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Playing as Becoming: Sharing Australian Aboriginal Voices on Play

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Young Indigenous children in Australia grow up in a range of cultural contexts. By sharing Indigenous stories about play, this chapter provides interesting perspectives on play that challenge conventional approaches. The Indigenous stories highlight the importance of play as the prime way for children to learn their culture. Children learn incidentally and explicitly by participating in the everyday activities of both adults and other children. They also learn by observing, listening to and imitating 'what counts' in their communities. This chapter explores the concept of play as a way Indigenous children learn to be Indigenous, to embody their culture and to learn the adults' views on how to 'be' in a community.

The authors of Chapter 12 use stories/narratives to develop insights into play. Some of the stories are based on the two Indigenous authors' reflections on their own play as children, the play of children they observe in the present and their research on play. The non-Indigenous authors also share the insights into play they have gained from life and experience with Indigenous people. A research project on play called 'Talking Pictures' is discussed where young Indigenous children took photographs of playful events that became the focus of reflective conversations with their families and the researchers. These conversations about the messages embedded in play objects and activities (which are replicated in this chapter) invite readers to reflect critically on the everyday activities of play and their cultural interpretations. Through these conversations, issues are raised about the imposition of mainstream play discourses that may, in Australia, not only interrupt core cultural narratives but also privilege mainstream, usually conventional Western, ways of being.

Chapter learning objectives

Study of this chapter enables the reader to:

- understand play as a cultural construction
- reflect on play as a way of participating in cultural practices
- consider play as a means to learn and form identity
- critically reflect on 'taken-for-granted' approaches to play using a range of resources and some Indigenous Australian perspectives on children's play
- recognise and value diverse perspectives on play.

Starting the conversation: about the authors

Alison's play is a context for learning culture

This is the story about my Indigenous ways of viewing or understanding things in the environment and how children use what is happening as part of their play. I come from a remote Indigenous community in north-east Arnhem Land, in Australia. It is a small place with about 800 people.

While children are playing they are also learning about their environment and their culture. Every time something new comes along it gives them strong emotions and they feel very happy about the new things that they see in their lives. As soon as they see something new they start playing it. For example, when one of the big kids goes out of the community to go to the high school in Darwin (Kormilda High School), the little kids start playing 'gul-gul' which means 'school-school'. You can see them using their imagination. The little kids talk about the charter plane that takes the older kids into town, the bus they take to school, the shops like K-mart and McDonald's, about Darwin and about the school, Kormilda. They include everything they hear the big kids talking about and they can play it sometimes for weeks. They'll all leave their stuff in that area of the community where they play 'gul-gul'.

The authors of this chapter are four early childhood educators who have an interest in Indigenous perspectives of play. Alison is a Yolngu woman (from the Dhalwangu clan) from north-east Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory, who has chosen to use an oral language narrative to present her perspective. Lyn is an American-Australian who has lived in Darwin in the Northern Territory for the last 31 years. Veronica is a Bardi woman who comes from the One Arm Point community 230 km north of Broome in the Dampier peninsula in Western Australia; Veronica has lived in Alice Springs for six years. Alma has lived in Australia for over 30 years; she was born in America but has lived in a range of countries including Saudi Arabia and Scotland. Throughout this chapter, Alison, Lyn, Veronica and Alma contribute their individual stories, and at different points they combine their voices to reflect on play through conversation.

The authors use play scenarios to draw out the key ideas in this chapter. A range of Indigenous play practices are discussed. Beginning teachers will see that some of these practices differ from those seen in mainstream early childhood settings. Indigenous play practices have emerged from a particular social, cultural and historical context that has its own world view and set of values. This context differs to other contexts and, therefore, the play practices that occur within this context are different. The problem this chapter focuses on is that one set of practices—what might be called mainstream, conventional, early childhood practices—tends to dominate the thinking of Australian educators in settings such as childcare and school. This has an impact on young Aboriginal children. Practices that are privileged and valued in Indigenous communities can differ to those prized in mainstream contexts. Practices that are culturally appropriate in an Indigenous context are learned by children who

are born and bred into that context; such practices contribute to children's development of unique cultural identities. However, these normal, culturally appropriate practices, learned in Indigenous community contexts, may be seen as evidence of a 'deficiency' or 'problem' at school or childcare (Malin, Campbell & Aguis 1996; Martin 2005; Spencer 2007). These negative perceptions of differences can affect children's sense of belonging and their formation of identity; this in turn impacts their learning and their belief in their capacities to learn.

