Play and Folklore

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Editorial address: Dr June Factor, Australian Centre, University of Melbourne, Victoria, 3010, Australia
Phone: +61 3 8344 7235 **Fax:** +61 3 9347 7731 **Email:** j.factor@unimelb.edu.au

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GPO Box 666E, Victoria, 3001, Australia. **Phone:** +61 3 8341 7378 **Email:** playfolklore@museum.vic.gov.au
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Welcome to the first issue of Play & Folklore for 2005. Museum Victoria recently celebrated its publication of *Childs Play: Dorothy Howard and the Folklore of Australian Children* with a launch at Melbourne Museum, appropriately alongside the Playgrounds exhibit within the Australia Gallery. Guests included the Chairman of the museum board, Harold Mitchell, the CEO of the museum, Patrick Greene, and a flock of children who were promised cake and a good time. Adults and children alike enjoyed themselves immensely. Information about this publication can be found on pages 18 and 19.

We do hope you enjoy this June edition of Play & Folklore as we value your continued readership.

June Factor – Co Editor

Museum Victoria CEO, Patrick Greene, greets his young audience
Source – Museum Victoria

Tree stumps, manhole covers and rubbish tins: the invisible play-lines of a primary school playground[1]

Dr June Factor

In traditional Australian Aboriginal societies, tribal territory is inscribed in the memory of its community through song and story lines: invisible tracks that trace the history, meaning and use of every significant feature of the environment. Each place has its own story, its own melody, and often its own special importance for a particular family. To an outsider, it is just a landscape of trees, rocks, water. A geologist may discern precious metals, a tourist enjoy a pleasing view. Without close, patient and attentive listening and learning from the traditional owners of this land, the song and story lines that mark every inch of their earth are unknown and unknowable to the non-initiated. Outsiders cannot read the invisible tracks which hold the land and its people in such close embrace.[2]

European settlers declared that Australia was *terra nullius* – an empty land. They were unable, or chose not, to recognise the ownership, belonging and uses of the land by its indigenous inhabitants. They declared the land empty because Aborigines did not plough the soil and grow crops as the settlers had done in Europe. And this outsiders' reading gave them permission to take land without asking, or paying, or even sharing. The tragic consequences of that blindness are with us yet, and *terra nullius* was only expunged from Australian law in 1992.

Now consider the school playground. Its inhabitants – children – have developed, sometimes over generations, a map of the school grounds which designates functions and attributes values to every major feature: open space, treed space, benches, shelter-shed, toilets, grass, asphalt, tree roots, secluded corners, verandahs, rubbish bins – this could be a very long list.[3] And, while usually much better treated and appreciated than the indigenous inhabitants, children's points of view are also little regarded or respected: children are young, ignorant and powerless – what would they know?[4]

Just as Aborigines learnt the uses and meanings of their land as part of their growing and initiation into the community of the tribe, so young children learn from the older ones the clapping games and rhymes, how marbles are played, where you can make houses from stones and dirt in the roots of special trees. The school playground is no more *terra nullius* than was Australia in 1788. In these noisy, crowded, chaotic-looking spaces we can observe what I call the double helix of children's play: 'one strand representing the universal, ubiquitous features of child lore, the other the particular manifestations of children's play lives which result from particular circumstances'. (Factor, 1988: xiv) [5]

While still modest in quantity, there is now a growing research literature that illustrates how the 'particular circumstances' of a school playground influence children's play.[6] The odd progeny of pedagogy out of utility, with bloodlines connecting child reformers and child disciplinarians, these 'backyards' of schools have become, in the words of one scholar, 'more central to children's play than streets, parks or adventure playgrounds… [the] school playground is now the principal social centre, the place where most games are passed on… the school playground is the dominant, varying, yet common experience of the entire child population, [and] individual differences tend to be submerged in the common play culture'. (Roberts, 1980: 116) [7]

Among the multiple relationships children establish between themselves and their playground environment, I have selected a handful – just enough to demonstrate the complexity of children's play culture, the flexibility with which they manipulate the given and permitted, and the resourcefulness of their artful stratagems to outwit intrusive school rules. My examples come from a variety of sources, focusing especially on the work of two scholars whose meticulous playground watching, listening and questioning in Australia, almost 40 years apart, has enriched our understanding of how children map and use the school playground. Both set out to 'read' the playground from the point of view of its young inhabitants. They became ethnographers, non-participant observers, in order to chart the meanings children attribute to each element of their play. They mapped the play world of childhood, knowing and respecting the diversity of children's culture and wishing to inform adults of its power and significance.

