

**Paper presented at conference :
Children's cultures: universality and diversity
15-17 March 2007 University de Nantes, France**

WITH RESPECT: ADULT CONTEXTS FOR CHILDREN'S PLAY

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Children's play: adult recognition and threats

The Australian Research Council is the Australian Government's principal provider of research funds for projects in science, social science and the humanities, and on 1 July 2006 the ARC announced a major award for a project in children's culture, named *Childhood, Tradition and Change: a national study of the historical and contemporary practices and significance of Australian children's playlore*¹. This 'linkage' project involved a consortium of three universities, Melbourne and Deakin Universities (Melbourne, Victoria), Curtin University (Perth, Western Australia), the National Library of Australia and Museum Victoria. Dr June Factor, a keynote speaker at this conference is a Principal Researcher with the ARC *Childhood* project.

In a climate of fierce competition for research funds in Australia, the provision of funding for a four-year, nation-wide project on children's play is a clear indication of the growing importance being accorded to children's cultures, not only in Australia, but internationally.



Playing 'monkeys' on the cricket nets, Preston West PS
Photographer – Judy McKinty

In 2003 the UNESCO Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage called on signatories to safeguard and 'ensure respect for the intangible cultural heritage of the communities, groups and individuals concerned'². Children's traditional play is part of the intangible cultural heritage of children around the world, and in many places it is, indeed, in need of safeguarding and respect from the adults who influence children's lives.

In May 2006 Dr Michael Patte presented a paper to The Association for the Study of Play Conference in Canada. His paper was entitled 'What's Happened to Recess?'³ and looks at free play time in Pennsylvania's elementary schools. Patte discussed the alarming decimation of children's play in many schools in the United States. He quotes from the American Association for the Child's Right to Play (2004), which states that

Since 1990, 40 percent of the nation's 16,000 school districts have either modified, deleted or are considering deleting recess from the daily elementary school schedule due to increased pressure from numerous sources to improve academic achievement.⁴

Of particular significance, notes Patte, is the *No Child Left Behind Act*⁵, signed into law by President George W. Bush on 8 January 2002, which has resulted in many places in a focus on academic achievement and evaluation to the detriment of children's free play, and the development of an adult-created *political* context inimical to children's cultures.

Michael Patte's 2006 TASP paper called on adults such as teachers, schools and families to oppose this political intervention in children's lives by a series of measures. Patte argues that adults should

- Advocate for recess at the local, state and national level.
- Document the positive outcomes associated with recess.
- Initiate public discourse concerning recess.
- Hold public officials accountable for policies that impinge upon daily recess.

The Australian Research Council project *Childhood, Tradition and Change* will provide an opportunity to literally examine the 'state of play' in Australian primary school playgrounds in every Australian State and Territory, to establish whether playtime is similarly under threat in Australia, and whether traditional games still flourish alongside today's electronic games and other forms of activity.

The National Library of Australia's *Children's Folklore* project

An inspiration for the application to the Australian Research Council was a project carried out in 2005 and 2006 and initiated by the National Library of Australia's Oral

History and Folklore Section. This *Children's Folklore* project aimed to enrich the National Library's considerable holdings in children's folklore which are listed in an on-line guide entitled *Fish Trout, You're Out!*⁶ The Library's project was carried out in the State of Victoria, in three primary schools, and became a *de facto* pilot for the Australian Research Council project, in which the National Library plays a major role.

The pilot project provided some interesting findings. Harcourt Valley Primary School is a rural school in the heart of Victoria's apple growing region. It has 100 pupils and is ethnically almost entirely Anglo-Celtic.



Harcourt Valley Primary School
Photographer – Judy McKinty

By contrast, Preston West Primary School is a culturally diverse school in an inner suburb of Melbourne. It has 300 pupils from over fifty countries, and only 50% are of Anglo-Celtic background. There are 29 home languages other than English spoken by the children, including Arabic, Greek, Hindi, Indonesian, Italian, Mandarin, Somali, Urdu and Vietnamese. Both Harcourt Valley and Preston West Primary Schools have a harmonious playground and a rich play culture.

Adult encouragement of play

In both schools play has been facilitated by contexts, both environmental and socio-psychological, in which adults have played a crucial role. During the 1990s, two Harcourt primary schools (Harcourt and Harcourt North) were merged to form Harcourt Valley Primary. During the merger discussions for the selection of the site for the new school, parents and staff alike agreed that major criteria were that the site had to be the same or larger than the existing Harcourt North school, and that it had to have an existing pine plantation. Pine tree plantations are a common financial investment for schools in this region, and were highly valued by many teachers and parents, as well

as children, as a children's play area. In particular, sociodramatic play flourished in 'the pinies', as the plantations were called, through the building of 'cubby houses'. The cubbies were often elaborate constructions, with children bringing building materials from home, even though they may have a short life, when the children would pull the structures down and begin building again. In the case of the Harcourt schools, past and present, adults helped to provide a rich environmental context, 'the pinies', for children's play.



