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The Child's Right to Play

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*American Association for
the Child's Right to Play*

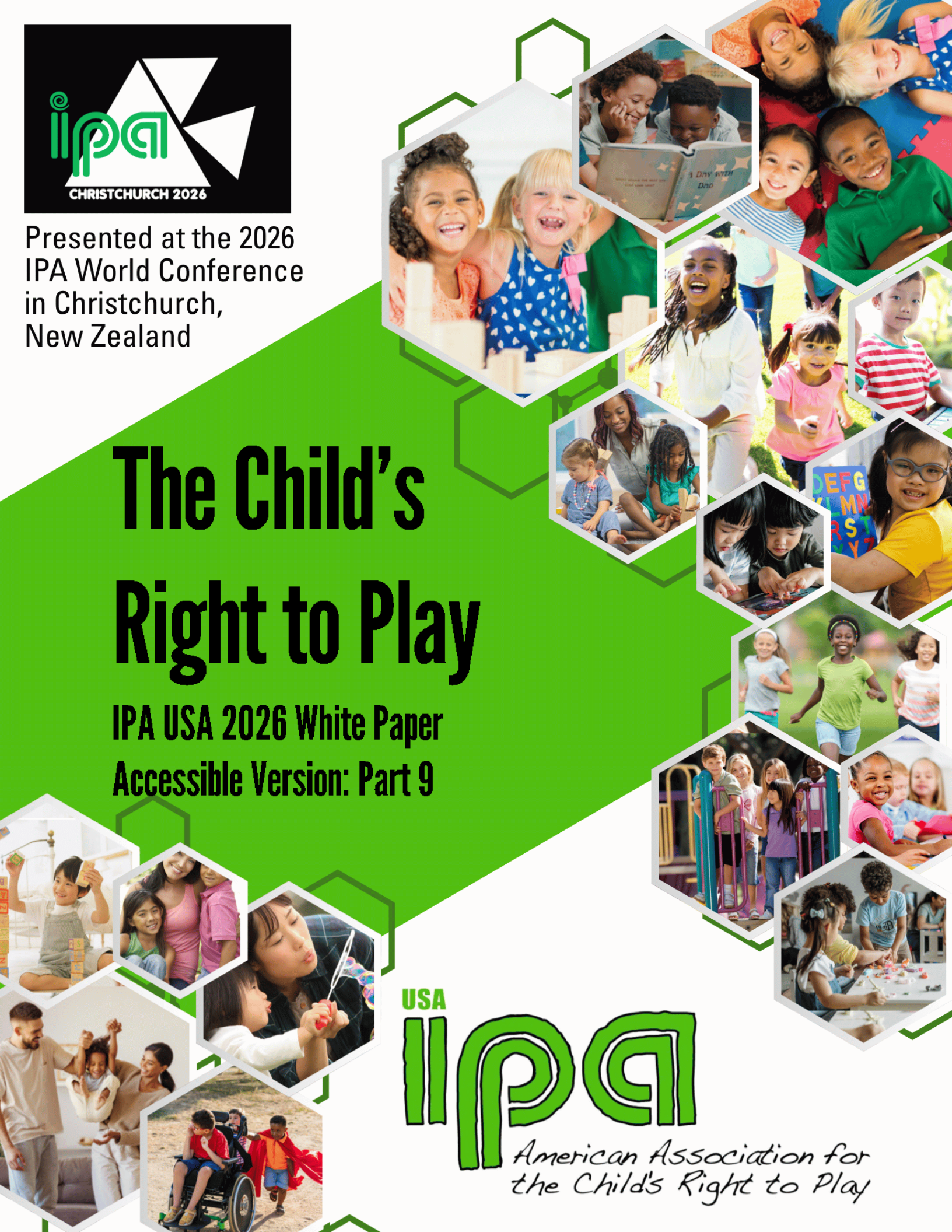


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Executive Summaries

Executive Summaries are organized by category, followed by author.



Play and Culture

Play does not occur in a vacuum. Children's play is shaped by the cultures, communities, traditions, values, and social experiences that surround them. At the same time, play serves as a powerful way for children to express identity, build relationships, make meaning of their experiences, and develop a sense of belonging. The articles in this category explore the dynamic relationship between play and culture, examining how play reflects, challenges, and transforms the social worlds children live in. Through discussions of justice, belonging, identity, and lived experience, these authors highlight the ways play can foster inclusion, amplify diverse perspectives, and create opportunities for connection across differences. The research and insights presented in these articles encourage readers to view play not only as an individual developmental process, but also as a cultural practice that helps children understand themselves, their communities, and their place in the world.

