

The State of Play: Perspectives on Children's Oral Culture

**INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE, THE CENTRE FOR ENGLISH CULTURAL TRADITION,
 UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD, UK, 14-17 APRIL 1998**

April in Sheffield provided an unexpected but magical blanket of snow for the *State of Play Conference*. Even more magical was the opportunity to meet and listen to the principal keynote speaker, Iona Opie, who discussed 'a lifetime in the playground'. Her entertaining and engrossing speech began with a reminder to this generation's Cassandras that when she and Peter first started collecting they were constantly assured that 'children didn't play games any more'. Iona Opie talked about these as archetypal fears, fears that children 'aren't the same', and that 'the crops won't come'. She reminded us that 'adults love to play too'.

Iona Opie's descriptions of hers and Peter's working lives gave a sense of the gigantic tasks they set themselves, both for the nursery rhyme book and *Children's Games*. She is often asked if the task of collecting for the *Games* book should be repeated today, but does not believe it would be possible since primary teachers are too burdened and too fearful. She described her most recent book, *Children's Games with Things* (OUP 1997), as her 'last book', and stated that she has now retired. Suspend disbelief...

Five other keynote addresses were presented over the three days of the conference, two by the editors of *Play and Folklore*, and the others by Simon Lichman (Israel), Alison James (UK), and John Widdowson, Director of the National Centre for English Cultural Tradition at Sheffield.

June Factor discussed *Three Myths about Childhood*. The myth about 'the good old days' has been expressed by many writers and researchers, from Newell's notion of 'expiring custom' to the collectors of 'survivals' such as Gomme, and in more recent times, Neil Postman's view that 'childhood is waning'. The contemporary sociological view that childhood is a social artefact came in for strong attack from Factor as the second of her 'myths'. The third myth about childhood identified by June Factor concerns the supposed insignificance of playlore. A past tendency to ignore playlore has



Iona Opie with some Australian participants in Sheffield.
 L-R: June Factor, Iona Opie, Judy McKinty, Kathryn Marsh

now been replaced by schoolteachers' and parents' attempts to replace playlore with sport and organised activities, in some cases leading to the eradication of children's play time in schools.

Gwenda Davey's paper *Bruegel and the bush* discussed continuity and change in Australian children's traditional play. With the use of slides, Davey analysed Peter Bruegel's 1560 painting and compared its representation of the traditional playground repertoire with 1995 children's games from the Australian coal-mining town of Moe in Victoria. Most of Bruegel's games are still played in Australia, although in a few cases such as hoops, stilts and ring games, the 'locus of control' has passed to the adult world. Commerce was held to have only minor influence, and the post-1950 game of elastics continues to elude us about its origin.

Simon Lichman from spoke about *Hopscotch, Seven Stones, Marbles and Dolls: Generations at Play in the 'Traditional Creativity in the Schools' Project* in Israel. Lichman's paper was an inspiring account of breaking down barriers between Israelis and Palestinians through sharing traditions in several primary schools. Children asked their parents and grandparents about their childhood games, which were then demonstrated by the adults to children from their own and neighbouring schools. Later, the children themselves incorporated the 'old' games into their play.

As well as games such as marbles, hopscotch and seven stones (jacks), programs involved dolls, foodways (such as pickling olives and making sauerkraut and bread) and telling stories and lullabies.

Alison James' keynote address discussed children's oral communication and identity. She described children as marginal to the centrality of the adult world, and discussed how orality is of great importance in the movement from early into middle childhood. James spoke of children's special vocabulary, and noted the Opie's references to children's use of old dialect words. Performance can be a key element in ritualised verbal exchanges, such as *Do you mind? No, I babysit.*

Elizabeth Grugeon's paper on *Girls in the Playground 1997* focused on 'girl power' and attracted enough interest to be reported in the *Guardian* newspaper. She discussed the incorporation of popular culture phenomena such as the *Spice Girls*, *Teletubbies* and line dancing into traditional games such as *Saint Mary Ann*, *Red Rover* and *We are the cougirs coming to get you.*

Kathryn Marsh (University of Sydney) spoke of *The influence of the media, the classroom and immigrant*

groups on contemporary children's playground singing games in Australia. Marsh's research was carried out in a Sydney inner-urban primary school where 40% of the pupils were from non-English-speaking backgrounds, and provided a detailed analysis of factors influencing inter-ethnic transmission of singing games, including classroom practices, multi-ethnic membership of friendship groups, and the confidence and popularity of game performers.