Making cubby houses in 'the pinies', Harcourt Valley PS
Photographer – Gordon Dowell

In contrast to Harcourt Valley, Preston West Primary School is a double-storey brick building in a densely-populated inner suburb of Melbourne. The school opened in 1915, over 90 years ago. Traditionally a working-class suburb, Preston now has a few pockets of expensive housing, so the children at the school come from a diverse range of ethnic groupings and socio-economic backgrounds. The school prides itself on being 'representative of the modern day multicultural Australia'⁷.



Junior assembly area, Preston West Primary School
Photographer – Judy McKinty

The Principal, Craig French, sees the school as being very much part of the wider community, and the teachers take a positive and inclusive approach in their interactions with the children. For instance, one of the guiding principles of the school is to recognise and reward achievement and effort, not just academically, but in all areas of the child's development. There is a weekly award for academic achievement, but there is also another award, called the 'You Can Do It' Award⁸, which is presented to children each week for 'getting along'⁹, which in this case means having positive interactions with each other. This type of supportive school environment builds the children's confidence and self-esteem, and encourages them to feel a sense of ownership in their school.

Outside in the playground, there is a Yard Duty Reward system, which aims 'to encourage positive playground behaviour by rewarding those who play well, care for others, help out and so on.'¹⁰ This means that the teachers on yard duty assume a different role to the traditional patrolling supervisor, whose job it is to keep an eye out for children who might be enjoying themselves too noisily, too roughly, too quickly, in the wrong place or even, in some instances, upside-down.

At Preston West, the time spent outside in the playground is regarded as an important part of the whole school day, and free play is recognised as being a fundamental activity for children. The adults have what Iona and Peter Opie call 'respect for the juvenile code'¹¹. During the recess and lunch breaks, children go about the serious business of organising their play without having to take into account a long list of adult-imposed restrictions. This enables them to plan their activities knowing that they will not be disturbed before the school bell calls them back into class.

Landscapes of children's play

At the beginning of the *Children's Folklore* project, Ruth Hazleton and Judy McKinty documented the playground by taking photos and mapping the different play spaces. There are areas with different ground surfaces: hard asphalt, grass, gravel, wood chips, and natural or built features: trees, taps, logs, fences, bushes, seats, play equipment and the school building itself. Almost everything is used for playing on, under, in, behind, between and with.

This is a school playground which has not been landscaped or tidied up. It is full of what Danish researcher Kim Rasmussen calls 'children's places',¹² special places created by children themselves, or used by them in a certain way, that have a meaning and significance largely hidden from adults. Rasmussen makes the distinction between

these places and 'places for children'¹³, areas carefully designed and made for children's use by architects, planners and other well-meaning adults. Heather Russell, an Australian ethnographer who studied the relationship between play and place in an Australian primary school, asserts that

There is no doubt that children's perception of the landscape is different from adults'. Children use the environment, play with it and invest a meaning into it which adults do not know about or care to ask about.¹⁴



These boys always play their card games in this narrow space between two buildings, Preston West PS.

Photographers - Judy McKinty, Ruth Hazleton

Some of the 'children's places' at Preston West Primary School include exposed roots at the base of a tree; the space between the fence and the cricket nets, where you can play 'Monkeys'; the far back corner of the grassed oval – the traditional place for Grade 6 boys and girls to play a secret adolescent game called 'Drop the Tray'; a particular corner of the covered walkway where boys always go to play their card game and another popular card-playing area – the narrow space between the sports equipment shed and another building. Drinking taps are used as 'the barleys',¹⁵ a safe rest area in the game of 'Gang Tiggy', and a green, grassy strip under the shade of some peppercorn trees is where boys plan their battles and choose sides when they play 'Lord of the Rings' and other war games.



Planning war games among the leaves of a peppercorn tree,
Preston West PS
Photographer - Judy McKinty

Within the cultural landscape of the playground, the children are master organisers. They determine what they will play and where, according to the 'place traditions'¹⁶ within the school. Heather Russell determined that

These place traditions imposed another layer of order on the apparent disorder of recess and lunchtime activity. Place traditions defined appropriate areas for certain types of play without having to have exclusive age-related play areas dictated by teachers.¹⁷

It should be noted that all grade levels at Preston West, except the Preparatory year, the first year of school, are composite classes – Grade 1/2, Grade 3/4 and Grade 5/6 – so the age range within each class is greater than in traditional single year levels. Outside, the children play freely across different age-groups, as in their own families, and this results in a harmonious playground, with no hint of territorial boundaries.

Freedom and imagination in the playground

The richness of the play at the school reflects the children's sense of ownership of the playground and their easy familiarity with every inch of space in the schoolyard. The large gravel area, often the first to be redeveloped in schools of this era, is dusty and hot in summer, but is perfect for role-playing games like 'Mums, Dads and Gardens', played under the shade of a small tree, using found materials like a paper bag, pieces of glass, leaves, sticks and stones; and where else could you make 'Snow Angels' in summer? The gravel version is called 'Sand Fairies'. In winter the whole gravel area becomes a seething mass of children playing marbles. The teachers describe it as a phenomenon to see with one's own eyes.