Authors

Play as a Vessel for Justice and Belonging

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Hiding in Plain Sight: Play and Culture

Anna Beresin, PhD

Play as a Vessel for Justice and Belonging

Dr. Sarah Aiono, Longworth Education, Aotearoa New Zealand

Introduction

Across many education systems, play has been steadily displaced by policies and practices that prioritise standardisation, measurement, and early academic performance (Aiono et al., 2024; Paris & Alim, 2017; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Hirsch-Pasek et al., 2025). In classrooms shaped by accountability pressures, children are increasingly expected to demonstrate proficiency in discrete skills long before they have had opportunities to explore, imagine, and connect with others. While these trends affect all learners, their consequences are most acute for children from Indigenous, minoritised, and historically marginalised communities.

For these communities, play has never been peripheral (Aiono & McLaughlin, 2018; Brown & Brown, 2022). It has functioned as a cultural practice through which knowledge is transmitted, relationships are nurtured, and identities are affirmed. When schooling systems marginalise play, they do more than narrow pedagogical options; they undermine children's opportunities to see themselves, their families, and their cultures reflected in learning. Repositioning play as a central and legitimate pedagogy is therefore not only an educational concern, but also a matter of equity and justice (Blucher et al., 2018; Paris & Alim, 2017; Penetito, 2010).

This paper draws on findings from a design-based research project conducted in Aotearoa New Zealand that explored culturally sustaining play pedagogies in an elementary (K– Grade 3) school serving predominantly Māori (indigenous New Zealanders) and Pacific Island children. While grounded in a specific Indigenous context, the findings speak to global challenges faced by education systems, including those in the United States, where similar tensions exist between accountability-driven reforms and culturally responsive practice. This paper shares key insights from the research and offers strategies for reclaiming play as a right that supports belonging, identity, and learning.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings from *Ko te tākaro te kauwaka e pakari ake ai te tangata* reaffirm that play is far more than a recreational activity; it is a powerful driver of learning, identity, and belonging (Aiono et al., 2024; Aiono & Waitoa Tuala-Fata, 2025; Hirsch-Pasek et al., 2025; Whitebread, 2012; Walsh et al., 2007). It is a pedagogical space where learning, identity, and belonging intersect. For Indigenous and minoritised learners, play offers opportunities to see their cultures valued, to build relationships, and to engage deeply with learning in ways that are meaningful and sustaining.

Reclaiming play as a right requires intentional action at multiple levels. Based on the research, the following recommendations are offered:

- Protect time for play by embedding it within the school day and not making it contingent on academic performance.
- Embed cultural knowledge through partnerships with families and communities, allowing local values and traditions to shape play environments.
- Invest in teacher learning through coaching models and reflective tools that make play-based pedagogy visible and actionable.
- Ensure resource equity so that play materials and environments reflect the identities of all learners.
- Shift accountability narratives to recognise belonging, wellbeing, and cultural identity as essential educational outcomes.

The Māori whakataukī, or proverb, that guided the research is *Ko te tākaro te kauwaka e pakari ake ai te tangata*, meaning “Play is the vessel through which children grow strong.” It reminds us that play is fundamental to children’s learning, identity, and wellbeing. When education systems honour this understanding, they create conditions for all children to flourish academically, socially, and culturally.

Hiding in Plain Sight: Play and Culture

Anna Beresin, PhD

Introduction

Children's cultures are often missing from academic discussions of play, even though there is no activity without culture, and play abounds in cultural expression. This paper argues that children's play cultures are visible in objects, movements, sounds, jokes, games, and peer-created rules, but adults often overlook, judge, or absorb them.

Perhaps this omission is rooted in the psychological tradition of emphasizing universal development and individual differences. Perhaps it reflects discomfort with the idea that children have a cultural life without adults. Perhaps it is related to adult ambivalence about culture itself. Even spaces that appear sterile represent a form of cultural withdrawal.

Many discussions with educators regarding their confusion about inside jokes like "six seven" conclude with some variation of adults just not getting children these days. Yet, I have found that asking adults about the joke cycles and neighborhood play of their own youth quickly brings childhood cultures past and present into focus. "Six seven" is not far from "Guess what? Chicken butt." Just ask adults about what made them laugh or to show you how they would begin a game in their neighborhood when they were young.