Alistair Roberts entitled his paper *Danish games and Scottish playgrounds: a peaverish postscript.* Roberts explained at the outset that *peavers* is a Scottish word for hopscotch. He then provided a hilarious (and rueful) account of attempts made by the European Union and the Danish government to regularise the production of glass taws used for hopscotch – allegedly for safety reasons.

The *State of Play* conference included many other engrossing papers with presenters from many parts of the world. John Widdowson explored the contribution of children's oral lore to their linguistic competencies. Panagiotis Kanellopoulos (UK) observed the social source of children's music-making, and Andy Arleo's cross-cultural study of *When Suzy was a baby* compared several countries' versions of this classic life-cycle rhyme and handclapping sequence. Alvard Jivanian's *Children's death play and nonsense literature* (Armenia), Kathryn McCormick's discussion on 'fear lore' and Carole Carpenter (Toronto) on *the need for joy* collectively provided only one of many challenging sessions.

The Australian contingent to the Sheffield conference consisted of June Factor, Gwenda Davey, Judy McKinty and Kathryn Marsh, and we were delighted to meet so many friends and colleagues from the world of children's play. Our heartiest congratulations go to the conference organisers, and we eagerly await the publication of the conference proceedings. Contact Dr Julia Bishop at the Centre for English Cultural Traditions, University of Sheffield UK for further information; email J.C.Bishop@sheffield.ac.uk

NEWS AND NOTES

One of the editors of *Play and Folklore*, Dr Gwenda Davey (pictured) has been appointed a Member of the Order of Australia. The award, among the highest official Australian accolades, singles out her "service to the protection and preservation of Australia's traditional folklore and folklife". Folklorists are not often recognised or rewarded in this country, so there is much jubilation. Gwenda Davey's work – as collector, editor, author, archivist, researcher and teacher – marks the distinguished contribution of a talented and determined scholar. J.F.



Marc Armitage was one of the delegates to the *State of Play Conference* in Sheffield. He has asked for help from colleagues for "White lady/Mary/Molly/Black madame stories in Australia". His email address is Marc_Armitage@compuserve.com We are awaiting his postal address.

Representing the Child is an international interdisciplinary postgraduate conference in childhood studies to be held at Monash University Caulfield Campus on 2-3 October 1998. Papers will be presented on a number of aspects of childhood studies related to the theme of *Representing the Child*. One sub-theme will be the child and play. Enquiries to Dr Heather Scutter, Department of English, Monash University, Clayton Vic 3168, Australia. FAX +61-3-9905-2135.

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Megan Young has sent us this rhyme which Mrs Maxine Garman learnt during her childhood in Madras, India.

I Won't go to Missi
 Ain't Meret! Meret! Meret!
 There's a big fat Piggy
 At the Door! Door! Door!
 She Will catch me by my Collar
 And make me pay a Dollar
 So I Won't go to Missi
 Ain't Meret! Meret! Meret!

Do any readers know it?

ABORIGINAL CHILDREN'S PLAY PROJECT

A RESEARCHER'S EXPERIENCE

Judy McKinty

This is a preliminary report on a project which was initiated by Dr. June Factor in 1991 for the Australian Children's Folklore Collection. 'Aboriginal Children's Play' is an oral history project, located in Victoria, in which Aboriginal adults and children have been interviewed about their childhood games and pastimes.

In her funding application to the Stegley Foundation, Dr. Factor said:

The chequered and often bleak history of the relationship between Aboriginal and European communities in Australia has been well documented. However, an aspect of the cultural 'invisibility' found in many Aboriginal groups as a result of European dominance which is less well known or researched is the survival and development of Aboriginal recreation traditions.

*Every society evolves its own folklore, what the American folklorist Roger Abrahams calls 'the accumulated traditions, the inherited products and practices of a specifiable group'. As part of my research into the folklore of Australian children (published as **Captain Cook Chased a Chook: Children's Folklore in Australia**, Penguin 1988), I examined what has been recorded by anthropologists and other largely non-Aboriginal observers concerning the play and games of Aboriginal children. That examination convinced me that there had been rich and diverse Aboriginal folkloric play cultures, and that, although the contemporary record was frustratingly thin, a number of these traditions had survived, sometimes in modified form, into the present.*

Subsequently, having assisted in the establishment of the 'You're IT!' play exhibition at the Children's Museum in the Museum of Victoria, and directing a month-long hands-on play exhibition at the Royal Children's Hospital in 1990, I came into more direct contact

with the living play traditions of Aboriginal children. In particular, the wealth of string games presented and taught to many hundreds of children by a young Aboriginal woman, Amy Saunders, reinforced my belief that these traditions need to be recognised, understood and made visible in exactly the same way as other culture traditions of Aboriginal people.