The first, Dorothy Howard, was a remarkable American folklorist and educator, a pioneer of children's folklore research on two continents.[8] A post-doctoral Fulbright scholar attached to the University of Melbourne in 1954-55, her still-unrivalled collecting enterprise in Australia produced a rich archive of children's playlore 'transmitted from children to children without benefit of printed book or adult sponsor'. (Howard, 1955: 31) Much of it was collected from school playgrounds.[9]

Dorothy Howard observing boys demonstrating a game of marbles, Perth 1955
Source – Museum Victoria

Almost 40 years later, in 1992, another ethnographer set out to investigate a single school playground. Heather Russell's purpose was to 'document the play text (activities) and context (institutional rules, equipment provision, physical environment) of three hundred children in a large outer suburban Melbourne primary school playground… Children's play habits were systematically documented over twelve days, followed by in-depth interviews and on-site tours with selected children'. (Russell, 1994: xi) Like Howard and other researchers before her,[10] Russell concluded, after spending more than four months observing and learning from the children in an unusually spacious and diverse playground:

> *Traditional use of various play structures and children's common interpretation of the landscape demonstrated links between play texts and play sites which were passed down from one generation to the next.* (Russell, 1994: xi)

Melbourne Primary School, 1992
Source – Heather Russell

The Australian suburban school playgrounds of Dorothy Howard's time are, to contemporary eyes, mostly drab and bare. Yet they permitted an extraordinary variety of playlore. In her ten-month foray across the continent in the mid-50s she collected, in verbal playlore alone:

> *Over 700 game names; 175 autograph album rhymes; 50 rope skipping rhymes; 40 counting out rhymes …; the words for about 15 singing games (with musical notation for 8); … riddles, tongue-twisters, rhymes; hand, finger and toe rhymes; rhymes for taunting, swearing an oath, bouncing ball; and nonsense rhymes.* (Howard, 1955: 31)

Although she noted that 'adult supervision of school playgrounds had increased' in the 1950s (Howard, 1960a: 166), it is clear from Howard's research and from the accounts of those who were children at the time that youngsters were permitted considerable freedom to play as they chose, within certain minimal limits of order and safety. Playground equipment was almost non-existent, but children made use of trees, benches, the corners of shelter-sheds and the hard asphalt – the latter advantageous for knucklebones, ball games, skipping, hopping, and endless varieties of chasing and hiding games.

That capacity to utilise materials at hand and the available space (including areas not intended for play) for their own inventive and imaginative purposes is a dominant characteristic

mentioned by almost every researcher.[11] The youngsters who demonstrated their skill at Marbles to Dorothy Howard had found a patch of earth, but she noted that most had adapted their game – once played 'on open paddocks, earthy playgrounds and sandy footpaths' (Howard, 1960a: 166) – to accommodate to the unyielding surface of the bitumen or asphalt that covers the school yard. In Brisbane in the mid-70s, two physical education academics who observed and recorded the playground games of almost 5,000 children, and who found that '[the] preferred areas [for marbles games] are flat dirt locations in the shade in the summer or in sunny areas protected from the wind in the winter', none the less recorded two smiling lads playing 'Manhole Marbles' in a school where the children 'had developed this particular game in order to play marbles on the grid patterns of the manhole covers in an almost totally bitumen-covered playground.' (Lindsay & Palmer: 124)[12] At her Melbourne Primary School, Russell observed 'Grade 4 boys playing marbles in the drain, even though the drain has water in it'. (Russell, 1994: 83)

'It seems that developmentally humans are disposed towards flexibility before precision, invention and experiment before integration.' (Factor 1988: 180) [13] The old, rigid categories to classify play – sensory-motor, dramatic, fantasy, constructive, and so on – are melded and transformed in children's play. Climbing equipment, now found in most school playgrounds, is used for much more than physical exercise. The monkey bars at Russell's primary school provided a good view of the oval, woods and basketball courts. They were therefore a popular site for numbers of children to sit, chat and muck around.[14] For the youngest they provided the opportunity for a delicious reversal of the laws of nature. A Grade 1 girl explained:

> *Us two sing – 'Everything is upside down.' We sing and shake our legs... You get dizzy... all the buildings are upside down and all the equipment's upside down and all the trees, and it looks like everything's growing from the sky!* (Russell, 1994: 74-5)

Games of Cops and Robbers, a constant of the playground, involved much running and hiding within an elaborate structure of make-believe. The boys (illegally) constructing tunnels and dwellings in the clay for their GI Joes were engrossed in fantasy and drama.