Introduction

Indigenous children's play is a neglected area of research. While thousands of volumes have been written about play and its benefits to young children's learning and development, most discuss play from a mainstream developmental or psychological view (Fleer 1999; Hyun 1998; Roopnarine, Johnson & Hooper 1994). This chapter offers new material to fill this gap. It also proposes strategies for reflecting on the meaning and purposes of play from various Indigenous perspectives. Some of the material in this chapter is drawn from personal research and experience with Indigenous children and their families; some is taken from an emerging body of literature that reconceptualises play from diverse perspectives (Fleet & Robertson 2002). First, this chapter reviews early childhood literature that critiques dominant, mainstream, psychological perspectives on play. Second, stories about Aboriginal children's play are recounted to illustrate how new views of play can guide mainstream practice. Finally, there is a discussion of what these new views contribute to the broader early childhood sector and how they can be used to support and prompt critical reflection on young Indigenous children's play.

The early childhood sector and concepts of play

Mainstream perspectives on play

Anglo, European, Western, middle-class societal perspectives, referred to here as 'mainstream' perspectives, dominate play literature (Spodek & Saracho 2005; Göncü 1999). For teachers who work with Indigenous children, there is almost no literature on Indigenous attitudes to play to prepare them for their work. Articles and textbooks about play mainly draw on the well-known theories of learning and play that are based on the ideas of Piaget, Parten and Vygotsky (Fleer 1999; Göncü 1999). These theories provide developmental and psychological views of play but leave out what could be gained from a cross-disciplinary approach (Bloch & Swadener 1992; Diaz Soto & Swadener 2002). Such an approach could include, for example, the consideration of anthropological, sociological and cultural perspectives (Sawyer 2002). The recent work of critical, post-colonial and re-conceptualist early childhood thinkers is beginning to have an impact on the early childhood practices that have been taken for granted (Glover 1999; Fleer 1999; Ritchie 2001; Rogoff et al. 1989).

However, it is difficult to change such ingrained, taken-for-granted practices. Mainstream views of play are reinforced in early childhood courses and in the media: magazine articles, comedies on television and talk-back radio shows. Mainstream views are also reinforced

in everyday conversations about play. Educators may feel lost when they move away from mainstream practices and classrooms (Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist 2003; Price 1999).

Discourses about play

Adults tend to think of play as a universal activity and, particularly in the early childhood sector, we advocate strongly for play as universally ‘good’ for young children. Play *is* universal in the sense that all children engage in play regardless of culture (Rettig 1995). However, play is *not* universal in the way it is defined, understood, supported or valued across cultures (Johns 1999; Fleer 1999; Vandermass-Peler 2002). Increasingly, play theorists are revealing the deep cultural roots of values about and definitions of play. What we see when we watch children playing, and what we think about it, is filtered through our cultural viewpoints about its worth and value (Ailwood 2002; Göncü 1999). As Dockett and Fleer (1999, p. 112) describe, ‘we build up a series of expectations about what we think children should be like, what they should be doing and when this should occur’; consequently, ‘we label anyone who does not fit the standard pattern, or who has already moved beyond the standard patterns, as “abnormal” or in need of extra assistance to reach what we have determined is the appropriate level’. We support children to play in particular ways because we value these ways. We analyse children in terms of their capacity to play in these ways. However, we rarely reflect on play and its overall purposes.

Play is not ‘value free’. In early childhood, it is full of cultural beliefs about what is ‘right’ and ‘best’ for children. Mainstream views about play have become powerful discourses and influential ways of talking and acting.

Alison's story about discourses

When I was working in mainstream, I saw every day the staff setting up the same toys but in different places. But the kids didn't get much opportunity to play with natural materials. I wanted to talk to the director about doing some play with the kids like I used to play on the beach when I was growing up. I wanted to set up a play activity by giving kids sand and water. We would cover our bodies with sand and put it in our hair, and play pretend hairdressing. The wet sand in your hair is like shampoo, but it makes your hair really stiff. You can make your hair like dread locks or make it straight up on top of your head. It feels really good. You feel the heavy sand on your hair. Then it dries, and it falls off. But I didn't do it because I knew she would say no. I would get into trouble for getting the kids' hair wet or they would worry about kids getting germs on them from playing with sand or getting sand in their eyes. So I didn't say anything. I knew that my discourse about children's play was different from their discourse about play.

Play discourses affect how we view play, how we value it and how we scaffold it (as shown in Alison's story above). Strandell (2000) worries that educators are adopting an ‘instrumental view’ of play where play becomes a means (or an instrument) to ‘develop’ children, to

implant in them a desirable set of skills and knowledge. For example, Copple and Bredekamp (2009) emphasise the role of play in the development of cognition and self-regulation. While these are valuable outcomes, they undervalue the role of play as a form of acculturation, identity formation and relationship building (see for example, pages 47 and 131 of Copple & Bredekamp).

Play can involve influential power relationships. When educators think of play as innocent and 'free', they may overlook these important and unequal power relations (Ailwood 2002). Managing play effectively involves attending to relations of power. Ailwood (2002) points out that certain dominant play discourses are promoted and reinforced in many early childhood courses in which play pedagogy is taught in didactic and uncritical ways. As Ailwood (2002, p. 12) put it, 'The educative discourse of play, based in a combination of romanticism and developmentalism, is used to regulate parents (particularly mothers), teachers of young children (mostly women) and childhoods'.