Viewing childhood carefully from a distance helps, as travelers notice what is different and what is the same, but we may miss these things when we look at our everyday routines at home and at school. When we travel, we notice the handshakes, the melodies, the shapes of things. Children are travelers by design, and growing up means entering into new, confusing, cultural frames. To examine children's play without highlighting culture is to miss the taste of the everyday and the struggles these choices contain.

As with adults, children's culture includes both material culture—the objects made for children and those modified by children for their own use, from paper balls to

go-karts—and immaterial culture related to motion and sound. Children still use found objects in novel ways: rocks for game pieces, string for handwrought string games, and electronic memes shared as if they were marbles. These tangible intangibles can disappear before they are studied; they are often kept secret from adults, typically for good reason. Grownups often pass judgment on children's peer cultures, take them over, or repackage them as novel toys for profit. Yet such bits of culture reveal what is valued in a specific locale and can serve as markers of social tension and humor.

Recommendations

There is no play without a social life; even if toys are stand-ins for people, the players are online, or the "people" are AI bots. There is no social life without culture, so ideally there is no play study without play culture study. Avoiding it as a topic reflects cultural constraint.

A toy store is not the same as a hardware store because of the cultures of children, although both offer means of repair. What materials are used for playful improvisation? Is improvisation even allowed? Recess is not the same as gym because of children's culture. Who holds the chalk in the schoolyard? Who is in charge of the games?

Schools, hospitals, museums, play programs, and institutions of advanced learning miss out on so much by excluding the full range of children's cultural topics. Denying children's very identities as members of specific cultures (plural) disavows their skills in making meaning and making change, bit by bit, craft by craft, game by game, and also weakens broader commitments to equity, advocacy, and opportunity in play settings (Jarrett et al., 2023).

Children's cultures have been increasingly trivialized, and their playtime has been co-opted by adult-organized physical activity or passive entertainment, a colonization of play and acceptable play forms (Elkind, 2007 & 2015). When children's cultures are rendered insignificant, it sends the message that children's voices are unwelcome and can feel like a personal rejection, potentially leading to a clash between the school and the child's home life. Without cultures in play, we lose not just the baby's bathwater, but the siblings in the tub and the rubber duck.

White Papers



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Play and Culture

Play as a Vessel for Justice and Belonging

Hiding in Plain Sight: Play and Culture



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Play as a Vessel for Justice and Belonging

Sarah Aiono, EdD, Longworth Education, Aotearoa New Zealand

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Problem Statement – Issues

Over recent decades, play has increasingly been framed as supplementary rather than essential to learning. In many jurisdictions, early childhood and primary education have been reshaped by “school readiness” narratives that equate quality with early mastery of literacy and numeracy skills. As a result, child-led inquiry, imaginative exploration, and relational learning are often viewed as expendable when time and resources are constrained (Hirsch-Pasek et al., 2025; Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Nicholson et al., 2016; Woodward, 2024; Whitebread, 2012; Martlew et al., 2011).

For Indigenous and minoritised learners, this narrowing of pedagogical space compounds existing inequities, particularly in communities already experiencing systemic disadvantage (Milne, 2020; Berryman et al., 2023; Penetito, 2010; Brown & Brown, 2022). Schooling systems historically designed around dominant cultural norms frequently marginalise the knowledge systems, languages, and values of Indigenous communities. When schools reduce or remove play, children lose one of the few pedagogical spaces where cultural expression, storytelling, collaboration, and intergenerational knowledge can naturally emerge.

The consequences are multifaceted. Children may experience school as a place of compliance rather than connection, limiting opportunities to develop a sense of belonging. Teachers, under pressure to meet external benchmarks, often report uncertainty about how to integrate play meaningfully without compromising curriculum expectations (Blucher et al., 2018; Davis, 2018; Aiono, 2020). Families, particularly those who view education as a pathway to social mobility, may support play in principle but worry that it detracts from academic success (Aiono et al., 2024).

These challenges do not result from individual teacher choices, but from systemic conditions that make play difficult to justify, difficult to measure, and culturally neutral. Without intentional efforts to reframe play as a rigorous and culturally sustaining pedagogy, existing inequities are likely to persist.