At the same school, another piece of climbing equipment, a set of metal curved bars, was generally used for an elaborate game of Chasey called 'Crocodile, Crocodile'. 'Grade 6 [children] reminisced about playing 'Crocodile' on these bars, and teachers also commented on the long history of this game in this location.' The game was so site-specific that if the curved bars were occupied by non-players, 'children would go off and do something else, rather than go off and find another place to play the game' (Russell, 1994: 81).

Elsewhere, a 'huge sixteen metre-long fallen tree' had been left to rot away in the playground for many years. This was where 'Spaceships' was played by Prep to Grade 2 boys, not only during the time Russell visited the school but continuously for years earlier. 'The detail of the key, the computer room, the engine room [of the spaceship] were all stimulated by the intricate crevices, bumps and nodes caused by the decaying wood.' A Grade 6 boy commented nostalgically on one of the on-site tours: 'this massive log – spaceship – see the way it's ripped out on the side? You could hop in when you were younger and smaller…' (Russell, 1994: 93)

Features of the playground never intended for play may be selected and stubbornly retained for a particular game, despite teachers' disapproval. Children were not supposed to play near school entrances, but metal poles supporting a covered walkway between buildings at Russell's primary school were both a meeting place and a site for swinging, hoppy and chasey games for

Prep to Grade 3 children. Russell remarks that 'This was the spot where many of these children lined up at the end of playtime, so the poles represented secure, familiar territory – their territory.' (Russell, 1994: 76) Further away from the school buildings, 'on a public thoroughfare… a pathway with plenty of access to trees, leaves, flowers and pine log fences for props', two Grade 3 girls played an imaginative and dramatic game they called 'Princesses' and 'Flying Unicorns':

> *The girls used the physical and natural features of their chosen playsite to represent their home and other far-away lands they travelled to… [One girl's] bed was a low pine fence, her shop was a pile of stones, and the kitchen a clump of bushes with a strategically located sawn-off branch which served as the controls for the oven.* (Russell, 1994: 98)

Yet these girls were forbidden to enter their imaginary world because children were not allowed into the school's gardens: 'Krystal… stood on the edge of the forbidden territory, looking in, imagining her kitchen, shop and bedroom from the log fence.' (Russell, 1994: 115)

Moyles may be right that 'Outside the school building lies an area in which the writ of adults plays a less decisive part' (Moyles, 1994: 49), but school rules and regulations certainly limit and often frustrate children's play. Concerns about safety – and increasingly fears of litigation – have resulted in both school and public playgrounds removing 'equipment which is most popular with children … equipment which has a high degree of complexity and that which they can move and manipulate.' In its place comes equipment declared safe – and 'invariably fixed in concrete' (Evans, 1993: 8), and ever more restrictions on active play.

Boys digging illegal tunnels and dwellings for their GI Joes. Melbourne Primary School, 1992
Source – Heather Russell

And then there are the moral panics. In 2002 I read in a newspaper that 'teachers in the United States have banned children from playing cops and robbers as part of a zero-tolerance crackdown on any signs of violence at school. Youngsters at several schools across the US have been punished for pretending to be policeman or criminals.' (*The Age*, 2 April 2002) The frustration caused by these prohibitions is cogently described by a girl of 12 in New South Wales:

> *It's like they get joy out of saying 'you can't do that'… All the games we want to play, they keep banning. At the beginning of the year we started playing kickball, where you run on the basketball court, kick the ball and run around bases. It got banned. I don't know why, they reckoned we might run over a little kid – like, there was no evidence that we'd ever done it or anything. Then we started playing brandings, and they thought we might throw the ball too hard – which we hadn't ever done and we had a soft ball anyway! So that was*

> *banned. Then we started playing goalbreak and then that got banned. That was sort of like tip, and I think it got banned 'cause we played grab 1 2 3, where you don't just tap them, you gotta grab them and hold on for 1 2 3. And then that wasn't allowed, but we played it still for a while… So they get pleasure out of saying 'you're not allowed to do that' and we get pleasure out of saying 'just watch me!'.* (Dockett & Fleer, 1999: 267)