REFLECTION ON PLAY DISCOURSES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

Many readers can imagine how an early childhood setting 'should' look. Maybe it should look the same as your local childcare centre or preschool. Picture the typical early childhood centre. Does it have a home corner with dolls in beds and tiny versions of kitchen equipment, a block corner organised with blocks stacked neatly on shelves, four little blobs of play dough sitting ready on a table with four chairs, a water trough full of bobbing plastic containers with plastic aprons hung on the edge, a couple of paint easels primed with a carefully limited number of paint pots and brushes, and out the back, a bike track and a sand pit? Does this sound familiar? Why?

Early childhood centres across the nation have very similar layouts and provisions. Has the same architect been employed for all of them? Is there a manual that dictates resource provision? This similarity illustrates how discourses work. When powerful, dominant perspectives on practice become accepted as unquestionable givens, they become universal. Why is play valued only for what children can learn from it, such as social, language and fine motor skills? Children in contemporary classrooms and centres bring a range of diverse skills, knowledge and values learned at home. What happens when some boys convert long blocks into guns or a child paints her feet instead of the paper? Educators often intervene to redirect or stop such activities, because children aren't playing 'properly'. How do we know what is the 'proper' way to play? Who decides what equipment is essential, and how children should interact with it? What assumptions underlie the provisioning and practices allowed in early childhood environments? The ways adults set up children's play environments and orchestrate their play reflects the views and values of the adults. Many Indigenous children in Australia experience early childhood programs that are dominated by mainstream views and values (Glover 1999; Martin 2007), including mainstream perceptions of play.

A clash of cultural practices

A dissonance between the cultural practices at home and the practices at school/childcare has a profound affect on young children. For example, Cronin and Jones (2007, p. 73) have discussed the dissonance of 'stranger care' (a practice accepted as normal in mainstream society) and its impact on young children's capacity to play and learn, particularly in relation to the use of home languages:

If no one in the childcare program speaks the child's language, if none of the toys recreate home, if no familiar adult is present in a caregiving role, the young child is thrust into the confusing but all-too-common experience of stranger care; of long days in a setting which doesn't resemble home and whose people will have no lasting relationship with the child's family. In such a setting, it's hard to play and learn.

People hold different views of what play is for and how to play 'properly'. When children experience positive and encouraging interactions in play, they learn to see themselves as successful human beings who are valued and respected. When teachers misjudge young Indigenous children's play (using their mainstream play discourses to make this judgment), their actions may have negative consequences for the children's development (Spencer 2007). What happens when a child's everyday play behaviour is seen and dealt with as 'misbehaviour' or as being 'deficient'?

Malin, Campbell and Aguis (1996, p. 47), in discussing their research of Indigenous children, explained the dilemma for many Indigenous families, 'Unfortunately, the successes of families ... in raising children competent in the ways they consider important could be misconstrued by outsiders from a different culture, with different values, and with a tradition of different practices.'

It is important that all children experience a sense of belonging and a feeling of being accepted in the early childhood setting. When their home culture is alienated, they are

alienated as well. Glover (1999, p. 314), an Australian early childhood educator who has extensive experience with Indigenous children and their families, agrees, 'Most teachers are from the dominant group, are trained in institutions that promote Anglo-Australian values, beliefs and practices, and thus (unintentionally) create classrooms in which children must leave their Aboriginality at the door.'

Mainstream values and approaches to children's play are adopted to ensure that children grow up to be 'successes' in mainstream culture. How well do these values and approaches reflect 'success' from an Indigenous cultural perspective?

Alison's story of playing *Ten Canoes*

Alison talks about the play she observed after children in her community saw the movie, *Ten Canoes*. This is the first Australian movie made entirely with Indigenous actors in an Indigenous language (with English subtitles). Many of the children in her community are related to the actors.

The kids got really excited because Yolngu people starred in the movie. This happened last year. It was health week in the community and the health workers had a 'scabies' day. They encouraged people to clean up their yards, their houses and put their mattresses outside and wash all the clothes to kill scabies. They gave everyone cleaning equipment and scabie cream and soap. Then they had a barbecue and movie night. This movie was *Ten Canoes*, which was made in a community called Ramingining. The language they spoke in that movie was the common language we speak all over east Arnhem Land, so everyone understood what they were saying in the movie. The kids loved that movie. Watching it gave them perspective about traditional living, the ways our people used to live.

We took the children to a place that has a fresh water river; it's not far from the community, about 40 km out. When we got there some of the old women were weaving baskets and collecting the *pandanus* leaves to take home (to make baskets at home). When I saw these women I went up to them and I told them what we were doing there and why we had children with us. I asked them whether they would tell us stories about the olden days and why it was important. The children sat around listening to some of the women telling stories.