Background

The research informing this paper was conducted through the project *Ko te tākaro te kauwaka e pakari ake ai te tangata* (Aiono, Waitoa Tuala-Fata, & McLaughlin, 2024). (“Play is the vessel through which children grow strong”). The study took place in a New Zealand primary school (Kindergarten to Grade 9) located in a low-socioeconomic community, where over 95% of students identified as Māori or Pacific Islanders. The project was developed in partnership with local iwi (tribal) representatives and was guided by Māori values and knowledge systems.

The project used a design-based research methodology, allowing iterative development, implementation, and refinement of a culturally sustaining play framework within authentic classroom contexts (Brown, 1992; Design-Based Research Collective, 2003). This approach enabled researchers, teachers, and community partners to co-construct practices that were responsive to local aspirations while remaining grounded in empirical inquiry.

Central to the project was the adaptation of an existing play-based learning observation and coaching framework to explicitly reflect Indigenous values. Through wānanga (collaborative knowledge-building forums) with teachers and cultural advisors, the project examined play not only as a pedagogical strategy but as a cultural practice connected to manaakitanga (care and reciprocity), whanaungatanga (relationships), and māramatanga (wisdom and understanding).

Data were gathered from multiple perspectives, including children, teachers, and families, using interviews, surveys, and structured classroom observations (Aiono et al., 2024). This multi-voiced approach provided insight into how play was understood, enacted, and experienced before and after introducing the culturally sustaining framework.

Appropriate Approaches and Strategies

Drawing on the findings of the research, this section outlines key approaches and strategies that support the reclamation of play as a culturally sustaining, equitable, and intentional pedagogy within primary education

1. Affirm Play as a Right

One of the clearest findings from the research was the importance of positioning play as a non-negotiable component of the school day. When schools treat play as optional or contingent on completing “real work,” it becomes vulnerable to removal under pressure. In contrast, when play is affirmed as a right, it creates protected space for exploration, creativity, and relational learning (Aiono et al., 2024; White & Ellis, 2007; Hirsch-Pasek et al., 2025).

In the research context, increasing opportunities for sustained play enabled children to articulate clearer connections between play and learning. Over time, children described play as a context for problem-solving, language use, and perseverance. These shifts suggest that when play is consistently valued, children come to recognise it as integral to their learning rather than separate from it.

2. Embed Cultural Knowledge Within Play

The project demonstrated that play is most powerful when it reflects the cultural worlds of the children involved. Teachers intentionally incorporated local stories, artefacts, language, and practices into play environments, ensuring that cultural knowledge was not treated as an add-on but woven into everyday learning.

Children responded by drawing on their own experiences and cultural references in imaginative play, demonstrating increased agency, collaboration, and oral language development. Construction areas became sites for building culturally significant structures, while dramatic play supported storytelling grounded in community narratives. These practices affirmed children’s identities and positioned cultural knowledge as a legitimate and valued source of curriculum content.

3. Prioritise Relational Play

Relationality emerged as a defining feature of culturally sustaining play, with play functioning as a context for strengthening relationships, empathy, and collective responsibility (Berryman et al., 2015; Aiono et al., 2024; Aiono & Waitoa Tuala-Fata, 2025). Children consistently described play as a space to help others, resolve conflicts,

and work collaboratively. Such interactions supported the development of empathy, leadership, and collective responsibility.

Teachers observed that play created opportunities for peer learning and mentoring relationships to emerge organically. These dynamics reinforced the idea that learning is a shared endeavour, aligned with Indigenous understandings of knowledge as relational rather than individual.

4. Support Teachers Through Coaching and Reflective Tools

Teacher confidence was critical to the successful implementation of culturally sustaining play pedagogies. Many teachers initially expressed uncertainty about how to honour cultural knowledge appropriately or how to balance play with curriculum demands.

Introducing a culturally adapted observation tool and coaching framework provided a shared language for discussing practice (Aiono & McLaughlin, 2018; Snyder & Wolfe, 2008; Aiono, 2020; Aiono et al., 2024). By translating abstract values into observable indicators, the coaching framework supported reflective dialogue and goal setting (Snyder & Wolfe, 2008). Teachers reported that this structure helped them see play as intentional and purposeful, rather than unstructured or incidental.

5. Address Systemic Conditions

Finally, the research underscored the need for systemic alignment. Teachers identified ongoing challenges related to time constraints, access to culturally relevant resources, and external accountability pressures. Without system-level support, individual efforts to sustain play-based pedagogies are difficult to maintain.