The Australian Children's Folklore Collection, of which I am Director, contains many thousands of items from the oral and play traditions of Australian children, but only a few are clearly sourced as originating or deriving from Aborigines. The ACFC is the only public archive of its kind in Australia, and it is a grave weakness of the collection that it lacks significant Aboriginal content. A major reason for this inadequacy has been the lack of resources to enable research and collecting to be done other than on a very ad hoc basis. This research project should begin the steady aggregation of knowledge and understanding on an aspect of Aboriginal cultural traditions hitherto little recognised or valued in the general community.

Needless to say, the application was successful. The Stegley Foundation's decision to fund the project was more than the granting of funds for research – it was, in effect, an acknowledgment of the value of children's play traditions as an integral part of a wider culture.



*Childhood revisited – An impromptu game of marbles at Lake Tyers Aboriginal Trust.
Photograph: Judy McKinty*

THE PROJECT

The aim of the project was 'to enhance the knowledge and the standing of Aboriginal children's play lore, current and traditional, in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities' by interviewing Aboriginal people living in Victoria.

One of the outcomes of the project was to provide training for an Aboriginal researcher in the collecting and recording of oral history. This was begun in 1992 when Stanley De Satge conducted the first trial interviews, using field notes sheets specially developed for the project. The sheets were designed to be used by the researcher when formulating questions, or by the informant when filling them out personally. Each sheet had headings referring to a specific aspect of childhood, with prompt questions, for example:

CHILDHOOD YEARS (0-16) (Where and when? What was it like? What did you enjoy?)

SCHOOLING (What was the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children? What about attitudes of teachers?)

HOME-MADE PLAYTHINGS (Where and when made, by whom, for whom, made out of what? Note especially any traditions, things handed down, etc.)

The use of hand-written notes was found to be inadequate, so a tape recorder was introduced to the project in 1993, when a new Aboriginal researcher started. Paula King conducted taped and written interviews during 1993 and 1994, and even found time to interview Victorians when she was staying in Darwin.

When Paula left the project to take up other employment, Liza Jackson became the researcher. Liza worked on the project for a few months, and when she left there was no researcher for a time. This was when I became involved in the project.

From November 1995 until November 1997, I conducted interviews in various places across the State. The aim was to include people from as wide an area as possible, from regional Victoria as well as metropolitan Melbourne. It was not possible to cover the whole State, but field trips were made to Healesville, East Gippsland and Warrnambool to interview adults in Co-ops, workshops, homes and offices, and children at local primary schools.

Joy Sellars, Koorie Project Officer for the Museum of Victoria, and Chris Allen, Manager of the Moogji Aboriginal Council, offered invaluable assistance to the project, and Margaret Wirrpunda of Worawa Aboriginal College took us to task over the question of copyright,

leading to a re-examination and rewriting of our documents and a new awareness of some of the issues faced by Aboriginal people in trying to retain ownership of their own culture.

THE INFORMANTS

ADULTS

Establishing initial contact with people was fairly easy, but it was sometimes more difficult to arrange an actual interview. Some people were reluctant to talk with a stranger about their childhood memories, especially if the conversation was being recorded. Apparently, this is a fairly common experience in oral history projects. Others were busy with job or family affairs, so a flexible timetable was needed in order to conduct the interviews when they were available. I found that most interviews, even the ones which started slowly, proved to be a joyful experience for the person interviewed as well as myself. Most people found it surprisingly easy and very enjoyable to be able to revisit their childhoods, and they talked freely of the things they did at school, the games they played, funny and sad things that happened and what their world was like back in those days. Occasionally, other members of the family would be drawn into the interview, and there would be much laughter as long-forgotten memories were recalled.

CHILDREN

The children I interviewed were, of course, the experts. They are the people who are playing the games, saying the rhymes, playing the tricks and living the life right now! The children were far more willing to be taped than the adults I interviewed. They were eager to show me their games, and to involve me wherever possible. I frequently spent part of the day playing skippy, elastics and hopscotch, or swapping string figures. Swapping games always took place after the interviews had finished, as it was important to record the games the children already knew before introducing new ones.

During visits to schools, I usually interviewed both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children about their games. This was because, in some places, the parents of Aboriginal children were sensitive about their children receiving special treatment. Parental permission was an issue where children were interviewed at school. I frequently had to catch parents as they arrived to pick up their children, or arrange to visit them at home, to ask them to sign the consent forms. Every person interviewed received a copy of their tape and any photos taken of them, and a set of photos was sent back to each school visited, to be displayed as a reminder of the visit and the games we played.

