



Play and Folklore

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by Janice Ackerley



For the first time, an issue of *Play and Folklore* consists of one long article. Janice Ackerley's survey of the literature on gender differences in children's folkloric play in school playgrounds provides a valuable overview of a much-debated subject. Her study provides a useful summary of the perspectives of scholars in the field.

Are the different, sometimes quite separate play traditions of girls and boys the result of nature or nurture, of biologically-determined behaviours or the influences of the social and cultural environment of children in a particular place and time? And if we argue that both biology and environment shape children's play, then we need to track and demonstrate how this occurs in specific cultures. As far back as 1978, Helen Schwartzman, in her admirable book *Transformations: The Anthropology of Children's Play* (Plenum Press, NY), speculated, in a footnote, whether boys' play roles and game preferences have become more, or with the effect of the women's movement, less circumscribed.' (p.85) The same might be asked of girls' play.

There is still much work to be done to document, and explain, the continuity and change in gendered play in our own communities. A further limitation for students of children's play and folklore - most of us based in industrial and post-industrial societies - is how little we still know about the history and evolution of children's playlore in other cultures. One of the goals of the editors of *Play and Folklore* is to publish worthwhile studies focused on children's playlore in non-Western communities. Our last issue (No. 43) included an article on play in Morocco and the Tunisian Sahara. We welcome more such contributions, to enhance our understanding of the traditions and practices of childhood. – **June Factor and Gwenda Beed-Davey**

Gender differences in the folklore play of children in primary school playgrounds

Janice Ackerley

ABSTRACT

This literature review focuses on the gender differences in children's folklore play in the context of the primary school playground. Consideration is given to the historical background of gender segregation as well as the social and biological influences on gender preferences. The recognition of the move from the physical aspects of folklore play to the more symbolic and verbal is supported by recent research.

Specific folklore activities, such as skipping, hand-clapping and counting-out rhymes, are examined in some detail, along with the vulgar rhymes of childhood. Reference is made to the categorising of playground rhymes by leading researchers in the field, such as Opie, Turner, Factor, Bishop and Curtis and Vissel.



Hampstead Primary School – Ashburton, New Zealand
(photo source Janice Ackerley)

The area of children's playground rhymes is one requiring continued scholarship and research in order to gain an understanding of current trends in children's social interaction and play styles. In New Zealand the raw material is available from recent collections and there is an opportunity now for analysis of this valuable data in terms of the 'how' and 'why' of children's folklore play.

This literature review concludes that there is research evidence of same sex preferences in children's play groupings and that there are gender differences in the folklore rhymes and play that can be seen in the playground. Research also shows that girls, rather than boys, are the bearers and preservers of folklore traditions.

Introduction

Children's folklore play, under examination here, focuses on the rhymes, chants, insults, taunts, rituals, riddles and parodies that are part of the folkloric traditions of children's play. This type of play has been classified as 'verbal play' (Bishop & Curtis, 2001, p.13), as opposed to physical play and imaginative play. Verbal folklore play is 'social, rule-governed and often traditional' (Factor, 1988, p.xi). Some of the more active games have a high verbal content. These include skipping, clapping and ball-bouncing rhymes (Bishop & Curtis, 2001).



Children's play traditions are 'a living, active art, made by children for their own purposes' (Bishop & Curtis, 2001, p.8). This type of play is owned and controlled by children themselves and is unrelated to adult directed and organised games that may occur in the playground. These games are generally spontaneous, unsupervised, unstructured and mostly unrestricted (Borman, 1979).

The age range of the children most involved in this verbal play fits into the area known as middle childhood, 'the period between early childhood and puberty' (Factor, 1988, p.5). Rhymes associated with games 'belong almost exclusively to the eight to thirteen-year-old group' (Turner, 1978, p.158). On the importance of play, Factor (2001) comments that 'play is the core of middle childhood. It is a means of integrating a child's outer and inner worlds. It is a medium of friendship, and a protection against enemies' (p. 29). However rhymes of the playground, classified by Turner (1978) as 'For Amusement Only' (p.158), have a greater age range, extending from five to sixteen years. This section includes parodies as well as the more obscene playground rhymes.