Long ago, educators rejected the notion of the child as a *tabula rasa* – an empty slate on which adults are free to write their own cultural preferences. In the same way, the school playground is not an empty slate – it has been written on in enormous detail by generations of children. That this is so can easily be confirmed by any adult who cares to spend time in a playground, listening and watching. While there have long been educators like the Scotsman David Stow, who in 1839 urged teachers to study the 'uncovered classroom' of the playground, where children could be observed learning from and with each other, few have followed his advice. (Stow, 1839: 189)

Nor have many reflected on the implications of the research findings of scholars such as Vygotsky, who insisted that 'In play a child is always above his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form; in play it is as though the child were trying to jump above the level of his normal behaviour'. (Vygotsky, 1976: 552) Our general indifference to such insights is a consequence, I believe, of our culture's continuing benign neglect of children's imaginative interests, passions and play lives. There is a brutal frankness in the conclusion of one researcher: 'Parents and teachers encourage children to play with each other in order to have time to get on with their adult pursuits'. (Davies, 1982: 60)

Whatever the advantages of well-thought-out and well-designed playgrounds and playground equipment, one cannot argue that they are essential for children to play. Children will play, whatever adults do – or don't do. They always have, and short of serious genetic engineering, they always will.[15] Theirs is no mere imitation of adult life, or practice of skills useful in the distant future. These engagements of mind, heart and imagination are forms of creative invention built on tradition. Everything is possible in play – if the rules allow it. In its own way, play functions for children as the arts do for adults: the flux and chaos of life is temporarily ordered, given form and pattern and meaning. As Robert Louis Stevenson understood: 'Fiction is to the grown man what play is to the child: it is there that he changes the atmosphere and tenor of his life'. (Stevenson,1882)

Knowing all this, what can we do to enrich rather than obstruct the play environment of children in the school playground? I would make three suggestions. First, ensure that student teachers – and student architects and landscape designers – receive a thorough grounding in the whys and wherefores of children's play (play, not sport): this is not a subject to be restricted, as it mostly is at present, to early childhood educators. Second, provide ongoing in-service classes for teachers and parents in schools – classes that build on their own (generally fond) memories of playlore and encourage them to deconstruct the regulations and restrictions which entangle school playgrounds in a sticky web of forbiddings and resistance. And third – and most importantly – consult the children. Robin Moore was right when he said that 'We have no business making policies and spending money on facilities for children until we have an understanding about what parts of the environment children actually use, and why'. (Moore, 1986: xvi) It is the young inhabitants of the playground who are our teachers when it comes to play.

Notes

1 This article was first published in *Childhood*, Volume 11, Number 2 May 2004. Reproduced with permission.

2 An interesting elaboration of the persistence and renewal of this traditional knowledge can be found in Krim Benterrak et al (1984).

3 In the last 30 years, there is a large body of research and writing describing and discussing the traditions of children's play, in schoolyards and elsewhere. In this period, leading English-language scholars in this field include Iona and Peter Opie (1959, 1969,1988, 1997), Mary and Herbert Knapp (1976), Helen Schwartzman (1987), Alasdair Roberts (1980) and Brian Sutton-Smith (1964, 1976,1977, 1999).

4 The Danish scholar Flemming Mouritsen (Mouritsen, 1999, Mouritsen, n.d.) has explored some of the connections between our view of the child (and children's culture) and the 'savage' implicit in developmental theory. See his *Child and Youth Culture*, and the discussion paper 'Project Demolition: Children's Play-culture and the Concept of Development'. For a much earlier psychoanalytically-based theory of children's play, see Winnicott (1971).

5 Scholars not mentioned elsewhere in this article who consider continuity and change in children's play include Gregory Bateson (1955), Ann Richman Beresin (1999), Kornei Chukovsky (1963), Linda Hughes (1999), Robin Moore (1986) and Colin Ward (1978).

6 Despite the gradual increase in this research, its influence is far from widespread. Thus a recent ambitious and scholarly text, A *History of Childhood: Children and Childhood in the West from Medieval to Modern Times* (Heywood, 2001) by Colin Heywood includes neither play nor playgrounds in the index, has brief sections on games but no mention of playgrounds even in the school section.

7 Bernard Mergen's (1999) 'Children's Lore in School and Playgrounds' offers an economical survey of playground studies, particularly in the US. There have been many, often nostalgic, accounts of the free movement of children in play before the increasing control of the young through schools, streets of traffic, feared strangers, etc. And some writers compare the school playground unfavourably with other sites where children play. In contrast, I want to suggest that school playgrounds remain one of the few sites available to the young in cities in many countries where, in comparatively large numbers, and within the (sometimes burdensome) limitations of site and rules, they have relative freedom to play as they wish, with those they choose.