THE GAMES

The games described by adults were often the games being played right then by the children interviewed. Many were games which are common to Australian childhood and usually found in schoolyards – marbles, skippy, chasey, ball games, racing games and various sports. The games at home were also similar – riding bikes, playing with pets, collecting things, making things and just 'mucking around'. Generally speaking, the strong Aboriginal traditions in childhood were found where there was an ongoing connection or re-connection to the land and someone to pass the traditions on to the children. Body-painting, 'boondi' throwing, mud switches and making spears and nulla-nullas need a supply of natural materials, and plenty of time, space and knowledge.

THE FUTURE

The project has been completed to the end of Stage One – the collecting of information. Stage Two will involve notating the tapes, to make it easy for researchers to find their way through the wealth of information recorded. There are 50 audio tapes to be processed as well as field notes, and this represents many long hours at the computer. As well, the material on cassettes need to be copied on to a more durable format. Funding will have to be sought before this stage of the project can begin.

Many of the informants have decided that access to their interviews will only be available with their written permission, especially when the informant is a child and parents are concerned to protect the child's rights.

Many of the Aboriginal people interviewed expressed the desire to see the information collected returned to the communities in some easily accessible form. There was much support for the idea of a travelling exhibition, which could go from place to place around the State, showing Aboriginal children and adults an important part of their heritage, and allowing non-Aboriginal people to share the experience of childhood from a different perspective. This, also, will need funding.

The Aboriginal Children's Play project has been a very positive and enlightening experience for me. I have seen new places, made new friends, learned new games. I have also gained new insight into the importance of maintaining cultural traditions right from childhood, and the place of childhood traditions within a wider culture. I believe this project will stimulate interest, discussion, questions and, of course, play wherever it goes.



String Figures – an example of continuity and change in Aboriginal tradition. This figure is "parachute".

Photograph: Judy McKinty

BOOK REVIEW:

Brian SUTTON-SMITH, Jay MECHLING, Thomas W JOHNSON & Felicia R. MCMAHON (eds).
Children's Folklore: a Source Book. (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc, 1995.
PP xii + 378, ISBN 0-8240-5418-0 cloth (acid-free paper).)

First reviewed by Gwenda Davey for *Canadian Folklore Canadien*. Reprinted with permission.

Many of the great publications in children's folklore such as the Opies' works have focussed on the collections themselves, with questions of theory taking second place, and sometimes confined to a preface or introduction. *Children's Folklore: a Source Book* reverses this process; it is a book of theory and argument, where the collections are subsidiary and the items used for illustrative purposes only. Such may be the natural progression in the study of children's folklore as a scholarly discipline, and Sutton-Smith, Mechling, Johnson and McMahon are to be commended for the fine contributions to theory which they have assembled in this source book.

It is regrettably impossible to comment on each of the twenty or so chapters in the Source Book. There are some summaries which will be particularly useful for teaching purposes, such as Brian Sutton-Smith's 'Overview of methods in children's folklore', where it's helpful to be reminded of the seminal contributions of writers such as Geertz, Huizinga and Victor Turner. Linda Hughes' chapter on 'Children's games and gaming' is a good example of the many writers in this book who argue for the complexity of children's play. Hughes makes the useful distinction between basic rules, social rules and what she calls 'gaming rules', those 'rules for rules' used for managing ambiguity and ensuring the success of the game in widely differing contexts. The 'rules for rules' might also be called 'rules for breaking the rules', a classic concept in human activity and relationships developed by Marvin Harris some years ago.

Rosemary Zumwalt distinguishes between nineteenth-century searches for origins and twentieth-century searches for meaning. It is a pity that Wolfenstein's (contentious) psychoanalytical approach to children's humour is so prominently featured. It is my view that cognitive developmental theorists such as Piaget and McGhee have much more to offer, in their analyses of the intellectual content and meaning of children's humour and games. Zumwalt is right to emphasise the multi-functional nature of children's folklore, which has cultural, intellectual and social elements. In her last paragraph (page 45) she cautions the analytical folklorist, and warns that children's 'mirthful nature will not be pinned down by our sobriety'. I wish she – and others in this book – had written more about children's 'mirthful nature'. It is surely one of the most enduring and endearing features of the complex world of children's folklore, as well as one of the principal reasons for its survival. This point is well made by McMahon and Sutton-Smith in their Conclusion to this volume, where they state that 'the lore ... is sustained primarily by the very active interest of players in the enjoyment they get through their own activation of ... play forms' (p 300).

