hong Kong.



Government Officials Accepted “Inclusive Play” after Direct Experience and Participation

The discussions on the limitations of Hong Kong’s playgrounds inspired Playright to reflect on what activities could attract even more stakeholders. This sparked the idea of conducting a training program, a design competition and finally an exhibition of the most noteworthy competition entries. But how could the professionals and the public be connected? This question was answered during a Family Inclusive Playday at Tuen Mun Park in 2014, when a government official was observed to ask some of the children and their families, “What do you think is an inclusive playground?” and “Can we have such a play setting in our public playgrounds?” Based on this short dialogue, Playright produced a documentary video² with the storyline of student designers looking for inspiration by interviewing potential users.

The documentary video featured parents and children expressing their views on playground designs as well as the play challenges for children with special needs (Figure 4). In 2015, the video accompanied an invitation for a playground design competition that attracted many professional designers as well as tertiary education design students. Many of the entries showed outstanding designs. The relevant government departments adopted the winning designs, identified a park in Tuen Mun that was to be renovated and organized public consultation workshops to collect further stakeholders’ views on the design of a public inclusive playground.

Playright cautioned the Tuen Mun Park Inclusive Play Space project team that although the children living in Tuen Mun district would be the majority users, they had not been consulted about the proposed Project. The call to allow contributions from children was immediately accepted. The playground construction work finally started in the summer of 2016 with community leaders, stakeholders and children attending the groundbreaking ceremony.

Figure 4. The documentary video *Our Playgrounds* by Adam Wong was first presented at the award presentation and opening ceremony of the UNICEF Inclusive Play Space Design Ideas Competition exhibition on October 11, 2015



Participation Helped Designers Make Children's Viewpoints a Priority

During 2016-2017, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department and the Architectural Services Department supported Playright's implementation of the Junior Playground Commissioner (JPC) Incubation Programme at Tuen Mun. This was a 14-month project to engage children in rethinking and designing their inclusive play space in the community. Specifically, 17 children living near Tuen Mun Park, aged between 10 and 14 years, were selected from one secondary and one special needs school in the neighborhood to serve as JPCs. The JPCs provided their ideas on the design of the inclusive playground through a series of child-led activities that included playground experiences, inclusive play component design workshops, children's presentations on inclusive play components, and a studio visit to create a dialogue with the Tuen Mun Park inclusive play space designers. The children then "went to work" and designed their ideal inclusive play component, which was eventually shared with the design professionals.

Playright heard that the designers emphasized how they had made great efforts to incorporate the JPCs' ideas and were confident about hearing the feedback. Could it be true? Playright visited the construction site in early May of 2018 and indeed, two play component ideas, a sensory wall and the floor pattern, had been adopted from the children's presentation into the actual design³ (Figure 5). This was the result of an interaction between the inclusive play space designers and children in April 2017 where the JPCs had been given the opportunity to review their thoughts, present their own designs and ideas and give comments on the combined designs by professionals (Figure 6).

Figure 5. Junior Playground Commissioners shared their ideas regarding a sensory wall and floor pattern to the Tuen Mun Park inclusive play space designers



Figure 6. Junior Playground Commissioners visited the playground site and gave comments on the combined design by the Tuen Mun Park inclusive play space designers



Inclusive Play Space with Children's Participation Sets a Model for Future Playgrounds in Hong Kong

The project was successful in raising public awareness of the importance of providing adequately stimulating playgrounds in general, as well as inclusive playgrounds in particular. This four-year project exceeded the original goal of raising community awareness, resulting in a sustainable impact on the development of inclusive play space in Hong Kong. This was timely as the design of public playgrounds in Hong Kong has been increasingly discussed in the community as well as reported by the media. In December 2017, the Research Office of the Legislative Council of Hong Kong issued a publication on "Public Playgrounds in Hong Kong" that revealed that the public playgrounds compared unfavorably with those in other places in the region like Singapore or Taiwan. The publication further included critiques by children's rights groups and suggested elements of successful playground designs. Consequently, the project generated attention and curiosity among different stakeholders in its early phases, gave opportunities for learning at many levels and finally succeeded in its aim to create an inclusive play space created by multiple parties, thereby setting an example for similar spaces throughout Hong Kong in the future (Legislative Council of Hong Kong, 2018). Through the work of the project, the group of play advocates and long-term partners has not only grown, increasing the chance to create more inclusive playgrounds in the community, but future play space designs are more likely to make children's needs and viewpoints a priority (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Junior Playground Commissioners attended the community festival in Tuen Mun district and helped Playright to promote the first inclusive play space in Hong Kong with children's participation



Endnotes

1. Playright invited Susan M. Goltsman, FALSA (1949-2016) to be the honorary advisor and overseas trainer for the "Playright UNICEF Inclusive Play Project."
2. Playright invited film director Adam Wong Sau Pin to produce the documentary video *Our Playgrounds* to capture the essence of the UNICEF Inclusive Play Space Design Ideas Competition and the playground movement in Hong Kong. See the video on Youtube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a98vZPrsXvY>.
3. RTHK interviews of JPCs on the Hong Kong Connection television program on August 21, 2017 are available on Youtube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pnTxAwuW4qk>

Chris Yuen has a great passion for the social dimensions of design and is particularly keen on working on children's playground projects with social values. He is the Playright Children's Play Association Play Environment Consultant advocating the values of child-friendly environments, advising on inclusive play space design and checking playgrounds for safety compliance. He has extensive experience in playground research, design reviews, safety assessments, inspections and training. Since 2012, he has led Playright's play environment team to initiate and complete a series of inclusive playground advocacy programs including the publication of the Inclusive Play Space Guide supported by UNICEF HK.

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