

Longitudinal Research and Consent: The Childhood, Tradition and Change Project.

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In 2007, a cross-disciplinary team of academic researchers from The University of Melbourne (UM), Deakin University (DU) and Curtin University (CU)¹, assisted by experts from major collecting institutions the National Library of Australia (NLA) and Museum Victoria (MV) secured funding through the Australian Research Council to analyse the state of play in Australian primary schools. This four year project (2007-2010) was designed to:

- Establish an historical overview of the playlore practices of primary school children since 1950 based on previous fieldwork research findings and other archival material
- Produce outcomes that include: a book, articles, symposia, conference, public forums, a new archival collection (including photographs, video and sound recordings along with traditional text based observations) and evidence to assist UNESCO in the identification of intangible cultural heritage
- Compare new and previous material to create longitudinal ‘cultural maps’ of Australian children’s playlore, taking into account a variety of defining categories

The project is a horizontal study of continuity and change in Australian children’s play cultures. An American folklorist and academic Dr Dorothy Howard arrived in Melbourne on a Fulbright Scholarship in 1954 to collect information about the nature of Australian children’s playlore. Other scholars have followed Dorothy Howard’s lead. P. L. Lindsay and D. Palmer published a study of the playground game characteristics of Brisbane primary school children in 1981 and Heather Russell, assisted by Gwenda Davey and June Factor, reported on *Play and friendship in a multicultural playground* in 1986.² Much related material forms the backbone of the Australian Children’s Folklore Collection (ACFC) at Museum Victoria in Melbourne. The ACFC was developed from research begun in the 1970s by Dr June Factor and Dr Gwenda Davey. Its significance is underlined by its status as the first Museum Victoria collection to be placed on the prestigious UNESCO Australian Memory of the World register. It’s a marvellous baseline to measure what is taking place now against.

We are now in the final year of the project, and it is an opportune time to reflect upon both the process and the outcomes. This is in the context of what this research means for children, both those who participated and those who, we would hope, will benefit from the research. We are firmly committed to

¹ As well as Prof Kate Darian-Smith (UM), Dr June Factor (UM) and Dr Gwenda Davey (DU), the team includes Professor William Logan (DU) and Professor Graham Seal (CU)

² P. L. Lindsay and D. Palmer, *Playground game characteristics of Brisbane Primary School Children*, Australian Government Printing Service, Canberra, 1981; Heather Russell, *Play and friendship in a multicultural playground*, Australian Children’s Folklore Publications, Melbourne 1986

recognising the capacities of children and advancing their interests in rights as articulated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations General Assembly 1989).³ We are very sensitive to the implications of these rights as they pertain to the protection of children's privacy in the age of the internet, especially when the data we collect is to be kept in perpetuity, for the benefit of an informed, public audience. However, we do want children to have the freedom to remain active participants in research about matters that are important to them. As Pia Christensen and Allison James have pointed out, 'Only through listening and hearing what children say and paying attention to the ways in which they communicate with us will progress be made towards conducting research with, rather than simply on, children'.⁴

We are concerned that the regulatory environment that governs academic research with children may have the unwanted consequence of silencing the voices of a large segment of that population, a segment for whom action arising from the research outcomes are most pressing. Like Anne Graham and Robyn Fitzgerald, researchers at Southern Cross University, we worry that:

In an era that is increasingly recognizing the agency of children and their capacity to participate in research we are also witnessing an increasingly 'nervous' regulatory environment in relation to research ethics committees and children's involvement in research processes.⁵

Furthermore, there are major issues attached to the responsibilities of government funded researchers to make their data available for reuse by future researchers, so that future researchers may consider the possibilities of horizontal studies, for example. Initiatives such as the Australian Social Science Data Archive (ASDA) are being established to facilitate that aim and major repositories such as the National Library of Australia, are keen to be involved.⁶ Setting up the conditions for data reuse in most cases is relatively straightforward process, except for the complexity that arises when privacy issues and children's qualitative data intersect.⁷ Regardless of the content, any qualitative data collected from and about children appears to be labelled 'high risk' by research regulatory authorities. Even when the data to be saved and reused is recordings of children playing and describing the games they play in the school playground. So we raise here these issues for discussion. How do we protect children's interests when there is increasing pressure for the data collected in the course of public funded research to be reused? Are the dangers of the misappropriation of that material in the internet age so great that, in

³ Website of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: <http://www.unicef.org/crc/>, [accessed 2010-04-13]

⁴ Pia Christensen and Allison James (eds), 'Introduction', in *Research with Children: perspective and Practices*, London and New York, Routledge, 2nd edition, 2008, pp. 1-9, p. 9.