The aspects of gender under consideration in this literature review relate to whether or not girls and boys have different preferences in the games and rhymes they choose when free from direct adult supervision. Also under consideration is how far this segregation (if any) extends and if there is any historical, biological or social basis to the findings. Other considerations could also relate to the gender stereotyping within the rhymes themselves.

As well as the possible dualism of gender difference, children's folklore traditions are characterised by other dualisms. Folklore may be 'contemporary as well as traditional, improvised as well as inherited' (Factor, 1988, p.8), also innovative and conservative, variable and constrained (Zumwalt, 1999).

Primary school playgrounds are the focus of much of this activity, as 'playgrounds themselves may be the only school setting in which spontaneous peer interactions are condoned' (Borman, 1979, p 251). This literature review will examine available research on gender differences in the traditional play that takes place in school playgrounds. This will involve looking at the more general play activities of children, before focussing on the more specific verbal aspects of this play.



Hampstead Primary School – Ashburton, New Zealand (photo source Janice Ackerley)

Historical

As the origins of folklore are firmly grounded in tradition it is important to consider features of the past that may have influenced the gender differences present in the playgrounds and folk play of children today. Folklore provides 'a link with the past but also a vibrant force in the present' (Sutton-Smith, 1999, p.27). Over 200 years ago Queen Anne's physician, John Arbuthnot, observed that nowhere was tradition better preserved than 'amongst School-boys, whose Games and Plays are delivered down invariably from one generation to another' (Opie, 1959, p.5).

During the Middle Ages singing games were part of a courtship ritual for intending partners. By the 1800s these same games had developed into fantasies of marriage, 'games of unsophisticated girls who could make their choices among other girls largely without the presence of boys at all' (McMahon & Sutton-Smith, 1999, p.294). Apart from these singing games, boys were involved in a greater variety of traditional game pursuits than girls (Sutton-Smith, 1981). This is an historical reversal, as today it is the girls who are the chief preservers and initiators of folklore (Sutton-Smith, 1999).

Lady Gomme (1898) identified gender distinctions that divided the play traditions of children into dramatic play, being the property of girls, and competitive play, the property of boys (Turner, 1969). Sutton-Smith relates this to a significant factor 'that girls acquire a consciousness of their future roles earlier than do boys, and that many girls' games act out these roles' (Sutton-Smith, 1959, pp.53-54).

Skipping was originally enjoyed by boys, more on a basis of skill, with tricks, crossovers and double jumping, rather than as a rhyme-based activity (Turner, 1969). Girls were involved with single skipping and boys with community jumping with a long rope (Opie, 1997). Elderly Australian Aboriginal men also took part in skipping activities in the late 1800s (Parker, 1905, cited in Factor, 1988). However it was the girls who preserved and developed the rhymes to accompany skipping, and other rhythmic, physical games such as hand clapping and ball bouncing (Turner, 1969, Grugeon, 1988).

Boys' involvement in skipping ceased once team sports became popular. In fact teasing and abuse of those boys who continued to partake was common and is still prevalent today (Kinney, 1999; Thorne, 1993). A writer in 'Sports and Games for Girls and Boys' (1889) comments on rope skipping for boys, 'This is a game scarcely suitable for lads - cricket will suit them much better' (Opie, 1997, p.206).

In the early 1900s girls, given greater freedom in terms of dress, footwear and in the playground, as well as being unchallenged by organised sports, became the chief participants in and preservers of folklore (Turner, 1969; Sutton-Smith, 1981; Grugeon, 1988; Carpenter, 2001). The change also included a movement from static singing games to the more physical skipping, hand-clapping, handstand and ball-bouncing games for girls. These aerobic games were most often accompanied by rhymes. This resurgence of rhymes, from only two or three rhymes in 1900 to over fifty skipping rhymes identified in the 1950s (Sutton-Smith, 1981) is partly attributed to the fact that many were now being published in children's magazines and annuals.