Making 'sand fairies' on the gravel, Preston West PS
Photographer - Judy McKinty

Games that use natural and found materials are played all over the playground. The potential for imaginative play in a discarded snack food bag or lolly wrapper, combined with some dirt, sticks, stones and leaves, is boundless. In the schoolyard we saw two small boys playing in the sandpit with an empty drink bottle and some sticks; three girls playing 'Noughts and Crosses with Drawing Rocks' by scratching a grid on the asphalt with a rock and using wood chips as their playing pieces; a 'cake' made from sand and sticks and a shop with a display of 'goods' gathered from the surroundings for sale, with the shop counter already provided, albeit unintentionally, by the adults who designed the play equipment.

Rainy day play: an exercise in trust

If the playground is the domain of the children, so, too, is the classroom at recess and lunchtime on wet days. The Wet Day Timetable is an exercise in trust, with the teachers adjourning to the staff room and the children playing in their classrooms. One teacher supervises four classrooms at a time by visiting them in turn during the break. Apart from this required supervision, the children are free to organise themselves and their time in their own way, resulting in happy, independent activity.

On one rainy day, Grade 5 & 6 students planned a dance for their graduation, played table tennis and explained to us how boys and girls kiss without touching lips in 'Spin the Bottle'. In Grade 3 & 4, they were spinning around in the teacher's chair and making 'Chatterboxes', in Grade 1 & 2 they were reading and playing games and in Grade Prep they were making a cubby house from chairs and a piece of cloth, and playing 'Harry Potter' with magic wands made from construction pieces.

At the end of the break when the bell rang, the teachers appeared at the door and called to the children. The play equipment was packed up, the classroom restored to order, and classes began again.

Respect for the culture of childhood

Children in Australia attend primary school for seven years, and these are also their peak playing years, the running, jumping, hopping, skipping, clapping and 'mucking around' years when they become immersed in their own culture and play lore. It is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. In our desire to become 'the clever country'¹⁸, we should not forget Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989):

'States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts'¹⁹.

By respecting 'the juvenile code'²⁰ that exists in schools as it does elsewhere in children's lives, the teachers and parents of Harcourt Valley and Preston West Primary Schools are giving children a positive alternative to the kind of school that prompted the Opies to write:

'...in our continual search for efficient units of educational administration we have overlooked that the most precious gift we can give the young is social space: the necessary space - or privacy - in which to become human beings.'²¹



Quiet play in the shade among the roots of a tree,
Preston West PS
Photographer - Judy McKinty

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² UNESCO, *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, Paris, 17 October, 2003
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001325/132540e.pdf>

³ 'Recess' is the term frequently used to describe free playtime, usually in mid-morning, in primary schools.

⁴ Patte, Michael M., 'What's Happened to Recess: Examining Time Devoted to Recess in Pennsylvania's Elementary Schools' in *Play & Folklore*, No. 48, October 2006, p. 6

⁵ United States of America in Congress, Public Law 107-110: *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, 8 January 2002
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⁶ National Library of Australia, *Fish Trout You're Out!*: Children's Folklore in the Oral History and Folklore Collection
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⁷ Preston West Primary School, 2006
http://www.prestonwest.vic.edu.au/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=14&Itemid=27

⁸ Preston West Primary School, 2006
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⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ Preston West Primary School, 2006
http://www.prestonwest.vic.edu.au/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=34&Itemid=4

¹¹ Opie, I & P, *Children's Games in Street and Playground*, Oxford University Press, London, 1969, p14

¹² Rasmussen, Kim, 'Places for Children – Children's Places', in *Childhood*, vol 11, No. 2, Sage Publications, London, 2004, p. 155

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ Russell, H., 'Revisiting the "Child Festival": some thoughts on new directions for play research in primary school settings, in *Play & Folklore* No 33, December 1997, p. 6

¹⁵ 'The barleys' at this school means a safe place where players can rest during a game. Anyone touching 'the barleys' is temporarily out of the game and cannot be caught.

¹⁶ Russell, H., 'Foo Foo Come To School: A case study in place-making traditions in a primary school playground', in *Australian Children's Folklore Newsletter* (now *Play & Folklore*) Nos 30 - 31, November 1996, p. 12

¹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸ Hawke, R.J., *Speech by the Prime Minister to the National Press Club*, Canberra, 21 March, 1990
<http://docushare.unisa.edu.au/docushare/dsweb/Get/Document-1446/1-6-3-10.pdf>
N.B. The notion of Australia as a 'clever country' has been a recurring theme in Australian political commentary since Hawke's speech.

¹⁹ UNESCO, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 1989, Article 31
http://www.unesco.org/education/pdf/CHILD_E.PDF

²⁰ Opie, P. & I. 1969, op. cit.

²¹ *ibid*

SPECIAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Gordon Dowell, researcher and photographer at Harcourt Valley Primary School
Ruth Hazleton, co-researcher and photographer at Preston West Primary School