⁵ Anne Graham and Robyn Fitzgerald, 'Children's Participation in Research: Some Possibilities and constraints in the current Australian research environment', *Journal of Sociology*, 2010 46: 2 pp. 133-147, p. 139.

⁶ The Australian Social Science Data Archive: <http://www.assda.edu.au/index.html> [accessed 2010-10-29]

⁷ See Lynda Cheshire, Alex Broom and Michael Emmison, 'Archiving Qualitative Data in Australia: An Introduction', *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 2009, 44 3: 239-254.

order to protect children, we effectively create administrative barriers that deny their rights to participation?

The research and regulatory environment

Needless to say, the research environment, and children's position as participants in that environment has changed significantly since Dorothy Howard was able to wander in and out of schools in the 1950s. This is entirely appropriate – and in my opinion the University ethics process is a useful forum for researchers to sort out methodological issues themselves. But is it true that any research with children, regardless of what is actually to be done, should be regarded as high risk?

Further to the university process, we were obliged to get permission from the various state and territory education departments and relevant authorities. In total, including the HREC application, we wrote eleven applications, two of them twice for two knockbacks that were eventually overturned through recourse to higher authorities. Sometimes their requirements conflicted with the HREC – and some HREC requirements, such as the stipulation that all data collected needed to be destroyed after 5 years – needed to be contested. In this instance the HREC was able to acknowledge that this ran counter to the stated aim, supported by the ARC, to collect folklore for deposit in national collections. Some educational authorities were hard to convince that this was a worthy aim. Initially one Department of Education told us that the project was speculative social history gathering that offered nothing in the way of concrete research outcomes. However, most state authorities were tremendously cooperative – Victoria and South Australia in particular – although they were all very nervous about how the data would be looked after once the research was completed.

However, as long as we explained thoroughly what we planned to do, and got parents (and in one state children) to sign forms saying they understood what was going to happen while the fieldworkers were at the school, and what would happen to the material that was collected, we were set to go. The problem was, satisfying all the regulatory bodies' requirements with regard to informed consent required us to produce a six page document that was so complex, one principal told us that he'd love to have the school involved but his parents would never read the form. We sympathised! As parents, we agreed that we would ignore it for as long as possible too and eventually not agree to sign. Anything that complicated just isn't worth the effort and is probably hiding something – right?

Implications of the Regulatory environment

So, what were the implications of this environment on our research? Obviously, there was no recording of children's play 'in the wild' of the playground. We could only record children who had permission, which meant, for instance, that work in the open playground simply wasn't possible. We had to adopt a methodological approach whereby fieldworkers spent the first couple of days watching what kids do, and then setting up interviews with those who had consent. Recordings were staged. This was not a huge issue in

terms of data collection. Staged interviews enabled better control of sound quality.

It was a big issue for our research budget, however, because the cost associated with administering informed consent escalated – even from the cost associated with similar projects conducted in the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s. Fieldworkers needed also to be administrators, ticking off names, collecting forms, and so on. It was very hard to do this as a one person job; and if it could be done as a one person job, most principals would prefer that one person not to be male. Perhaps this is really an issue for funding bodies. Researchers need to have their claims with regards to the cost of administration of research with children believed, and not treated as exorbitant!

The bigger research issues related to concerns about the sample and managing the data. We'd like to share an anecdote relating to fieldwork conducted as part of this project to illustrate the issues as they relate to the sample. It comes from a school in a very low socio-economic outer metropolitan area, where five years ago the children were too scared to play at recess because of the violence and bullying, and which was a hair's breadth away from being closed permanently. The school has gradually become a place where children feel safe and where they can play again, and enrolment numbers are rising. But to facilitate this, the rules of the playground are *very* strict. No more than five children can be involved in any activity – and chasey was prohibited at the time our fieldworkers visited. The kids know why the rules are tough. They understand that physical play involving large numbers of children has historically had a habit of ending in fights and tears. They, by and large, accept the rules. But their response to the rules is complicated - being banned from playing chasey as one boy said 'it's like you're banned from the TV or you can't have food'.

No easily implemented, written survey will give you that qualitative gem – that nugget of gold about what free play means to young people. How on earth can we empower young people if we remove their capacity to say what they feel about things that are important to them and ensure this is documented? We must be able to conduct this sort of qualitative research in order to allow them an authentic voice.