8 Dr Dorothy Howard was born in Texas in 1902 and died in Massachusetts in 1996. During her long life she made a signal contribution to the study of children's folklore in the US. She was probably the first person in the English-speaking world to gain a doctorate (in 1938) for a study of children's 'folk jingles' – the rhymes, chants and songs of American children in the 1930s. As well as collecting and teaching, Dorothy Howard wrote extensively about the significance of children's inherited and adapted play traditions, an informal educational arena operating 'three feet below adult eye level and invisible to myopic adults'. In recognition of her outstanding scholarship, The Association for the Study of Play (TASP) presented her with its first Distinguished Achievement award in 1981.

Dorothy Howard was also a pioneer researcher in Australia. In her ten months in Australia in 1954-55 as a post-doctoral Fulbright scholar based at the University of Melbourne, she travelled across the land, collecting and documenting children's games and verbal lore in cities, country towns and small rural communities. Her meticulous work laid the foundation for research into children's folklore in this country.

9 All the material collected by Dorothy Howard while in Australia, including photographs and play memorabilia, is held in the Australian Children's Folklore Collection at Museum Victoria, Melbourne, Australia. For a discussion of her fieldwork see Factor (1988). For a more general survey of her contribution to children's folklore studies, see Grider (1994). Dorothy Howard published a series of articles in American scholarly journals about her findings in Australia which are listed in the Bibliography.

10 In the Australian context see for example the individual and collaborative work of Ian Turner (1978), Wendy Lowenstein (1974), June Factor (1986, 1988, 2000, 2001), Peter Lindsay and Denise Palmer (1981), Sue Dockett (1999), John Evans (1993), Bronwyn Davies (1982) and previous research by Heather Russell (1986, 1994, 1997).

11 The doyenne of children's folklorists, Iona Opie, represents the view of many other researchers in her account of her 13 years visiting the same school playground, *The People in the Playground*: 'Every feature of the playground is used: the corners and walls of the buildings; the fences (as "home", or for tying one end of a skipping rope); the ledge outside the largest temporary classroom (for walking along, or as a vantage point, or for a game of King of the Castle); the flat drain covers and slotted drain covers (as sanctuaries or as marbles boards); the small cavities at the foot of "the marbles fence", where the asphalt meets the grit surface of the lane; the dust-bowl at the edge of the grass, used for flinging toy cars.' (Opie, 1993:11) See also Marc Armitage's (2001) description of an English school playground.

12 Lindsay & Palmer (1981: 121) also noted that 'The games are not to be found in all [Brisbane school] playgrounds because in some schools they are banned and in others they are definitely not encouraged.'

13 This view derives some support from Jerome Kagan's observation that 'The human brain, like the brain of a rat, is biased initially to attend to generality rather than particularity.' (Kagan, 2000:2)

14 'Mucking around' is an all-purpose term encompassing casual conversation, joking, teasing, showing off, etc.

15 The ubiquity of play, especially in primates, is now the subject of new research by a number of biologists and other scientists, who are speculating that 'play has evolved to build bigger brains… play activates many different parts of the brain… [and] also seems to activate higher cognitive responses… play creates a brain that has greater behavioural flexibility and improved potential for learning in later life' (Furlow, 2001:29-31)

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Where have all the players gone?

Olga S. Jarrett

Think of how you played as a child and what you learned from your play experiences. When I was a child, I had rich play experiences. Like many children today, we did not live in a safe neighborhood. I did not have the freedom to roam the streets, but we used our tiny backyard to the max. At home with my brother or with my friends, we played detectives, designing our own 'who-done-its', played school and made up tests, and played supermarket, shopping for products from our pantry with pretend money. Other memorable experiences included dress-ups, making up complex scenarios with dolls and dollhouses, being an explorer among the hollyhocks in our small backyard, making up puppet shows, playing board games, and designing a museum of natural history in a bedroom cabinet. When we got tired of having our baseball go over the fence, we sometimes got taken to a park to play. On vacation, we made sand castles at the beach and moss gardens and stick log cabins in the mountains. My half-day kindergarten did not teach me to read. Instead, we played at the sand table, learned singing games and did art projects. In school we had recess twice a day and an hour to walk home for lunch. We had art and music every week; and we had time to play after school since we did not have homework until 4th grade. I see many connections between how I played as a child and my adult work and hobbies, and I strongly suspect that play and informal learning experiences affected my approaches to learning (creativity, problem solving ability, and persistence) more than my formal school experiences.