Figure 12.1: Playing community



Source: Lyn Fasoli

After that the children wanted to go swimming. The kids had that idea and wanted to re-enact the movie. The older kids went and made their own spears. I didn't even tell them. When they were swimming, they started talking about the characters in the movie. They were telling each other to do the things in the movie. They were laughing and enjoying themselves. Then the older kids went out and collected fresh water mussels and caught some fish with fishing lines. While they were doing this they started playing *Ten Canoes* again and the younger kids joined in. The older kids gave some spears to the little kids. They were just playing gathering food, like hunting, but it was real food: they were acting out the *Ten Canoes* movie. Instead of putting the food in the tin, they made *pandanus* carrying bags. It was 'real' play; it wasn't just imaginative play. It was both: real experience and imagination. Through their playing they had a lot of fun and everybody was excited; at the same time we ate *ngatha*, our traditional food, like mussels and fish.

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Later during the week we went to the bush to collect some bark to make a humpy. The kids loved building that. When it was finished we invited everybody to see what we did. We had a barbecue and the children sat under the humpy and started singing traditional songs while other kids started dancing. This was during Children's Week and all during that week the kids were all there. They didn't want to give up or stop. They wanted to stay and do that playing all week. Everyone was helping and loving it. We had lots of *bungul-bungul* (dancing). It was easy looking after those kids. Even older kids, 15–16, were there with the younger ones, helping. When we celebrated the whole week and I thanked everyone we had some dancing and all the parents came.

Alison's comments

All these things supported kids' learning about traditional culture while they played. Movies have a big influence on children and their play so we need to be careful what we show the kids. If we want to encourage our children to be strong, we need to start looking at ways to build a positive pathway through play. We can help by doing activities through the school and childcare, by doing imaginative play like pretending to go hunting or singing songs in our language about different animals, going on short walking excursions and letting the kids experience the real life. You don't shut them out from the real life.

Looking at all this makes me think that we should make more movies and television programs with Indigenous people, so children will see that everyday and learn from it. These days some parents are not doing the cultural things regularly with their children and kids are missing the cultural knowledge that they need to know. Some kids don't think about hunting or traditional ideas. They know they are Yolngu people but they just go to the shops and want take-away and that becomes their life. People that really want to encourage their kids are the people who have the passion to teach their kids hunting and traditional ideas. We have to turn off the television and take the kids out to the beach and to the bush. In town it's really hard to do this because it costs money (to buy petrol) and you have to take food and that costs money. In the out-station people have their boat or they can borrow it or go along with other family members to go fishing. People need a car to go out bush now. They're always thinking about smokes or gambling and not enough about their kids. But when parents go to the out-stations they forget all these things and they do a better job with their kids.

This story makes three important points about the links between play and culture. First, Indigenous children need to see positive images of their culture in the media, because they are likely to copy what they see in movies and on television. Second, children are likely to re-enact in play what they see adults doing. If children only see adults sitting at home, gambling or shopping, they have limited role models for their play. As Alison says, it is important to take children into the 'real' world, where they can learn cultural practices. These cultural experiences often turn up in children's play as this is one of the ways they learn about their culture. Third, Alison makes a point about 'real' play and imaginative play. Children's play in her community combines both real activities, such as hunting for real food, and imaginative activities, such as directing each other to re-enact elements of the *Ten Canoes* movie. Play is not always 'pretending' for these children.

Non-Indigenous educators who work with Indigenous children may have had little exposure to Indigenous play practices. Equipped with dominant discourses of play, they may have no idea

Figure 12.2: Playing at home



Source: Lyn Fasoli

of the problems Indigenous parents confront or what they want for their children in relation to play. As Glover (1999) has shown, Indigenous children must learn to belong to and to be successful in two worlds. They must learn the standards of their own culture and what is expected of them in the broader Australian society. Learning this successfully requires assistance from families and teachers; this lesson is critically important for the development of children's identities as Indigenous Australians (Glover 1999; Hughes 2004).

Veronica's story about her own play

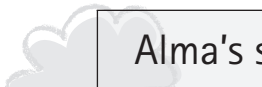
I was raised by my Aboriginal community; my childhood involved many kinds of play. When I was in primary school, I had friends ranging in age from 5–10 years old. Nearly every day after school we would walk about 20 km to go swimming in the ocean (which was full of currents and sharks among other things). We inherently knew the rules and expectations: we had to be home by the time the sun went down. We also knew what dangers to look out for because we had grown up with adults who imparted this knowledge and provided us with a great understanding of the environment. I believe that this model of play developed our skills; increased our social responsibility; and improved our knowledge about place, time and risks (such as the depths of the ocean and the safe locations to swim).