Brian Sutton-Smith's Overview to Section 3 on 'Children's Folklore Concerns' highlights some topics still missing from this extensive book, such as 'material on folk games, pregame ceremonies, rule making in different kinds of games, cheating, or performances in singing games, or play

and games on traditional occasions' (p 142). I would add that there is also a need for more longitudinal studies, for example, of play in a particular playground. It is to be hoped that Beresin's Mill School might be revisited some years hence, as might Heather Russell's inner-city school in Melbourne in Australia, described so vividly in her book *Play and Friendships in a Multicultural Playground*.

Simon Bronner presents a rare and valuable discussion of the material culture of childhood. He extends the range of activities which should be considered by students of children's material culture. Such studies are usually restricted to toys, art and craft and body decoration, but should include 'foodways, clothing, and ephemeral architecture' (p 254). Bronner develops an interesting relationship between developmental, contextual and commercial influences on children's material culture, and discusses the way in which children manipulate these 'resources and structures' to their own ends.

The notion of children's folklore as empowering children themselves permeates this book, and its bleaker side is not ignored, as in Marilyn Jorgensen's discussion of 'malicious' teases and pranks. Gary Alan Fine also discusses 'sensitive' material, such as obscenity, in his consideration of methodological and ethical problems in collecting folklore from children. As a matter of methodology, June Factor and I have found that undergraduate students are often better collectors of 'difficult' material than even the most experienced folklorist. Clearly children perceive younger students as closer to peers than as authority figures, and are therefore more willing to share their less savory lore.

In their concluding notes on 'theoretical directions for children's folklore', McMahon and Sutton-Smith point out that there are many approaches to the study of children's folklore, including 'traditional, ethnographic, performance and interpretive'. Clearly, to have achieved all the possibilities highlighted in *Children's Folklore: a Source Book* would have required several volumes.

This one volume is of immense value. It will therefore, I hope, not seem mean-spirited to make a gentle complaint about the ethnocentrism of the publication. It should be retitled *Children's Folklore: an American Source Book*, since all contributors come from within the United States. Similarly, Sylvia Grider's introductory chapter on the folklorists of childhood could be retitled 'folklorists operating in the English language'. If Halliwell is to be included for his nineteenth-century collection of nursery rhymes, so too (for example) should Brentano and von Arnim for *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (The boy's magic horn). It's also a pity that Grider so briefly considers the rest of contemporary non-American scholarship in a short sentence which notes merely that 'significant work is being done throughout Scandinavia, Germany and Australia' (page 16). This having been said, it must however be held that *Children's Folklore: a Source Book* is an invaluable new addition to the field.

A LETTER FROM BILL SCOTT AND NOTES ON GAMES AT CABOOLTURE, QLD IN THE EARLY 1930s

WARWICK QLD, 15 FEBRUARY 1998

I have noticed in a couple of TV documentaries about Aboriginal settlements in the past year or two is that children in such communities are still making those pull-along tin steamrollers we made in 1931! The two-pound syrup tin of sand with wire bent through holes in the centre of the lid and base, and a piece of string to tow it along.

Match-box cameras were made very simply. An empty match-box with tray was used. You punched a hole in the outside casing about a third of the way down on front and back (with the tray removed). You tied the end of a piece of cotton to any small button and then threaded the cotton through the two holes so the free end came out of the front of the box. Into the tray you stuck a small sketch, hand drawn, as horrible as you could make it. The tray was then slipped into the casing, which of course brought the cotton loosely around the bottom of the tray. You said, 'I'll take your photo' to an unsuspecting friend, held the box in front of them and then pulled the free end of the cotton. Of course the tray rose and showed the caricature inside. It was an artefact we often made, though they didn't have a long life, the cotton quickly cut the soft cardboard of the box; but empty matchboxes were easily found...

Games in the playground were traditionally different from our play away from the school grounds. Boys played Red Rover, with two lines of players facing each other about twenty yards apart, with at first only one boy in the centre. To the shouts of 'Red Rover, come over!' it was the purpose to run from one line across the centre without being tagged by the runner in the centre. If he tagged you, you perforce joined him as a catcher, and so it went on, with the less agile caught first and gradually the ranks of the pursued thinning as the number of catchers grew. It could be a rough game, some catchers not being satisfied merely to tag you: they would grapple and bring you down.