With the development of organised sports in the 1900s in New Zealand, the boys' involvement in cricket and rugby meant they dominated large spaces in the playground (Sutton-Smith, 1981; Carpenter, 2001). The girls were restricted to play sheds and concrete areas. In wet weather separate play sheds were utilised by boys and girls. Often the divisions within the schoolyard were by high concrete or brick walls, an inherited British tradition. This sometimes resulted in rivalry and antagonism between the sexes (Factor, 1988).



The yard (in 1908) was split and the girls' yard was this side, and (the boys) were that side ... you were not allowed to go into the girls' yard and vice versa, they were not allowed to come into our yard ... you got 'what O' if you got caught.

(Frank Inch interview in oral history project, Lee Street Primary School 1983 p.3, cited in Factor, 1988)

The strict segregation of the schoolyard was not necessarily reproduced in the home and neighbourhood environment. Crossing of the gender barriers occurred mainly in out-of-school hours (Factor, 1988). 'Neighbourhood play lacked the rigid sexual and age constraints of that in the school yard' (Sutherland, N. 1986, p.44).

Historians have traced a change in the second half of the twentieth century from the increased freedom of the fifties and sixties, to the imposition of more restrictions on play developing from the seventies through to current times. These limitations to free play resulted from a number of factors, including safety issues, increased academic emphasis and an increase in the adult direction of organised sports and after school activities, along with the increasing regulation of children's free time (Factor, 2001). Commercial influences have also impacted and resulted in a shift from physical to verbal play (Sutton-Smith, 1981). 'Perhaps current childhood does indeed occupy more verbal crevices and less obvious physical space than used to be the case' (McMahon & Sutton-Smith, 1999). Commercial influences have also tended to create gender divisions with specific masculine and feminine toys and also the creation of 'sex-stereotyped environments' for children (Factor, 1980, p.138).

Contradictory viewpoints exist with regard to the degree of sex differences over the years. Sutton-Smith (1972) observes in his studies of game preferences of American children that the differences between the sexes has reduced over the years. However, Hart (1979), as a result of studies in a small New England town, noted that in the upper grades the differences between boys and girls had increased.

Gender Segregation

The historical segregation of play areas still has repercussions in the playgrounds of today, and impacts on gender segregation issues. Researchers have found that when given a choice of play associates, children still choose same sex groupings (Borman, 1979; Factor, 1988; Thorne, 1993; Boyatzis, 1999). Studies have also shown that this same sex preference increases with age (Martin, 1999). Peer interactions are segregated from as young as three years of age, and increase through to eleven years (Maccoby, 1990). The reasons cited by Maccoby include behaviour-based compatibility and socially based cognitions. It has also been found that group size increased with age, with boys choosing larger groups of five or more members and girls opting for dyads or triads (Thorne, 1993; Lewis, 1998).



Hampstead Primary School – Ashburton, New Zealand
(photo source Janice Ackerley)

Lewis's (1998) findings, after observing two age groups (1st - 2nd grades and 5th - 6th grades), in the playground, contradicted previous research that indicated children tend to stay in same gender groups until puberty. She found that gender segregation by age was less pronounced than previously thought, with 45% of 1st and 2nd graders and 33% of 5th and 6th graders being involved in some form of mixed gender integration.

Other studies have shown that greater sex integration occurs away from the school playground, in home and neighbourhood environments (Thorne, 1993). Mixed gender games have also been found to occur more in schools with a wide social intake or in schools with children from professional homes (Kelsey, 2001). Integration is more likely to occur with adult intervention or when adults give attention to gender equity (Zhumkhawala, 1997; Maccoby, 1990; Jaffe, 1998). This may require some form of adjustment for both sexes. Goodwin (1999) found that when P.E. coaches encouraged boys to join in jump rope games with girls, they would do so willingly. However, at the same time they would ridicule the accompanying chants by using exaggerated sing-song tones and mimicking the dance-like movements of the girls. Similarly Hughes (1999) found that girls adjusted to the rougher play of boys in four square by playing their own game within the boys' framework.

Efforts at crossing the gender divide, or border crossing (Thorne, 1993), resulted in teasing and ostracising of those who were seen to deviate from the norm, especially among the boys. The boys' play beliefs were found to be more strongly defined and they were less tolerant of boys attempting to cross the gender boundaries, whereas they would tolerate the tomboyish girl (Thorne, 1993). Factor (1988) noted that 'crossing the gender barrier in play occurred mainly out of school hours, or in very small country schools where both boys and girls were needed to make up the numbers for a game' (p.139).