In the context of this research we are in danger of preventing certain voices being heard, because of the requirement to protect children as outlined by the regulatory bodies. There was, for instance, a school where the principal told us that the parent body would not read the forms. This wasn't because they weren't interested. It was because most of them had a functional literacy level of around 12-13 years of age. These were native English speakers who could not understand the forms – particularly the sections which required them to think about the consequences of depositing the material at the NLA and MV for later use. This school required additional funding and effort in order to involve it, but the insights gained were worth every cent. We had to sacrifice research in another school in order to afford it. If we hadn't however, we would not have had a single school from an urban, socially disadvantaged

neighbourhood. And it isn't just diversity in class terms that is at stake. There are concerns about cultural diversity. We identified one very important school where most parents are of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. We had to invest a lot of money in translations of these legal documents, thus sacrificing another school from our sample.

There has to be a better way of informing parents and children as participants on qualitative social research, a way that that does not get bogged down in vocabulary that is, when it is all boiled down, destined to exclude many willing participants from the process. We wonder whether concerns about the need to protect children from real or perceived dangers are creating a regulatory environment that is not flexible enough to allow reasonable access to children's voices, speaking about things that matter to them.

We now move onto concerns about data storage of our vast archive about children's play. Collecting the material is one thing. Managing collections in this context is quite another. The complicated process of determining conditions of access for each individual participant could quite possibly make the collection unusable for years. For example, five girls were recorded, all of them ticking different boxes about the conditions of access they place on the material. A variety of option must be made available for parents and their children. Shall I put it on 'Open access', can people look at it only after ten years, or should I consider access on a case by case basis? Furthermore, after the Bill Henson controversy, we received a number of calls from parents who wondered how they stood legally, agreeing to something on behalf of their children who might wish they hadn't in twenty years time. It's a complicated environment, no doubt, but do we need to make it so complicated and time consuming that institutions of goodwill, such as the NLA and MV, will think twice about embarking on any project that involves research with children?

We come back to the over-riding issue of children's rights. Our experience with this project is that children were very capable when it came to expressing their own concerns and interests in this project. This tends to confirm findings from an emerging body of work that argues children are both more capable and more rational than is often assumed.⁸ We met children in the playground who thought we were spies and kept well away from us. (We met teachers who wanted us to be spies, and we kept away from them!) We met children who desperately wanted to participate but whose parents were explicit in their denial of consent, and who felt aggrieved as a result. Unlike some adults and education department administrators who could see no social research benefit at all to understanding what children did when they had a choice, children needed no explanation from us – who wouldn't be interested in their world,

⁸ See Kylie Valentine, 'Innocence defiled, again? The art of Bill Henson and the welfare of children', *Australian Review of Public Affairs*, June 2008, accessible online at <http://www.australianreview.net/digest/2008/06/valentine.html> [accessed, 2010-04-13]. See also Alison James, Chris Jenks and Alan Prout, *Theorizing Childhood*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1998 and J. Qvortrup. 1994, 'Childhood matters: An introduction', in *Childhood Matters: Social Theory, Practice and Politics*, eds J. Qvortrup, H. Wintersberger, M. Bardy & G.B. Sgritta, Avebury, Aldershot, pp. 1–23.

their inventions, their language? We found families where one child wanted to join in and was given permission, while the other was reluctant, and didn't. By and large, we found that most children we encountered were capable of making judgements about their involvement in the project.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we recognise that these are not simple questions but they are key for the on-going participation of children in qualitative social research about things that shape their lives and may have implications for future policy decisions and enhanced understanding about the social and cultural worlds of children. Much of the discussion about children's privacy relates to their social interactions with each other and with adults in cyberspace, or their representation in the public domain through advertising or artistic endeavour.

The work of early playlore scholars such as Dorothy Howard has been crucial to the way we have shaped our research in the *Childhood, Tradition and Change* project. Having the historical view of children's lives enables us to analyse the processes of transition and the new pressures and opportunities for play in the early 21st century. But as researchers and historians, we want to ensure that we have the capacity to document the views and experiences of children across social classes, geographic locations and ethnic backgrounds – in other words, we want to be able to document diversity. We have no complete answers but we would like our concerns about social research involving children to be included in any future discussions about children's privacy and their rights as subjects and citizens. This, of course, extends to the complex question of how such data is ethically collected and then deposited in major national institutions where it contributes to an overall archive of Australian national life. We hope that researchers following us will have similar opportunities to explore such transformative processes.