Veronica's comments

Mainstream settings for play predominantly include manufactured materials. Also, in formal programs and schools, children are grouped into very narrow age groups (peer groups such as babies, toddlers, 3–5-year-olds, first grade, etc.). Also in mainstream settings there is a tendency to shelter children from the environment and to separate them from the adult world. I question the reasoning behind children being prohibited to act out real-life situations that involve risk (such as being involved in mowing the lawn and ironing a shirt). Play in mainstream settings can be restricted because health and safety regulations control the level of engagement in play. This may explain the overuse of plastic toys in mainstream environments; playing with plastic tends to disengage children from the natural materials in their world. Indigenous children are expected to be responsible for each other and seem to mature very fast. Indigenous adults allow their children go off in groups that involve older children; this shows that they trust the older children. By looking after younger children, older children learn social responsibility and acquire parenting skills.

By playing with 'safe' plastic toys most of the time, what might children gain and what might they miss out on?

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Alma's stories

The following play scenario gives a glimpse into the everyday play experiences of young Indigenous children, as observed by one of the non-Indigenous authors.

There was quiet chat from the group sitting in camp chairs by the edge of Lake Burrundong. It was a leisurely time, a still, warm, late Sunday afternoon. One of the men was fishing and another was packing up the truck on a ridge above. Then a phone rang. The toddler in pink put her hand in her small pocket, pulled out a hand-sized flat bit of slate and put it next to her ear. 'Hullo?' she said as she turned to look up at the caller.

'Hi there, how ya doin'?' came from one of the women seated nearby who had created the 'ring/ring!' Auntie smiled at the child, who had a sun-bleached head of curls, and continued to chat, with her slate phone (harvested from the rocks at her feet in the sand) held to her ear, matching the toddler's pose. As visitors to this place, we smiled, being welcomed into the group for a yarn, watching the play unfold.

Down the road from the lake, beyond the park, we stopped at a family-run shop to buy water to cool off after packing up camp. A woman with a business-like air, her dark hair piled on her head and glasses resting on her nose, steadied the 4-year-old who was sitting on the edge of the counter and wedged between the shopkeeper's safe frame and the cash register. 'Yes, that's right, \$3.60,' said the woman, guiding the child's hand to push the appropriate buttons on the register. Nodding as she went, 'Yes, now the three, that's right, and now ...' talking through the two transactions until the machine registered \$6.60, which she whispered in the child's ear. An older girl, maybe 10 years old, supervised the process from her standing position next to the others, rocking back and forth on her outstretched arms as she leaned over to watch the amounts appearing on the screen and looking up at me with smiles of delight at the unfolding events. The seated child looked up at me confidently with the right answer and said '\$6.60' in a clear voice. 'All right' I said, and counted out \$4.60 from my wallet, and handed it to the child, whose hand hovered over the waiting money tray. The adult hand guided the release of coins into their appropriate slots. 'Now,' I said, 'You needed \$6.60 and I gave you \$4.60. I wonder what else I owe you.' I said this glancing in turn at all three players in the shopping drama. The register-minder turned to look up at the protective face behind her while the older child wriggled in silence. '\$2' was whispered from the higher head to the lower. The smaller head, framed in wispy light brown stray hairs that had worked loose from the hair clip, turned to me and said '\$2'. I handed it over, and transaction completed, I smiled at the sales team and turned to leave. The older child bounded out from behind the counter, released from the stillness of being the watcher and asked, 'You been down at the dam?' I replied that we had been camping and that it was beautiful, but we had to pack up and go back to the big smoke. She looked out thoughtfully at the four-wheel drive laden with kayaks, and nodded her acceptance of the reply. Then, turning to find a teenager on the verandah, she yelled, 'Hey, get outa my chair!' The chair holder gave me a lovely unconcerned smile.

REFLECTION

In what ways did the adults in Alma's play scenario support the children's play? What were the children learning while they played? How did the context support their learning?

Veronica's case study

Play: fun or learning activity?

I investigated Indigenous children's approaches to play and the significance of play to Indigenous people. I conducted a small study of one child, who I will call Kayla, at the childcare centre in Alice Springs where I work. The centre is part of a school that was the first independent Indigenous school in the Northern Territory; it was founded by a group of elders who were concerned about the children from town camps who didn't fit into mainstream schools. The school specialises in providing 'both-ways' education (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) to about 150 children.

Around 20 Indigenous children attended the childcare centre at that time; most of the children resided at the 20 Indigenous town camps in the Alice Springs area. Kayla was a 3-year-old girl who had been at the centre for approximately a year. I selected Kayla because she usually played by herself; I was interested to see how she interacted with the other children at the centre and how she interacted with the surrounding environment. (The centre is situated among the hills in a natural setting that has a beautiful bush backdrop.) I also observed Kayla interacting with older relatives ranging in age from preschool to post-primary. Older children are welcome to come and interact with their family members during the school breaks. I also interviewed three staff members and three

parents to gain their views on play.