Different Play Styles

There is an extensive body of literature available describing the gender differences in the play styles of boys and girls (Sutton-Smith, 1999; Factor, 1988; Hughes, 1999; Boyatzis, 1999). These differences are attributed to social, cultural and possibly biological factors. Mechling (2000) recognises the 'complex dance between biology and culture in children's lives.' Feminism expounds the view that all gender is a social construction (Thorne, 1993), however there are biological differences that can't be dismissed, based on 'different bodies' (Mechling, 2000, p1).

Thorne (1993) expressed objections to the different culture model, in that it 'implied that girls and boys are always apart' (p.90), and did not take into account the cross gender interactions that occur both in and out of school. Also she noted that this model 'embeds the experiences of dominants and marginalises many other groups and individuals' (p90). Never the less, research has produced evidence of these gender-related differences. Considering first the social purposes of play, Sutton-Smith (1997) saw inclusion and exclusion as power tactics that differentiate girls from boys. 'The most important thing about play is to be included and not excluded from the group's activities. Much of female play is about the play of exclusion' (p. 103). Similarly, James (1993), in her studies of play in Great Britain, noted the importance for both sexes of developing play skills to avoid being seen as an outsider or different. 'For boys this means manipulating the important signifiers of masculinity - 'toughness' and 'physical prowess' - in the process of play; for girls it means demonstrating through play the nurturing skills of wives, mothers and managers' (p. 198).

Differences in play styles show boys to be more physical, more active and more involved in rough and tumble play than girls (Thorne, 1993; Lewis & Phillipsen, 1998; Butcher, 1999; Vissel, 1993). Girls 'tend to participate in sedentary games or activities and spend much of their time in socialising activities' (Butcher, p249). 'Girls like those games that serve to set off and cultivate deftness, lightness and grace of movement' (Vissel, 1993, p.1).



These differences are correspondingly reflected in use of playground space. In the 1980s Grugeon's (2001) research observed that 'girls seem to be marginalised on the edges of the playground as boys monopolised the centre space to play football' (p. 101). She noted that since then schools have made some effort to make playground space more accessible to all. Similar observations were made by Thorne (1993) and Lindsay & Palmer (1981). The latter found that it was the younger girls especially who stayed close to the safety and security of the school buildings and looked for adult contact. Thorne (1993) also noted that the boys had control of ten times more playground space than the girls.

Another area of difference in play styles relates to the boys' tendency to emphasise competitiveness as opposed to the girls' desire for cooperation (Twarek, 1994; Thorne, 1993; Lindsay & Palmer, 1981; Lewis & Phillipsen, 1998). 'While boys use a rhetoric of contests and teams, girls describe their relations using language which stresses cooperation and 'being nice'' (Thorne & Luria, 1986, p.179). The lack of competitiveness in girls' play is disputed by Hughes (1999), in her observations of girls' games of four square.

While the players I observed did care a great deal about 'being friends' and 'being nice,' they also competed quite aggressively and quite well. They did not fear or avoid competition, but they did prefer certain ways of competing (p. 112).

She also noted that girls prefer individual rather than team competition. Their wish to avoid conflict and divisiveness was a contributing factor to this. Lindsay and Palmer's (1981) observations of Brisbane school children concluded that

Girls preferred non-zero-sum games - games where the outcome was not as important as the process of the game - whereas in boys' games, the tendency was towards winning as a result of a score or game characteristic. The girls could always indicate who was the best player but it didn't seem to have any effect on the process of the game, nor to be important in the outcome (p.12).