Policy frameworks that recognise play as legitimate learning, alongside investment in professional development and resources, are essential for long-term change (Milne, 2020; Ministry of Education, 2020; Bernt-Santy, 2024). Shifting dominant narratives about what counts as success in education is a necessary step toward greater equity.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings from *Ko te tākaro te kauwaka e pakari ake ai te tangata* reaffirm that play is far more than a recreational activity; it is a powerful driver of learning, identity, and belonging (Aiono et al., 2024; Aiono & Waitoa Tuala-Fata, 2025; Hirsch-Pasek et al., 2025; Whitebread, 2012; Walsh et al., 2007). It is a pedagogical space where learning, identity, and belonging intersect. For Indigenous and minoritised learners, play offers opportunities to see their cultures valued, to build relationships, and to engage deeply with learning in ways that are meaningful and sustaining.

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Anna Beresin, PhD

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Many discussions with educators regarding their confusion about inside jokes like "six seven" conclude with some variation of adults just not getting children these days. Yet, I have found that asking adults about the joke cycles and neighborhood play of their own youth quickly brings childhood cultures past and present into focus. "Six seven" is not far from "Guess what? Chicken butt." Just ask adults about what made them laugh or to show you how they would begin a game in their neighborhood when they were young.

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go-karts—and immaterial culture related to motion and sound. Children still use found objects in novel ways: rocks for game pieces, string for handwrought string games, and electronic memes shared as if they were marbles. These tangible intangibles can disappear before they are studied; they are often kept secret from adults, typically for good reason. Grownups often pass judgment on children's peer cultures, take them over, or repackage them as novel toys for profit. Yet such bits of culture reveal what is valued in a specific locale and can serve as markers of social tension and humor.

Problem Statement

This paper will do two things: describe the author's own witnessing of cultural variation at play across several school playgrounds in one city and introduce some classics in this unfolding field of the cultural study of play. We will see that culture varies across playgrounds, sometimes within parts of the same playground, and even within a single game —each context has its own spoken and unspoken rules that are collectively crafted. Culture reveals itself in how things are done communally, in variation and always within a subset of power.

Background

Microcosms Within One City

When scouting out different regions for this potential study early in my research career, I first chose one small section of Philadelphia known for its racially diverse schools. This neighborhood had three public elementary schools with concrete schoolyards, all within walking distance of each other. Yet, their playground cultures were significantly different at the time.

- One school had a wide-open rectangular space, and the activities visible were reflective of the school's gym offerings- mostly sports variations and lots of milling around.
- A second schoolyard was partially obstructed by pillars from a section of the school building, keeping much of the area in shadow. Here, there was a lot of teacher presence and blatant teacher interference.

- The third schoolyard offered an L-shaped concrete area wrapped around the building, with one section somewhat secluded. This playground was the only one with visible signs of youth culture: shoes dangling from the electric wires above, and fresh graffiti on the school walls. There was a sense of vibrancy that the space was used by children both during and after school. The third playground was selected as the study site.

With permission, I spent an entire year visiting that schoolyard multiple times per week, and that study bloomed into a longitudinal one, with me returning to observe for several years (Beresin, 2010). This schoolyard had distinct areas where different play cultures emerged. If we walked around the playground clockwise, the top was a full-sized basketball court, though it sometimes lacked its nets and hoops. The children, not the teachers, organized play, and each game had several cultural variations, including folk variations of basketball games that might have been played in the early 1990s, such as H-O-R-S-E and *Around the World*. Nearby was an area for small-ball play and foursquare games, though it was primarily used as a theatrical boxing ring, with a range of folk customs. The "fighting game," as it was called, was considered taboo, though the staff tolerated it. It was more of a slow-motion version of pretend fighting. The task there was to push the opponent out of the painted ring slowly, and the rule was that once a body part left the painted boundary, the person was out and the round was over.

The children and staff classified these activities as boys' games. Yet, several girls were seen bouncing a basketball nearby or challenging the boys in the fighting game area. The literature on playfighting, or "rough and tumble" play, had, up to this point, described this type of wrestling as a boy's thing, yet right in front of me, girls were demonstrating evidence to the contrary. At this school in the early 1990s, only boys were on the official basketball team, and the annual student-teacher basketball game featured no girls, even though some were clearly skilled. When texts describe "what girls do" or "what boys do," they deny the cultural reality of children's distinct play worlds.

