

---

## **Book Review**

Bishop, J., & Curtis, M. (Eds.) (2001) *Play today in the primary school playground*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

ISBN 0 335 20715 4 (pb) 0335 20716 2 (hb)

**Reviewer: Ann Moore**

*de Lissa Institute of Early Childhood and Family Studies,  
University of South Australia, Australia*

*Play today in the primary school playground* includes a selection of papers, in revised form, presented in 1998 at an international conference entitled 'The State of Play: Perspectives on Children's Oral Culture'. The conference was convened by the editors of the book and hosted at the University of Sheffield by the National Centre for English Cultural Tradition, in association with the Folklore Society.

The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 presents contrasting perceptions of play by adults and children in today's world, with particular reference to the school playground. Part 2 provides a series of in-depth empirical studies of specific schools, playgrounds and current play traditions in Australia, Britain, Continental Europe and North America. Part 3 broadens out to demonstrate the possibilities and importance of play traditions in a number of different contexts. These include the relevance of children's traditional verbal creativity to formal language learning, the potential for sharing in play traditions between generations and different cultural groups in order to foster understanding and respect, and the role of children's free play in promoting their spiritual and psychological well-being.

Each part, with its accompanying chapters has been meticulously researched, is clearly set out and organized. The consistently easy-to-read writing style, makes a strategic use of focused sub-headings, within-text referencing, summaries, listing of relevant and related data, and concluding notes, all of which contribute to accessibility, cross referencing and an insightful comprehension of the main points and issues.

These are further expanded and clarified throughout the book with a generous inclusion of related materials and resources such as photographs, tables, examples of rhymes, chants and even musical notation, all of which contribute to the book's general appeal and interest to a wide audience. The book concludes by considering what constitutes 'play for today'.

The foreword, written by Iona Opie, is of particular interest to me. I have acquired, augmented and transmitted an interpretive form of cultural literacy through dance and drama, mostly in unwritten form, covering more than 55 years in South Africa, Britain and Australia, whereas Iona, with her husband Peter, have tracked, recorded and published many schoolyard traditions since the 1950's.

In the introduction by Julia Bishop and Mavis Curtis, 'folklore', 'childlore' and 'playlore' are defined, as are 'traditional games' with their ongoing processes of continuity and change, stability and variation, dynamism and conservatism. Traditions can be considered to be fluid, actively shaped, stopped, started, altered and renewed according to contemporary frames of reference, as well as from a more fixed perspective.

In Chapter 1, June Factor, whose books *Far Out Brussel Sprout* and *Captain Cook Chased a Chook*, have been favourites with my students since the 1980's, describes how her 25 years spent exploring children's folklore has shaped and coloured her reflections on contemporary attitudes towards childhood. She provides a potent reminder to keep studying the cultures and traditions of childhood as a way of understanding 'the complexity of human growth and change'. She also points out that concepts of childhood and adolescence may change while their actual experience may not!

Curtis continues to elucidate in Chapter 3 how thriving oral traditions in the school playground are transmitted through an apprenticeship of watching, practising and learning by rote. She pictures for us the adult role as one that can foster an environment where culturally specific knowledge is understood and valued by both adults and children.

Elizabeth Grugeon in Chapter 5 further expands on how children's oral playground language can provide insights into the complementary nature that exists between both personal forms of literacy as well as prescribed school literacy.

Acquisition of linguistic skills during informal play already mentioned by Kathryn Marsh, Grugeon and Andy Arleo in earlier chapters is further reinforced in *Widening Perspectives* in Part 3. It seamlessly draws together previously described themes of cultural traditions, many learned in childhood, seen as being pivotal in the formation and expression of cultural identity

J.D.A Widdowson provides in Chapter 7 a timely focus on an often informal form of adult engagement with young children resulting in spontaneous and mutually satisfying playful language, and how this assists them acquire and absorb many nuances of language. He describes how young children incidentally discover most of the key elements of language for themselves supported by a complex vertical process of transmission with adults who 'initiate, encourage, extend, develop, and refine linguistic knowledge and skills'. From these initial family relationships additional horizontal processes evolve with children's expanding peer relationships.

In Chapter 8 Simon Lichman writes about an ongoing folklore project in Israel which serves to address current issues commonly found in a number of societies today: cultural and religious pluralism; transmission of home culture between generations; and coexistence between neighbouring but different communities.

His accompanying photographs of children and adults joining together in traditional games illustrates their particular folkloric focus. Carole Carpenter in Chapter 9 addresses issues of spirituality in childhood. She deplores the commercialization of sport in Canada with its burgeoning entertainment, sports and toy industries. Carpenter suggests that by including Hopscotch in the elementary curricula in some Canadian school districts it effectively removes ownership of the game from the children themselves and transforms it into a measurable skill. This, perhaps, parallels the South Australian enthusiasm for '*Jump Rope for Heart*'. Her plea 'that we achieve our full humanity through play-activity that simultaneously engages body, mind and spirit' brings me back to the hypothetical suggestion I made at the beginning of this review. To it I would add a plea for continuing support and encouragement for challenges that are inherent in middle childhood: the inner reality of forming values congruent with a secure sense of self, and the outer reality of changing social and peer relationships.

Child-friendly play in *every* primary school playground can go a long way towards children achieving and satisfying many realities of importance to them.

### References

- Bruce,T. (1991) *Time to play in early childhood education*, Sydney: Hodder & Stoughton.
- United Nations. (1989) *United Nations convention on the rights of the child*, New York: United Nations.