We played Marbles: 'Holes', 'Big Ring' and 'Little Ring', and for the smallest with little skill, 'Eyedrop', where each player put a marble into a small circle on the ground and we took turns to stand over this ring at normal height and dropped a taw on to the marbles below. Any we could knock out of the ring became ours. 'Holes' was played by digging a series of small pits in the ground about eight feet apart; the skill required was to 'dribble' the taw along the ground to sink it in each hole in due sequence. If the taw went into a hole, you got a second shot immediately, if it missed and rolled idly in the dirt, all other players became eligible in order before you could make another attempt. It was quite in order, in this game, to aim for your opponent's marble and knock it far away, thus forfeiting your shot at a hole but also keeping him from any easy shot. Big Ring and Little Ring were played as boys did everywhere, with the marbles lined up in a row in the centre of the ring and players firing from the outer circle line.

Pastimes came and went: 'kite season' when everyone made kites and tried to outfly others, 'hoop season' where anything circular – a bike wheel rim, an old tyre (these were most easily available), or if one was rich, sixpence would let the blacksmith in King Street make a hoop from mild steel rod for you. How dirty our hands became as we ran for miles, patting the worn tread of a discarded tyre in front of us, until another 'season' arrived, all unannounced, to preoccupy us. We even had a 'sledge' season once, when all made sledges and rode them triumphantly down the steepest slopes we could find; in the case of Dave and myself and our mates, Col and Aubrey Busing, on a spot near the old river road bridge, where now are fountains. It was surprising how quickly the bottom of the runners became polished by the dead grass over which we slid.

Bows and arrows, though forbidden by Authority, were popular after the radio serial about Robin Hood, as were quarterstaves. But these died away when the serial ended, much as I observed the use of staves flourish and then depart when the recent television series about 'Monkey' was played to air. When yo-yos appeared we could not afford them but found a rough substitute could be made from the painfully sawn-off sides of a large cotton reel joined through the hole in the middle by a pencil stub. Their lightness made them difficult to spin properly, but as they were strung with sewing cotton some of us did develop considerable skill in keeping them spinning.

Perhaps I should mention some of the games we were compelled to play by usually large and formidable ladies at such outings as the annual Sunday School picnic. Here, to our sheepish horror, we were forced to play such games as 'drop the hanky' and 'London Bridge is falling down' in the company of girls. And there was a kind of mock marriage game, the name of which escapes me, but I recall the embarrassment of standing hand in hand with Helen Rarity in the centre of a circle while the circle sang enthusiastically:

*Now you are married, you must be good
And help your husband cut the wood
Cut it fine and carry it in
And shake hands over and over again.*

I winced to observe the faces of my schoolmates and knew I wouldn't hear the end of it for days. Though there was the saving grace which all admitted: it wasn't really my fault, Miss Baker had demanded that it be done and there was no appeal, especially as one couldn't run away before the small paper bags of boiled lollies (donated by Mr Allworth) were distributed!

So despite the hard times there was much laughter among us, and only later did I realise how much we owed to our parents who kept us fed and clothed, even if it was a prickly serge decency, in days which must have nearly broken their hearts sometimes.

From the moment we are awake...

Dr Julie Bishop, organiser of the State of Play conference in Sheffield, has sent us the following from the Guardian supplement of 9 May 1998. The editor reproduced it from Tatler of May 1998. It is part of a letter sent to the headmaster of St Thomas's Preparatory School, London SW11, and reprinted in Thomas's school bulletin (and then this month's Tatler. It was sent by a group of boys who were preparing for a seminar on free time; parents had been calling for playtime to be more structured.

Dear Headmaster,

From the moment we are awake we are chivvied and chided by our well-meaning parents into action for school, rushed through breakfast and piled into the family car ready for the traffic jams. As soon as we arrive, we are dropped in the teaching block from where starts the great 'pindown': assembly or chapel followed by lessons, the routine of lunch, followed by organised games (which are not always the fun activity adults presume them to be), followed by more lessons, followed by prep.

Our family cars arrive and all the way home we are grilled about the day – one fast swipe at prep and then to bed. Although this is not exactly child abuse or a case for Amnesty International, we would suggest that the one moment of sanity we need is the freedom to do our own thing in the two small breaks. Surely 20 minutes in the morning and 30 minutes after school lunch is not too much to ask.

We have so much organisation in our lives that there is no chance simply to be ourselves. We have the indignity of being observed at break – this we understand,

because you have so often noted that some of our number may be potential savages, as in Lord of the Flies. However, we feel that if animals have rights, so do children... This unstructured time is the best part of our day, and now you want to ruin it with yet more adult involvement.

If 'the best days of one's life are schooldays' is indeed to remain true and not an adult fib, then give us our free time back. We note that in the adult world there are coffee breaks, which appear to be totally free and not structured by employers.