A third game in this one playground was popular with girls and an occasional boy, and unlike the other two activities described, this game floated across the concrete, often in search of shade. The game was jump rope, with cultural variations in the lyrics,

rhythm, and types of rope used. It varied by ethnic and racial groups, and within those groups, it varied by social class. White European American girls typically counted steps taken, "101, 102, 103. . .", and used short, individual ropes. This group did not use songs while jumping. A similar group of African American girls from the nearby middle-class neighborhood also used individual ropes and lacked an active repertoire of game songs. The rich tradition of jump rope rhymes came with African American working-class girls who jumped with longer ropes, typically made from laundry line and turned egg-beater style. These children, who were bused in from a more economically disadvantaged area about a half hour away, could be seen teaching their games to the others. Where these three jumping subcultures intersected most was with the jump rope rhymes of advertisements:

- Big Mac Fillet o Fish Foot, Big Mac Fillet o Fish Hop, Big Mac Fillet o Fish Bounce
- R-E-E-B-O-K, do your footsies the Reebok way.
- Hop to the N-I-K-E,
Jump to the N-I-K-E

And yet, there was still room for in-game commentary:

Criminal-minded, you've been blinded

Looking for a shoe like mine, can't find it

Mine costs more, yours costs less

Mine Footlocker, Yours Payless

All of these elements intersected with adult culture: the sneakiness of corporations who co-sponsored double-dutch competitions, the style and wit of cultural traditions within Black communities.

When we remove culture from our discussion of play, jump rope becomes generic, homogenized, and often sterilized. Yet, like all play forms, children wrestled through these activities not only with cultural style but also with pride, skill, and psychological power. They said they learned these games from their mothers and their cousins.

- Boots, boots, Gotta get Loose, We came Here to Knock some Boots
- 1, 2, 3, Hallelujah, 4, 5, 6 Hallelujah, 7, 8, 9 Hallelujah, 10 Hallelujah 10

Several years later, in a different section of the city, in a mostly African American working-class school with Asian, European, and Latin American students, they were tapping pens on the ground between art activities (Beresin, 2015). The pen-tapping was done sneakily, rapidly, competitively, with an undeniable musical quality. I naively asked if they pen-tapped in music class. In music class? "You can't pen-tap in music class." I asked if they pen-tapped at lunch in the cafeteria "You'd get suspended if you pen-tapped in the cafeteria." When examined alongside colleagues in anthropology and music production, it became clear that the exact patterns at play here were undeniably similar to those in pop songs and hip-hop on the radio. Again, to deny the opportunity to tap or drum was to erase cultural pride and remove a much-needed space for physically processing the multiple rhythms of a child's day. Gendered culture is not static, ethnic culture is not fixed, and all children's cultures are subsets of overlapping adult institutional frameworks.

Years later, during the post-quarantine period immediately after schools reopened, each school playground in Philadelphia had its own culture of COVID protection (Beresin, 2023). At the same school where pen tapping occurred, there was no open-ended play after school because the after-school program was shuttered. At the same time, another public school across town allowed children to play on the playground after it had been cleared following school dismissal, meaning they could leave and return but not linger, making it difficult for many families who lived farther away. A school in a third section of the same city had a robust after-school playground culture during this same period- three post-COVID public schoolyards with very different school cultures in one city. This third school in a middle-class neighborhood featured a child-invented snack bar with a sign that said "No mask no seRvice" in large mixed handwriting. The second playground was in a more affluent area in the city, and there the children played food tag, running when one's favorite take-out food was hollered: "Pad Thai!" "Pizza!" "Sushi!" The after-school program in that underserved area was now online and quietly gave out free food to families in need. In all three places, families spoke about children modifying their play with pretend vaccines, improvised masks, and invented rules about

what was considered safe. The pandemic has taught us much about our collective need for social time and about the significance of play as a vessel for emotional and cultural expression.

Strategies

University courses and programs on child development or education tend to focus on specific utilitarian aspects of play, if play is included at all. There are ones in Child Life (note the singular) that tend to focus on assisting individual children through medical challenges in hospitals, those that focus on behavioral interventions (which emphasize the negative aspects of individual children's expressions), or abnormal child development (which, on trend, can focus on both). The classics (Piaget, 1965; Vygotsky, 1978; Axline, 1964; Elkind, 2007, 2015) in psychology that have been associated with the play field have typically emphasized the individual's emotional life, cognition, or the individual as a navigator within a broader, comparable social context.