Kayla liked to play by herself; she did interact with the other children who attended the centre, but she did not speak to them a great deal. She would move from one area to the next, mimicking the other children. I observed her moving into other children's play areas and playing with them; although, she would usually only spend a small amount of time in each place and then move to the next play area without saying a word. She preferred not to stay in any one setting for any more than 5 minutes. She was never invited to play with the other children but engaged herself as a participant in their play settings and the other

Figure 12.3: Playing in a childcare centre



Source: Veronica Ecenarro

children allowed her to be part of the group. She loved playing in the sand and enjoyed pouring water and making holes in the sand. She seemed to be comfortable at the centre and had no problems with her family members leaving her there after they came to play.

Kayla liked spending time with her family when they came to visit from the school. Her family spoke to her in their own language. She would do things like pour water into the sand (after the girls spoke to her in their language), which made me believe that she could understand the language and was responding to them in this manner.

From my observations, I found no evidence that suggested that Kayla played any differently to non-Indigenous children. She engaged in play in the same manner as other children around the world and made use of the resources provided to her. However, I did observe that she preferred to play outside.

Later I spoke with three of the childcare workers about how they viewed play (they all have children of their own). The interviews showed that the childcare workers had very similar ideas about how play influenced development. When interviewing parents (for both, English was their second language), I learned they had little awareness of how children learn and develop while engaged in play; they believed that play was about children having fun. Hyun and Lang (1998, p. 2, cited in Johnson, Christie & Yawkey 1987) recorded that:

practitioners, educators, and parents who are from families with a strong influence of Euro-American culture tend to stress the cognitive benefits of child's play or the acquisition of individual independent social skills through play. They showed appreciation for child's play as a chief aspect of young children's everyday cognitive and social experiences that are individually-oriented, independently-based, or toy- or object-oriented.

The non-Indigenous people in my case study viewed play in early childhood as a major part of a child's development. The Indigenous people viewed play as part of being a child and having fun; they did not associate it with any developmental achievements. As an Indigenous person who also speaks an Indigenous language, I understand how the parents I interviewed showed little understanding about the developmental outcomes and achievements associated with play. I had no understanding of these things either until I became accustomed to the mainstream world views, had children of my own and studied in the mainstream paradigm. Information needs to be exchanged between early childhood educators and Indigenous parents about what play means and how it is valued. However, if the exchange is only one way, it runs the risk of marginalising parents and their children. Glover's (1999, p. 319) advice provides a way forward:

If we belong to the dominant cultural group, we must be willing to acknowledge the unequal power relationships that exist between cultures, and find ways, at least in our centres, of redistributing and sharing power ... As relationships are built, teachers and parents will learn from each other. Our readiness to talk with parents and other family members will demonstrate our respect for, and genuine desire to understand, children's home socialisation, and the goals and expectations families have for their children.

Lyn's reflections on talking pictures: Indigenous families' perspectives on play

In 2005–06, I worked with a group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers (one of the co-authors of this chapter, Alison Wunungmurra, was one of these researchers) to investigate Indigenous perspectives on play in two remote Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. The investigation involved children taking photographs of their own play; these photographs were used to interview parents about their views on play, its purposes and value in children's lives. Only a small portion of the findings are reported here.

Figure 12.4: Playing in the river



Source: Lyn Fasoli

Play as a context for learning leadership and responsibility

The interviews with parents revealed that being responsible for themselves and for each other was a strong theme in Indigenous families' views on children's play. Older siblings were expected to take responsible roles in overseeing the activities of younger children. In this way, play was seen as a good way for children to learn leadership and to practise taking leadership roles. In delegating this responsibility to children, the children's safety was distributed among a number of people (particularly among the children themselves) rather than adults taking on this responsibility alone. Comments made by families showed that they expected their children to become conscious of each other in their play and to keep each other safe.

One mother discussed her own play as a context where children exercised leadership and responsibility:

It's like an unwritten rule ... that older kids have to keep an eye on the younger kids. You know, like they're by the water all the time. Like myself, I nearly drowned like 100 times, but the older cousins were there, see? And that's why I still have that bonding with them too. They were there, whoosh, grabbing me out, you know. So my mum was off fishing and that, but she knew them older kids would keep an eye on the younger ones. It's the unwritten rule out here in the bush.

Another mother also remembered being given this kind of freedom to play unsupervised by adults, 'We had big playing area (out bush). When the sun is going down, it was time to go home. No adults. Just kids.'

Allowing children to take risks and trusting them to make good choices seemed to be an important part of what adults wanted children to gain through play experiences. These reflections are consistent with many observations made by others who have worked with Indigenous families (Malin, Campbell

Lyn Fasoli, Alison Wunungmurra, Veronica Ecenarro and Alma Fleet

Et Aguis 1996; Hamilton 1981; Harris 1984). Many Indigenous families encourage children to be self-reliant and to care for younger children. Play is one context where this learning can take place.