What is happening to play? Children in America seem to be having fewer and fewer opportunities for positive play experiences. I see four trends that are eating into children's opportunities for play and fun in general:

- *Abolition of recess.* Many of the schools in at least 10 states have abolished recess, causing children to spend many six hour days without exercise or down time. Even kindergarten is affected. A recent survey of Georgia schools suggests that 25% of the kindergarten children do not get daily recess. They are indoors all day. Children without recess miss an opportunity to chase each other, make up their own games, decide what is fair and who is 'it' and hone their physical skills and imagination on playground equipment. The pressure to increase test scores has caused many school systems to opt for 'uninterrupted instructional time'. Nationwide (Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Linver & Hofferth, 2002) and in my home state of Georgia (Jarrett, 2003), the children most likely to be deprived of recess are African American or Hispanic children living below the poverty line. Since children who usually have recess consider it punishment when recess is withdrawn, one could consider that whole segments of the population are being punished daily. What are the outcomes of a no recess policy? Dale, Corbin and Dale (2000) found that children who are inactive at school are even more in active after school. My own research suggests there might be more classroom management problems. (Jarrett, Maxwell, Dickerson, Hoge, Davies and Yetley,1998) What about increases in obesity, lack of concentration, problems with learning social skills, lack of creativity, and increases in inappropriate play in the classroom?

- *Academic pressure at younger and younger ages*. Over the past 10 years, I have seen significant changes in Kindergarten and pre-Kindergarten (pre-K) curricula. Kindergarten is more like first grade was 10 years ago, and pre-K (4 year-olds) is looking more like

Kindergarten was in 1994. Kindergarten once was a ‘children’s garden’ where five-year-olds played in block areas, housekeeping centers, with puzzles and games, and with sand and water. There was circle time with books and story telling, music and movement, and outdoor play. As I have supervised student teachers in kindergarten classes over the past ten years, I have seen major changes. The block and housekeeping areas have been removed, and children receive formal reading instruction for most of the day. Children who can’t read at the end of kindergarten are considered behind. A pilot survey which my doctoral students conducted with veteran kindergarten teachers last summer showed that teachers are concerned that today’s five-year-olds seem less creative and less able to entertain themselves than five-year-olds were a decade ago.

What about pre-K programs? Early academics is becoming a growing focus of these programs as well. New trends include testing in Head Start and the abolition of naps in pre-K to allow for more academic time. (Carr, 2004) According to policy-makers, focus on academics in pre-K is needed to prepare children for kindergarten, where a focus on academics is needed to prepare children for first grade. But what happens where children are allowed to play during the early years? In Finland, children learn through play until they enter formal schooling at age seven. (Ojanen, n.d.) They start out a bit behind, but they soon catch up. In international research designed to compare test results from different countries (Program for international Student Assessment), Finland is the highest scoring country in literacy and near the top in mathematics and science. Finnish teenagers score high on engagement and interest in reading. They read because they enjoy it .(Valijarvi, Linnakyla, Kupari, Reinikainen, Arffman, 2000) In contrast, a second-grader I know who learned to read early and was rewarded for reading many books as part of the Accelerated Reader program, refused to read at all during the summer. Reading for him was work rather than fun. Does academic pressure at younger and younger ages deprive children of prerequisite play skills that help build understandings and positive approaches to learning?

- *More structured and/or more passive leisure time*. Children whose parents have the time and money to involve them in lessons, organizations and sports often lead very structured lives, as they spend after school hours, Saturdays and summers in one program after another. They don’t have much time for free play. On the other hand, latch-key children generally don’t have much opportunity to play either. They are expected to stay at home and not have friends over to play. These children are more apt to spend their leisure time watching TV or using the computer alone than in playing school, playing board games, exploring outdoors in the fields and woods or in playing outdoor games. Are over-structured children suffering from stress? Are ‘couch potatoes’ more likely to be obese? Do they expect to be entertained? Do children with little outdoor experience care less about the environment? Eminent scientists have reflected on their early freedom to investigate as important preparation for scientific careers. Where do budding scientists learn how to investigate if school and after-school experiences do not allow it?