The history of cultural study is embedded in the nationalism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when colonial forces sought to highlight the uniqueness and presumed superiority of specific Western, white nations (Huizinga, 1938/2016). Comparative historians and the earliest anthropologists were interested in cataloging differences. After Franz Boas (1940) famously slammed the racist assumptions about comparative work and reframed anthropology as a study of descriptive cultural uniqueness, comparative work became rarer and ethnography, or thick description, became the norm. In the anthropology of childhood, comparative work remained focused on child-rearing. Works by Beatrice and John Whiting and later by Joseph Tobin, Yeh Hsueh, and Mayumi Karasawa attempted to compare children's worlds across different countries—from weaning to school arrival rituals (Whiting & Whiting, 1975; Whiting & Edwards, 1988; Tobin et al., 2009).

The emergent anthropology of play can be said to have been anchored by a small handful of scholars. Notably, Helen Schwartzman (1978), who wrote the classic *Transformations: The Anthropology of Play*, gave us these gifts: 1) to present psychological statements of universals as culturally framed rather than "true" per se, and 2) to include in her book a filmography of documentaries that study play

ethnographically (Schwartzman, 1978). David Lancy's *The Anthropology of Childhood: Cherubs, Chattel, Changelings*, now in multiple editions, includes not just a subject index, but a culture index from Angola to Yaqui with much to offer the student of play (Lancy, 1996; 2022)

Meanwhile, the folklorists of childhood awoke from their nationalist hunt, and though anthropologists tended to focus on daily routines, the folklorists emphasized play genres (Abrahams, 1969; Bronner, 2009; Dundes, 1989; Knapp & Knapp, 1978). Whereas an anthropologist might call themselves a specialist in Indian family kinship patterns, folklorists aligned themselves with specific forms of play: folk games, folk toys, folk speech, often framed by a particular region. Some studied specific ball games, such as the Scottish Ba, specific Caribbean Mardi Gras festivals, or materials made by American urban children for street play (Dargan & Zeitlin, 1990).

The most famous collectors of children's folklore genres on both sides of the Atlantic were Iona and Peter Opie (1959; 1969) of the United Kingdom, and Brian Sutton-Smith, originally from New Zealand and based in America. With the Opie's material now housed at the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford, the most well-known of the Opie's available books include *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* and *Children's Games in Street and Playground* (Lancy, 1996, 2022).

As a folklorist and psychologist, Brian Sutton-Smith (1981, 1986, 1995) straddled the humanities and the social sciences, seeking to document, describe, and celebrate cultural differences while honoring the universals in children's development. He felt these two ways of thinking were compatible, and he looked at our general texts on child development as another form of cultural production. Building on the ambiguity within play and within children's cultures, he often cited William Wells Newell, who wrote of the "inventiveness of children" and the "conservatism of children" (Sutton-Smith, 1997; Newell, 1884; Beresin, 2024). For Sutton-Smith, play was a container for cultural paradox, as sophisticated and worthy of study as art or religion.

Recommendations

There is no play without a social life; even if toys are stand-ins for people, the players are online, or the "people" are AI bots. There is no social life without culture, so

ideally there is no play study without play culture study. Avoiding it as a topic reflects cultural constraint.

A toy store is not the same as a hardware store because of the cultures of children, although both offer means of repair. What materials are used for playful improvisation? Is improvisation even allowed? Recess is not the same as gym because of children's culture. Who holds the chalk in the school yard? Who is in charge of the games?

Schools, hospitals, museums, play programs, and institutions of advanced learning miss out on so much by excluding the full range of children's cultural topics. Denying children's very identities as members of specific cultures (plural) disavows their skills in making meaning and making change, bit by bit, craft by craft, game by game, and also weakens broader commitments to equity, advocacy, and opportunity in play settings (Jarrett et al., 2023).

Children's cultures have been increasingly trivialized, and their playtime has been co-opted by adult-organized physical activity or passive entertainment, a colonization of play and acceptable play forms (Elkind, 2007 & 2015). When children's cultures are rendered insignificant, it sends the message that children's voices are unwelcome and can be seen as a personal rejection, potentially leading to a clash between the school and the child's home life. Without cultures in play, we lose not just the baby's bathwater, but the siblings in the tub and the rubber duck.

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