Play as a context for learning about the land and your relationship to it

The adults' comments frequently related to more than the play that was occurring; they often referred to the cultural significance of play. For example, a father talked about play and the environment:

Learning about land, the environment, the sea, and the lake and the wind, which wind monsoon. Those things. Seasons. What is Yolngu is already in the environment. It's a good thing. Learning what your name is. Aboriginal kids, they feel it ... that flower tells you something, about the season, that it's a good time to go hunting. It tells a story.

This statement resonates with some observations made by Hannah Bell (1998, p. 52), an ethnographer who worked with the Ngarinyin people in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. She talks about:

the way older women draw children's attention to nature as it emerges in their pathway. Insects, grasses, bushes, trees, birds, reptiles and animals are all named to the young—named in their own right and in their relationship to children. There is an order to the natural world into which all of existence fits, including humans.

Like others in this study, a woman reflecting on her own play blurred distinctions between play and real-life activities such as hunting:

We play pretending I have baby. Like dolls. We have small billy cans and we go out looking for shells, fishing, together with the shells. We cook them and eat them. Sometimes our parents come together, mum and dad, aunties and uncles. They show us more activities.

Figure 12.5: Bush play



Source: Lyn Fasoli

it provided to children about leadership, the land, how to survive on the land, how to look after themselves, and as a context for learning important practices valued in their communities.

These parents did not separate play from learning. They emphasised that children learned as they played alongside adults going about their everyday activities in the bush; by watching, listening and doing what their parents were doing. This is how a great deal of learning was passed on, and this is consistent with findings made by Bell (1998) and Harris (1984). Veronica Johns (1999, p. 63), an Indigenous educator and writer, agrees, 'Young children are acquiring an awareness of where they are heading and what they need to do, which is critical both as a link with land and for survival. To survive you need to be aware.'

In the above examples, families valued play in its own right and also for the lessons

Discussion

Indigenous children in Australia are living in multiple cultural worlds. For example, people at home and at school may speak different languages, expect different behaviours and value different ways of being. It is important to emphasise that there is no 'Indigenous' view of play or of anything else (Hughes 2004; Walker 1993). The views that we have explored in this chapter are valid for the people who hold them. The stories in this chapter illustrate that many Indigenous people hold values and beliefs about play that differ from mainstream views. However, it is clear that both Indigenous and mainstream views of play are motivated by what is considered to be in children's best interests.

Pivotal in this discussion is early childhood educators' awareness of the impact of mainstream practices. Does our work with children reinforce rather than undermine children's sense of belonging? Martin (2005, p. 28) has written, 'To know who you are in relatedness is the ultimate premise of Aboriginal worldview because this is the formation of identity'. She asked that non-Indigenous researchers (and by implication, educators) 'walk alongside' Indigenous colleagues to explore matters that are relevant to Indigenous people (Martin 2008).

The Indigenous views of play discussed in this chapter emphasise children as cultural beings who are learning to belong by becoming skilled in the practices that count in their cultural contexts. Families prioritise play that enables children to take on responsibilities for each other and to learn how to live in the natural world. However, given that Indigenous Australians live in multiple cultural worlds, educators must find out the relationships children have to others, and to the land, by exploring these issues locally with parents and other family members. In addition, like all cultures, Indigenous cultures are dynamic and ever-changing (Christenson & Lilly 1998). Reading a chapter is only a starting point. Discussing play with Indigenous families is the next step to developing a critical and dynamic play pedagogy.

Implications for early childhood educators

Early childhood educators can become aware of dominant educational discourses and work with Indigenous children in ways that support their Indigenous cultural identities. Educators can also assist Indigenous children to acquire mainstream knowledge and skills; they can do this by:

- reflecting critically and seeking information about the cultures and worlds of the children they teach
- moving out of the classroom/workplace to get to know the communities with whom they are working, and learn from the people in the community
- recognising that early childhood settings are important places for negotiating 'good' practices for supporting children's play and learning; these services sit between the child's cultural life at home and their life in a mainstream institution; what counts as worth knowing and doing may differ, but it is possible to negotiate common understandings in the best interests of children who traverse these different worlds everyday

- adopting an approach to teaching and learning that seeks to engage with parents and families to learn with and from each other
- adopting practices that enable children to gain access to multiple sets of cultural tools or artefacts of practice to ensure their success in the mainstream without loss of cultural identity.

Conclusions

Often teachers avoid aspects of children's everyday life that might be controversial or delicate (this is called an 'ignored curriculum'). These factors (like death and racism) are important to children and should not be ignored.