- *Funding cutbacks and No Child Left Behind.* The pressure of standardized testing mandated by the **No Child Left Behind** legislation has taken a lot of the fun out of teaching and learning. Many schools are teaching only what will be covered on the test. In some cases, this has meant cuts in physical education, art, music, science and social studies. The subjects that are not tested are often not taught at all. And the subjects that are tested tend

> to focus on topics and concepts that can be tested by multiple choice tests. The National Science Education Standards (National Research Council, 1996) focus on science process skills, but scientific behaviour is not readily tested with multiple choice tests. Will a generation of students be turned off science?
>
> Many schools have scripted programs that give teachers no leeway to draw on the children's interests or make learning fun. One teacher in my master class has to teach five scripted programs each day, allowing him not more than 15 minutes a day to individualize the curriculum. Pep rallies for standardized tests have replaced pep rallies for sports. Interestingly, a school in Canada that devoted one third of the day to playful activities such as art, music, and physical activities saw an improvement in attitude, fitness and test scores in spite of less time spent on academics. (Martens, 1982)

I am concerned about the pressure for more time on task and earlier academics. I wonder about the long term effects of less time for outdoor play and less time for activity-based learning. An unfortunate experiment is going on that could show what happens when young children do not have the opportunity to play. Are we ready to study it?

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Play in Cuba

Gwenda Beed Davey

In January 2005 I attended the Ninth International Symposium on Social Communication, held in Cuba's second city, Santiago de Cuba. Post-conference traveling took me from one end of this beautiful island to the other, and provided a number of opportunities to photograph some examples of children's play. The photos were taken by my Canadian cousin and travelling companion, Patricia Moss.

Source – Gwenda Beed Davey

Trinidad is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, a town whose buildings are almost unchanged since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the casa particular (private bed and breakfast house) where we stayed, the daughter of the house has enlisted her cousin and next-door neighbour to help her make a friendship bracelet (while he does his homework!). Out in the street, the younger boy is receiving instruction from his older friend in some of the correct rhythms for Cuban music. Given the importance of traditional music in Cuban life, it seems necessary to begin learning at a young age.

In the capital city, Havana, children play baseball, an enormously popular game here, in a convenient park, and others take to wheels in a plaza in central Havana. In a generally low-income economy, clearly some children's families are able to provide these expensive toys. Perhaps they are some of the lucky families working in the lucrative tourist industry. I was told that last year 600,000 Canadian tourists visited Cuba – it's only a three and a half hour flight from Toronto to Havana.

Gwenda Beed Davey is co-editor of *Play and Foklore*. She is an Honorary Research Fellow in the Cultural Heritage Centre for Asia and the Pacific at Deakin University, Burwood, Vic.

Child's Play: Dorothy Howard and the Folklore of Australian Children

Morag Fraser

Walk in to the Melbourne Museum this week and you'll be confronted by a storybook line up of huge, improbable creatures. There's a rhino, a zebra, a bison and a mountain goat, all taxidermed to attention. But in between stands a boar, facing the other way round, his bottom stuck out at all comers. The children near me who stood and stared at the animals were as enchanted and astonished as I was. Stripes? Rumpled stone leather for skin? Tobacco horns? Can such things really exist? And, like me, they skittered round the back to look the boar in the face. Then they laughed, and laughed. Someone on the Museum's curatorial or promotions staff understands the importance of play and how gleefully children (and perennial child-adults) respond to play. One good game begets another. Any good teacher knows how to exploit that.

Upstairs in the Australia Gallery of the Museum last week another game was in progress. It swirled around the launch of a book about a remarkable 20thcentury East Texan educator called Dorothy Howard. The book, published by the Museum, is called *Child's Play* and collects the observations of this remarkable woman who came to Australia in the 1950s to explore the games our children played.

The book's editors, June Factor and Kate Darian-Smith, last week had a front-row audience of primary school children and a back row audience of adults. Dorothy Howard would have approved. Instead of talking about children, the adults had to talk with them. Engage. Play. Learn.

Children at the Launch
Source – Museum Victoria

Dorothy Howard seems to have been one of those rare people who can retain a childlike openness to experience while still managing to grow up. In the United States, as a young teacher doing it hard in the classroom, she made a virtue out of necessity by turning her yard duty into a laboratory. She became fascinated by the ritual complexity and inventiveness of children's play and used her understanding of it to change her own teaching. The fascination burgeoned into a lifetime of research.

Howard was an explorer – one suspects she couldn't help herself. In 1950, Australia, for a Texan, was along way away – the country of the great silence, she was told. It had no folklore of its own, they said. Australia's children played only the games of their colonial inheritance. And besides, there was nothing serious about child play anyway. Do Freud instead.