Cubbies: Home to a Lucky Few

John Evans

In the last edition of *Play and Folklore*, Heather Russell (1997) reminded us of the importance of the natural environment in children's lives and that school playgrounds can, with some imagination, be special places which provide unique opportunities for children to explore and experiment with the natural world. The prospect of 'ripping up the asphalt' and replacing it with a landscape more conducive to children's needs and interests has great appeal to those of us who have an enduring interest in play.

Unfortunately, as Russell points out, what we see happening in most of our primary schools is precisely the opposite. The playground equipment is firmly fixed in concrete, asphalt and bitumen consumes more and more space, and the emphasis on 'safe' play has led to the imposition of rules which tend to stifle rather than facilitate adventure and creativity. In most schools about the only 'loose' parts in the playground are the children themselves.

It is not all doom and gloom however. There are some bright spots, some havens where children still have opportunities to indulge in play experiences denied to most, but you generally have to look to small rural schools to find them. In some recent work with primary school teachers I was heartened to find that there are some enlightened educators who understand

the advantages offered by giving children the freedom and opportunity to play with loose materials. With these loose materials children engaged in one of the most traditional of play activities, that of building cubbies.

Some time ago, Cass (1971 p.61) reminded us of the value of such play. 'With large outdoor equipment, planks, big boxes, trestles, ladders, etc., an imposing world can be created and children can climb, balance, jump, crawl and walk on or round the objects they have built. They often find they need the help of each other in pushing, pulling or lifting bricks or blocks or other heavy material and to experience the breathless pleasure of making these inanimate objects obey them is very satisfying'. The benefits of working together are wonderfully evident in cubby building. Members of the group bring various knowledge, skills and resources to the common task of constructing a cubby. Social skills such as sharing and co-operating are essential to the process.

All of these features were evident in the cubby building which occurred during playtime in one small (38 children) rural school in northern Victoria. It is not possible here to go into a lot of detail but a few extracts from the account provided by the teacher (Cowell 1997) illustrates just how elaborate were the cubbies.



Being from farming communities, the children seemed to be conscious of the need for shelter from wind, rain and sunshine when building their cubbies. A pretend roof and walls were not good enough for them. Older children brought (on the school bus!) corrugated iron from home. Some persuaded their parents to bring materials such as corrugated iron, sheets of plywood, boards, lengths of trellis and pine lattice to school for them. As well tyres, bricks, pavers, disused fly screens and masonite sheets were borrowed from the school shed or gathered from around the school ground. There were many trips (with permission) to nearby paddocks for logs, branches, leaves and wire. Carpet, hessian and poly feed bags, tarpaulins, bed sheets, cardboard boxes, machinery parts and floor tiles were also brought along to use in construction of the cubbies. The younger children tended to rely on cardboard, string and sheets for walls while the older ones did a lot of sawing and hammering nails into wood to build their cubbies.

The interior decorations of the cubbies showed an imaginative blend of reality, fantasy and innovation. In one instance a real telephone was placed on a table that was really a tree branch. A computer made of a carton with stones for the keyboard and a piece of string and bark for the mouse was used to access the internet. Some children adorned their cubbies with carpets and had pillows for beds. Others could be seen cooking over ingenious stoves using very innovative utensils and very natural ingredients. Many house – old appliances and utensils were brought from home including old irons, saucepans, rolling pins, cutlery, coat hangers and vases.

At a time when most of the reported research shows a serious decline in, and restriction of, children's play, it is indeed heartening to hear of instances such as this where the children are not only allowed but encouraged to build cubbies. The rich and vivid description Cowell provides shows how the cubbies were a central part of the social dynamics of the playground in her school. The gathering of materials and the construction of the cubby was really only a small part of an elaborate social process, a process which invariably drew the children into situations where negotiation, compromise and accommodation were necessary skills.

The attitude and role of the teacher is crucial here. In describing the school playground the way she did, Cowell revealed her sensitivity to, and understanding



of, the value of play, and in particular play involving loose materials. Talk to most teachers about the prospect of having loose materials in the playground, and children building cubbies, and the conversation will invariably focus on the problems of safety, supervision, storage, damage and cost. 'A good idea but...' is the usual answer.

Cowell adopted a different approach, one which not only valued play but saw playtime and the playground as an integral part of the children's education. Being in a small school obviously made it easier but not all teachers in small schools allow cubby building. It takes a certain commitment by the teacher, and a willingness to give some responsibility to the children, to allow play with loose materials. The limitations of artificial environments, fixed equipment and heavily regulated playgrounds were made evident in Russell's paper. The school in which Cowell teaches is indeed 'home to a lucky few'.

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Can Play Survive the Pressure?