Mainstream practices may limit the play of Indigenous children and impact negatively on the development of their Indigenous identities if these mainstream practices transmit subtle but continuous messages about the children's play being unacceptable. Uncritical play practices can interrupt children's ability to become strong cultural identities and successful human beings. Early childhood educators can work towards

professional decisions that encourage engagement with families and communities, connect with ignored curriculum (Fleet 2006) and support children to thrive through playful encounters.

REFLECTION

You can reflect on your efforts to be inclusive by looking at your practice through the child's eyes:

- Do I feel safe, welcomed and respected here?
- Do people sit with me, listen to me and make an effort to get to know my family?
- Can I play quietly by myself or with friends, in my own way?
- Does the teacher know who I am?

The 'talking pictures' project highlighted the importance of children learning their identities as Indigenous people who are, like the adults in their culture, responsible for each other and their land. Veronica's stories illustrated that while Central Australian Indigenous children have similar play patterns to children in Alice Springs, they benefit and learn through play that enables them to engage in language and practices valued in their communities. Alison's stories foreground the fact that children growing up in remote Indigenous contexts are encountering multiple messages about how to be and belong as young Indigenous children.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter reported views of play that illustrate that all children, as cultural beings, learn to belong by becoming skilled in the practices that are important in their own home cultural contexts. To belong, children also need to learn the practices required for successful negotiation of the mainstream world. For Indigenous children the differences between home and school are much greater than for mainstream children from a European background. Early childhood educators are well placed to bridge this gap by working alongside Indigenous families to create settings that are culturally safe places for children to play and grow.

KEY CONCEPTS

- **Indigenous Australians:** a commonly accepted term for the first people of the land, who are also referred to as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. It is critical to recognise that these terms mask and homogenise incredibly diverse cultural contexts and may not be acceptable to the people implied by these terms.
 - **Culturally neutral:** an assumption that toys and play practices are equally known, valued and useful for all children regardless of their cultural background or experience.
 - **Culture:** a package of practices and values associated with a family, community or group of people. It is not to be confused with race. All people have culture in that they use the practices and ways of being, knowing and doing that are valued in their local context.
 - **Yolngu:** What Indigenous people from north-east Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory call themselves.
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POINTS OF DISCUSSION AND DEBATE

Imagine you are working with Indigenous children and their families and find yourself in a situation where you're not sure what to do. Consider these critical questions (adapted from Hyun 1998, pp. 9–10) in his discussion of play and culture):

- 1 What do I see? What do I hear? How do I interpret the situation (or thing)?
- 2 How can I be sure that my understanding of the child's behaviour is culturally fair and appropriate to him or her?
- 3 What leads me to think, interpret and interact in the way I do? What are my cultural references?
- 4 What leads the child to think, interpret and behave in that way? What are their cultural references to the situation?
- 5 How should I gather and expand my knowledge of myself and others in this context?
- 6 In what ways can I promote the children's play using this new knowledge so that all children become flexible and fluent in infusing all different cultural practices, while remaining free to enjoy their own cultural congruency within their creative play context?

Key references

Cronin, S & Jones, E (2007), 'Play and cultural differences', in B Neugebauer (ed.), *Play: A Beginnings Workshop Book*, Exchange Press, Redmond, Washington, pp. 73–5.

This helpful resource provides a summary of the theoretical perspectives of play; it also provides many practical strategies for educators.

Johns, V (1997) (with Dingo, A, Fasoli, L, Lawford, J, Quall, L, Ross, C, Senge, N, Spicer, C, Van Diermen, S & Young, N), 'Caring for Aboriginal children', *Every Child*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 6–7.

This article is written by nine Indigenous and one non-Indigenous early childhood educator in the Northern Territory. Aimed at practitioners, it provides insights into Indigenous cultural understandings of children's development and practices.

Glover, A (1999), 'Becoming bicultural', in LE Berk (ed.), *Landscapes of Development: An Anthology of Readings*, Wadsworth Publishing, Melbourne, pp. 309–21.

This chapter provides an overview of what it means to grow up in two cultures. It also includes an analysis of the challenges that Indigenous families confront in rearing their children within Australia's mainstream society. Glover offers good advice to early childhood educators for how to include Indigenous families and how to address discontinuities in values and assumptions between home and school culture.

Malin, M, Campbell, K & Aguis, L (1996), 'Raising children in the Nunga Aboriginal way', *Family Matters*, vol. 43, autumn, pp. 43–7.

This article is written by Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors; it outlines research about Indigenous child-rearing approaches and contrasts these to mainstream ways of knowing, doing and being.

Martin, K (2005), 'Childhood, lifehood and relatedness: Aboriginal ways of being, knowing and doing', in J Phillips & J Lampert (eds), *Introductory Indigenous Studies in Education: The Importance of Knowing*, Pearson, Frenchs Forest, pp. 27–40.

Written by a prominent Indigenous early childhood scholar, this chapter outlines an Indigenous world view that emphasises the importance of relationships and spirituality—these are critical underpinnings in the education of Indigenous children.