But Dorothy Howard was the kind of woman who would always have been first to run around the back and look the boar in the face. She got herself a Fulbright research grant, came here and

spent ten months travelling all around Australia as ‘a practiced playground snoop’. Her observations, collected in *Child’s Play*, detail exactly what she found but also what kind of woman, and teacher, she was. Australian children, unsurprisingly, were not the dutiful parrots they were supposed to be. Their games, rhymes, riddles, jokes, autographs albums, oaths and initiation rites were that paradoxical and intriguing combination – traditional ritual and dynamic invention.

In Dorothy Howard’s findings is a pedagogical principle so often articulated but as often ignored. If you start with children, trust to their innate wit, to the capacity for patterning and connecting and refashioning the world around them that is evidenced in their play, then you will be better able to teach them. And, as bonus, you too will learn.

A few weeks back Kevin Donnelly, writing in these pages (2 May 2005), lamented the ‘lowest common denominator’ literature being served up, particularly to boys, in our current curriculum. The likes of ‘The Day My Bum Went Psycho’ won’t lift their aspirations, he argued.

I don’t wish to trade book lists with my fellow columnist. And I’ll cheer any kid who reads The Iliad and will chant it happily alongside him. But I did wonder what Dorothy Howard would have thought of Kevin Donnelly’s prescriptions. There was something back-to-front about them. Children love the play of ‘The Day My Bum Went Psycho’. Just as they would love the irreverent inventiveness of the playground rhymes documented in Dorothy Howard’s research. Like this one:

A man sat down by the sewer
And by that sewer he died.
When the case was brought to the coroner’s court
They called it suicide.

From the energy generated by that play – word play, thought play – student and teacher can catch sparks and go on to explore other worlds. It is entirely possible to inspire children with all the best that has been thought and said while at the same time acknowledging the culture in which they live and encouraging what they themselves can do. That is, if we give them the space and licence in which to do it.

This article was originally published in the education supplement of *The Age* newspaper (Melbourne) 23rd of May2005.Morag Fraser is an adjunct professor in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at La Trobe University.

Source – Museum Victoria

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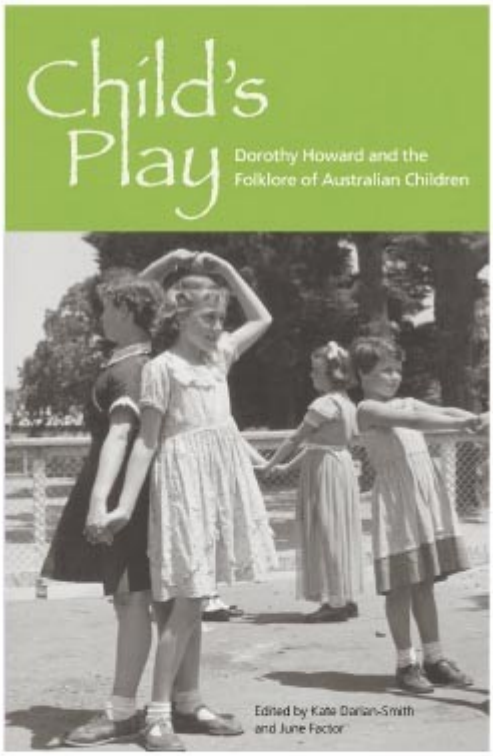
CHILD'S PLAY: DOROTHY HOWARD AND THE FOLKLORE OF AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN

Edited by June Factor and Kate Darian-Smith

About the book

American academic Dorothy Howard visited Australia in the 1950s on a Fulbright Scholarship: her mission was to observe and document the play and folklore of Australian children. Fifty years later, Howard's original essays have been re-published, along with contextual essays by international scholars in the fields of history and folklore. Howard's meticulously documented accounts of hopscotch, knucklebones, marbles and string games reveal the Australian schoolyard as it was in the 1950s. Her insights into the world of the child are as relevant now as then. Essays by well-known authors June Factor, Kate Darian-Smith and Brian Sutton-Smith pay tribute to Howard's fascination with and advocacy of child's play.

Format: Limp, gatefold cover
240pp, 216 x 140mm
Illus: black and white photographs and line drawings
RRP: $24.95
ISBN: 0 9577471 7 9
Publication date: May 2005



From the book: 'I suggest that while we are studying children on the playground, they are studying us in the classroom, at home and in public gatherings; and expressing their findings — not in esoteric, academic jargon but in subtle but direct satire. I suggest we can learn about ourselves by listening to them …' Dorothy Howard

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