Specific Game Choices

◆ Categorising

In examining more closely the specific gender differences in playground game choices, researchers have attempted to classify the game types involved in an effort to better organise the wide range of material collected. Some are classified according to the type of rhyme (Opie, 1959; Turner, 1969). The Opies formed seventeen different categories for their collection of rhymes and Turner divided his collection into rhymes associated with games, playground rhymes and autograph rhymes, with further sub-divisions within these categories (1969). The autograph rhyme division was dropped in the second edition (1978). He also commented that the playground rhymes were most likely to be associated with boys and the game rhymes were seen largely as the property of girls. Others use social divisions, with Kelsey (2001) dividing his 1962-1990 collections into individual and social categories. The individual games include entertainment rhymes, limericks, riddles and nonsense rhymes, and the social division include the girls' skipping and clapping games and ball-bouncing rhymes.

The boys' social repertoire is made up of football chants and indecent entertainment rhymes, with insults, teases, repartee, sayings, incantations and catching out-rhymes being common to both genders. Anu Vissel (1993), an Estonian folklore collector, has a four way classification system for material, with boys' games, girls' games, mixed games and sex neutral games being the divisions. Bishop and Curtis (2001) suggest three divisions: play with high verbal content, play with high imaginative content and play with high physical content.



◆ Individual Folklore Activities

In recent years folklore rhymes have been seen as very much part of girls' culture (Grugeon, 1988). Girls have been largely resistant to the trend towards electronic computer games which increasingly occupy more of the boys' free time, meaning 'young females will increasingly be the keepers of tradition' (Carpenter, 2001, p.175). The nature of children's preferences and gender differences in play styles relates directly to children's involvement and knowledge of playground rhymes. The boys' dominance of the playground and their more open and aggressive play is contrasted to the girls' preference for more private and at times subversive involvement in folklore activities.

Gender differences show up in playground rhymes. Boys prefer gross-outs, 'gotcha' and ball field banter – "We want a pitcher, not a belly-itcher! We want a catcher, not a belly-scratcher!" Girls go for more complicated cheers, hand slapping chants, dances and jump rope rhymes. (Helms, 1995, p.2)

◆ Rude and Crude

Boys and girls are both actively involved in rhymes that challenge and defy adult standards and conventions. These rhymes give children the opportunity to explore taboo subjects and adult themes within the safe environment of the school playground (Grugeon, 1988). Again the openness of boys is contrasted with the subversiveness of the girls. Thorne and Luria's (1986) observations of playground behaviour show the boys being more prepared to take risks.

Both girls and boys know dirty words but flaunting of the words and risking punishment for their use is more frequent in boys' than in girls' groups. Dirty talk is a stable part of the repertoire of boys' groups. Such talk defines their groups as outside the reach of school discipline (pp.180-181)

The more subversive and private nature of the girls' behaviour sees them partaking in 'giggling sessions' (p. 183) on carefully guarded topics.

In contrast to the Opies' (1959) claim that, 'genuinely erotic verse, however, is unusual' (p.115) in children's groups, Lowenstein's publication 'Shocking, Shocking, Shocking' (1974) exposed the large number of children's improper rhymes that were current in Australia during the 1960s and 1970s. She found that it was the 'good' girls who were the real experts in this area, rather than the 'bad' boys. Her findings challenged the belief that obscene rhymes were commonly circulated among boys and 'not very nice girls' or belonged to the 'ogre child' or 'delinquent' (Opie, 1959, pp.115-116). Also disputed was the finding that these rhymes were more likely to be known by working-class children than the sheltered middle-class girls, who were in fact the source of much of Lowenstein's material (p.6). Similarly, Factor (2000) commented that,

In my experience there are students at the most expensive private girls' schools who have as extensive a repertoire of vulgar and abusive rituals as the toughest, roughest boys in the working class suburbs of our major cities (p.xxii)

Although close interaction between the sexes generally does not occur during play, Factor (1988) observed that 'rhymes and games are shared throughout the school' (p.136). She also noted that with the changes in social values and attitudes, evidence of sparring between the sexes has become obvious in the development of some of the rhymes. The 60s rhyme,

*Girls are weak,
Chuck 'em in the creek.
Boys are strong,
Like King Kong.*

has many variants from the 70s onwards that reflect this sparring and possibly the development of girl power.