Andrea Nolan

Almost every day in newspapers or magazines, we are confronted by advertisements singing the praises of some early learning centre which can enhance a child's development from the tender age of three, or a kit which will help parents teach their pre-schoolers all of the '1500 skills' needed to get their child ahead in the education race. Parents can also be seen taxiing their children to specialised activities such as swimming, gym, etc. in an effort to further challenge and stimulate them. The 1990s seem to have spawned a proliferation of courses for the under 5s. In these circumstances one might well ask: what is happening to childhood?

Childhood is often depicted as a relatively carefree time where play is part of life. Initially trained as a kindergarten teacher, I was educated to facilitate children's learning through play. I was taught that this was how young children learn best and that children needed to be free to experiment with equipment and activities. It was clearly stated throughout my training that everything was to come from the child, not be imposed upon them. Real knowledge was gained not through the teacher transmitting facts or concepts but by getting the child to act on both physical and mental levels - learning by doing. It was up to each child to construct their own meanings and move on from the novice state. Throughout my nine and a half years working in the early childhood field I constantly upheld the 'learning through play' ethos. I was never tempted to 'impose' a curriculum on the children and constantly took cues for curriculum development from the children's interests, abilities and needs.

It was when I moved to become a teacher in the infant classes of a school that my strongly held philosophy of educating the 'whole' child through play was questioned. I found myself teaching structured lessons around a prescribed curriculum. In fact it was expected that certain content was to be covered on a weekly basis. Gone was the idea of individualism, as all children were expected to learn what was being taught. The parents' and school's expectations, the testing and reporting process, the importance placed on the curriculum as content rather than process, and the relegation of play to that of a break between work (learning), were all aspects which challenged my beliefs about learning. The shift from a play-centred approach to learning to one where 'work' took on a more pressing and significant role, had a strong impact on my classroom practices.

'It seems to be the case that the primacy of play as a learning medium dwindles as the child progresses through the educational system' (Chazan, Laing & Harper, 1987, p.53). Whereas in the past it might have been the middle grades of primary school that were seen as a time when serious 'work' had to start, it does appear to have shifted right down through the earlier grades, perhaps even into pre-school where the pressure for formal instruction begins. In fact some teachers even suggest that the Preparatory grade has become equivalent to what was expected from Grade One pupils 10 years ago - ie. more structured work. The thinking underlying this approach appears to be:

- a) children need to learn certain knowledge
- b) the earlier they start the better
- c) they learn best by a formal curriculum devised and supervised by adults.

A question we might ask is whether or not, with the advent of a more formal curriculum, the idea of learning through play will become irrevocably altered, changed or even lost. Is play still central to early childhood education? Has the focus on developmental theory, which upheld the concept of a child-centred approach where children's learning was facilitated through play, and which was at the heart of early childhood programs, succumbed to mounting pressures? Have we lost sight of the value of play in our quest to hurry children along the path of learning?

In order to try to find some answers to these questions I have embarked on a study of early childhood teacher training courses in Victoria since their inception. By examining the curriculum of these courses I hope I will be better able to identify what role play now holds in early childhood education.

The changing nature of early childhood services will almost certainly play an important part in course development as courses train graduates to be able to work in a range of early childhood settings which may include kindergarten or pre-schools, childcare centres, family day care, occasional care, after school care, as well as private and government schools. Unfortunately, while this fusion between the care and education fields is taking place, there is still a lot of confusion, debate and contention. It could perhaps be said that this dichotomy between care and education has done little to emphasise the importance of play (Kagan, 1990).

Whilst the research project is still in its early stages, there are signs that the long-held commitment to a play-based curriculum for children under school age is being eroded and the staff within the institutions offering early childhood teacher education, who hold to this belief, certainly appear to be under considerable pressure to change. While much more work needs to be done in order to understand the nature of these pressures, and how they impact on the early childhood curriculum and pedagogy, preliminary investigations show that changing priorities with regard to institutional funding and an emphasis on the academic development of the child, appears to be at the forefront of change in this important field.

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Andrea Nolan is a sessional lecturer at Victoria University of Technology and is currently doing her Ph D. If anyone can assist Andrea with information about the history of Early Childhood courses in Victoria they are asked to contact Dr. John Evans on (03) 52 272521 at Deakin University, Geelong.

This Spanish-language nursery rhyme (Rice and Milk) was taught to Gwenda Davey in 1975 by Sonia Orzecko, an immigrant from Chile.

Arroz Con Leche

Rice and milk
I'm going to call
On my Senorita
From Portugal;
I'll kiss her once
I'll kiss her twice
And feed her nothing
But milk and rice

Gwenda Davey's adaptation into English is close to the original.

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