Boys have the muscles,
Girls have the brains.
Boys are the stupidest,
And we won the games. (p.140)

Likewise, Grudgeon (1988) commented that girls developed rhymes as a form of ammunition and defence against the presence of boys in the playground, with such rhymes as,

*My friend Billy had a ten foot willy,
Showed it to the girl next door,
Thought it was a snake,
Hit it with a rake,
And now it's only four foot four.*

There is also evidence that many of these rhymes are part of a culture of subversive acts of resistance against both adult authority and at times the other gender (Grugeon, 2001; Factor, 1988). Attempts by school authorities to ban or limit these rhymes as occurred in Australia (Factor, 1988, p.176) and in Britain (Grugeon, 2001, p.101), have only served to drive them underground or make children more cautious when near adults.

As well as the gender differences that are apparent in the type of rhymes used by boys and girls, there is also a recognition by researchers in the gendered nature of the content of the rhymes themselves. Grugeon (2001) expressed a strong interest in the

gendered nature of the content of the singing games played by girls in the first four years at school, in the way these games parody adult norms and behaviour, often dealing with taboo subjects through mocking and subversive texts. (p.99)

Rhymes such as the prolific 'When Suzy was a baby' rhyme allow young girls to explore the possibilities of adult life and the new roles they will soon be encountering in terms of the passage of life from infancy to death and after. (Arleo, 2001; Factor, 1988) These rhymes allow children a 'freedom from customary propriety' (Factor, 1988, p.174) and to explore issues not available in their non-play lives. Sexually suggestive verses have been added and adapted across 'social, political, linguistic and geographical barriers' (Arleo, 2001, p.130).

*When Suzy was a teenager, a teenager, a teenager
When Suzy was a teenager, she used to go like this:
'Ooh, aah, I lost my bra in my boyfriend's car,
I don't know where my knickers are.
Ooh, aah, there they are -
Hanging in my boyfriend's car. (Arleo, p.131)*

Grugeon (2001) also examined the use of Spice Girl songs being parodied by young girls and accompanied by explicitly sexual and provocative actions, in terms of the process of media texts being adapted to the playground. Such rhymes demonstrate the ease with which popular culture and mass media can be absorbed into children's play (Ackerley, 2002).



Many of the gender clashes and differences are played out in the language of playground rhymes, with examples such as

Boys are rotten, made out of cotton,

Girls are dandy, made out of candy. (Zumwalt, 1999, p.34)

The good little girl and the bad boy clash also appears in the following jump rope song:

Down by the ocean, down by the sea,

Johnny broke a bottle and he blamed it on me.

I told Ma, Ma told Pa,

Johnny got a lickin'

So ha,ha,ha,

How many lickins did Johnny get?

1,2,3,4,5..... (Zumwalt, 1999, p.35)

♦ Skipping and Hand-clapping Games

Developing from the traditional singing games of the past, the area where girls rule supreme, is in the category of skipping and hand-clapping rhymes. A singing game is defined as a 'game which occurs in a playground context and involves rhythmic text (either chanted or sung) and movement' (Marsh, 2001, p.94). These activities require fine body and motor movements as well as rhythmic ability and can become very complex, involving extensive negotiation of rules (Goodwin, 1999; Lindsay & Palmer, 1981). 'Boys seem to lack the sense of regulated rhythm which girls tend to acquire through such play activities as clapping games' (Lindsay & Palmer, 1981, p.9). The rhymes that accompany these games deal with universal issues of growing up, sexuality, parenthood, aging and death and often parody adult norms and behaviour (Arleo,2001; Grugeon,2001).

Boys' involvement in these games seems to be in the form of invasion of space, or mocking the procedures and rituals of the girls.

On the rare occasions when boys were observed in these activities the purpose seemed to be directed to pain and endurance as they clapped partners' hands with a resounding smack and 'manfully' displayed pink hands as the chant came to an end. With girls, the emphasis was upon completion without error rather than upon extraneous outcomes and, consequently, speed was used to increase difficulty. (Lindsay & Palmer, 1981, p.9)

♦ Counting-out Rhymes

One area common to boys and girls is that of counting out rhymes (Turner, 1969; Factor, 1988). This process of deciding who is 'it' or 'he' is referred to as 'dipping' in England. It can also be used to decide who has priority in turn-taking games. 'Counting-out rhymes are accordingly shared by boys and girls' (Turner, 1969, p.157). Curtis (2001) chose to look at counting-out rhymes in her study, 'Who knows what in the playground' (p.62), for the very reason that 'they were used by both boys and girls' (p.67).



Issues arising and possibilities for further research

Two key issues emerge from a wide range of research related to children's play and folklore. First is the trend away from the consideration and collection of **what** children play, to the investigation of **why** and **how** these folklore traditions are kept alive. The comprehensive collections of the past decades (Opie, 1959; Opie, 1969; Turner, 1969; Kelsey, 1962-1990), though still of great value, have given way to greater consideration of the conditions under which such play occurs (Grugeon, 2001; Bishop & Curtis, 2001; Thorne, 1993).

McMahon & Sutton-Smith (1999) have recognised and encouraged a trend towards interpretive research and observations of context, both 'historical and situational' (p.306) with a caution against being over zealous in 'reading into children's folklore what simply isn't there' (p.306). The research cited in this review occurs almost exclusively in the school playground. Gender characteristics may be quite different had observations been carried out in the neighborhood or home environments. The social context of such research is of vital importance.

Limitations of earlier research collections have included the problems of the biases of the collectors and their methods (Turner, 1969; Grugeon, 1988). Turner speculated that early collections such as Bolton's (1888) collection of counting-out rhymes did not include rude rhymes because the children he collected them from did not 'want to offend him' (p.158).

The second issue is related to the danger of creating a mind-set prior to carrying out research. Thorne (1993) warns against the 'different culture' mind-set when considering gender issues. If observers concentrate their observations on distinct gender groupings, then results will be different to observations with a focus on interaction between the two groups. Thorne (1993) advises starting 'with a sense of the whole rather than an assumption of gender as separation and difference' (p. 108).

Similarly verbal folklore should not be considered as entirely distinct from the adult world, as much of this language play results from observations and mimicry of adults. With a recognised increase in verbal play with age, the boundaries between adult and children's humour are less defined, especially when considering the more vulgar rhymes. So much so that 'in their mid teens, it is difficult to divide their rude rhymes and jokes from the adult tradition' (Lowenstein, 1974, p.1).

There is an undeniable necessity for continued scholarship and research in the area of children's folklore. Since the studies of Sutton-Smith in the fifties and sixties there has been little research in New Zealand in children's folklore play. A recent study, looking mainly at dialectal variation in the playground vocabulary of New Zealand children, carried out through the Victoria University of Wellington by Laurie and Winifred Bauer (2002), has resulted in a collection of children's play rhymes. The Christchurch College of Education's National Diploma of Children's Literature (1994) has also resulted in the development of a comprehensive collection of children's playground rhymes. These collections could provide the raw material for further studies of the folklore tradition within New Zealand. As the latter collection includes gender details this is one area that could be open for further study.

Another possibility related to gender would be the consideration of gender issues within the rhymes themselves, providing the researchers are aware of the problems of adult speculation mentioned earlier, (McMahon & Sutton-Smith, 2001). Within New Zealand the area for folklore studies is wide open with so many avenues unexplored in terms of the how and why, and with much of the raw data still in the process of being collected.



Conclusion

This literature review has attempted to consider the gender differences in children's play in general, and the implications as they apply to the verbal folklore heard in the school playground. These studies show that primary school aged children prefer same sex play groupings, and that these preferences increase with age through to puberty. There is a strong historical influence, going back to the decades of gender divided nature of playgrounds. Environmental and social changes have seen a move from physical folklore play to more emphasis on the verbal and symbolic.

There is evidence of different gender-based play styles in a school setting, but consideration must be given to the fact that these conclusions were based on playground observations and not in the child's home or neighborhood environment. The differences relate to competitiveness, activity and use of playground space.

Girls are shown to be the bearers and preservers of the traditional playground rhymes, especially those related to skipping and hand-clapping games. The traditional bearers however, are more evenly spread when vulgar rhymes and counting-out rhymes are under consideration.

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Hampstead Primary School – Ashburton, New Zealand
(photo source Janice Ackerley)

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