

Play in Australian and Canadian Indigenous Contexts

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Reviewed by Red Bear Robinson, Knowledge Keeper

Adults who work with Indigenous children can have an extraordinary impact on their play opportunities, as the ways in which an adult views play influences the play opportunities, experiences, and materials they provide for children (Hare, 2012; Leaupepe, 2010). For example, Anderson et al. (2017) determined that teachers in an Aboriginal Head Start Program in a small First Nations community in northern Manitoba, Canada, valued children's play practices and created learning environments in which the children could make meaningful connections to their community and school.

While there is plentiful research focusing on the concept of play in Western contexts, the literature conceptualizing play in Indigenous contexts is sparse and is often conducted from Western perspectives (Dender, 2014; Dender & Stagnitti, 2015). It is vital that educators who work with Indigenous children become familiar with ethical research on Indigenous children's play and on Indigenous adults' perspectives on play.

In this paper, we summarize key findings in three areas of research that attempt to conceptualize play within Indigenous communities in Australia and Canada: learning through play, relational aspects of children's play with others, and the role of the adult during play.

It is important to note that, although there may be commonalities and shared foundational understandings across Indigenous communities regarding aspects of family, spirituality, and nature, because local contexts and history shape

individual communities and the activities in which community members participate, there is no universal Indigenous way of knowing (Battiste, 2010; Little Bear, 2000; Gerlach et al., 2014). For this reason, we will refrain from generalizing to other Indigenous peoples and contexts. Since there is no universal term to refer to the Indigenous peoples of a country, we will use the same terminology (e.g., Aboriginal, Indigenous, First Nations) as in the referenced papers.

Prior to beginning our review of the literature, we situate ourselves as two female non-Indigenous doctoral students, one of whom has Gaelic and Ashkenazi Jewish ancestry, and the other is a Vietnamese Canadian immigrant. We both have experience teaching in primary classrooms.

Learning through Play

Australia: As play is culturally determined, Indigenous children in Australia engage in various forms of play (Dender & Stagnitti, 2015). For example, research has determined that some children participate in imaginary play, often engaging with manufactured toys such as dolls (Fasoli et al., 2010; Dender & Stagnitti, 2015).

Dender (2014), however, found that, during imaginary play, the Indigenous children in her study tended not to reenact stories they heard at school, such as *The Three Little Pigs*, or engage in socio-dramatic play in the "kitchen corner" or "dress-up corner" in their kindergarten and preschool classrooms, as these areas were not

representative of their home or community, and therefore, held less meaning. She found that, the children preferred instead to engage with “toys and play materials that reflected local Australian animals, dark skinned dolls, and natural materials such as sand” (Dender, 2014, p. 375).

In their study of 18 self-identified Indigenous mothers and fathers from Tasmania, Victoria, New South Wales or Western Australia, whose children attended an Indigenous specific kindergarten, Windisch et al. (2003) found that the parents rated the importance of play highly, valuing it as an activity through which they could transmit and maintain their culture. They identified numerous activities including making toys and instruments, singing songs, participating in traditional dance classes, and playing in forests as activities through which children develop their cultural identity. Indeed, as Fasoli et al. (2010) found, through play, children come to know the relational aspect of people to land and water. As play and real-life activities blend together, young children also learn Indigenous community traditions.

Canada: Similarly, Canadian Indigenous researchers posit that Indigenous children participate in formal games and in more functional forms of play that mirror real-life activities. Through their participation in these types of activities, the children acquire a holistic understanding in that they learn about their identity, culture, traditions, and language, as well their relational responsibilities to other people and the land (Battiste, 2010; Little Bear, 2000; Peltier, 2017).

As family and community are highly valued in Indigenous cultures, young children learn by watching and imitating older members of the community (Anderson et al., 2017; Preston et al., 2012; Peterson, Jang, San Miguel, et al., 2018). Jacob et al. (2015) found that during play, Aboriginal children in a northern rural Manitoba community emulate roles they had witnessed in their communities such as hunters, fathers, mothers, and snowmobile drivers. Thus, by playfully reenacting what they have observed and experienced, young Indigenous children

construct cultural meanings (Anderson et al., 2017; Jacob et al., 2015). Furthermore, activities promoting survival or environmental skills, such as hunting and foraging (Peterson, Madsen, San Miguel, et al., 2018), engage First Nations children in experiential learning, and enrich their understanding of how to live on the land (Ball, 2012; Hare, 2012).

Relationships in Play

Australia: Family and community relationships are often at the heart of Indigenous children’s play (Dender, 2014). All children are considered equal and should therefore play together (Dender, 2014). Children have relational responsibilities during play activities, as Indigenous playgroups in the Australian context are composed of children of a variety of ages who may be siblings and/or cousins, with the expectation that older children will keep younger children safe, assisting them when required (Dender & Stagnitti, 2017; Harrison et al., 2017). Older children frequently determine and guide play activities and teach younger children traditional games and songs. They also support the younger children’s emotional well-being by offering comfort and hugs to those who are distressed or upset (Harrison et al., 2017).

As collaboration is a big feature within Australian Indigenous children’s play, there is no real ownership of toys and materials; consequently, a child is expected to share (Dender, 2014; Dender & Stagnitti, 2015). For example, if an older child is playing with a toy that a younger child would like, he or she is expected to adhere to the younger child’s request (Dender & Stagnitti, 2015). Competition in play is discouraged (Dender, 2014; Dender & Stagnitti, 2017); the deep, caring interactions between children create what Harrison et al. (2017) refer to as a “culture of belonging” (p. 203).

Canada: The concept of separating children by age groups for educational purposes is uncharacteristic to First Nations Communities (Anderson et al., 2017). Consequently, it is typical to witness children playing in pairs, with older children taking the lead (Ball, 2012).

The Role of Adults in Play

Australia: To encourage children to develop self-reliance, leadership skills, and independence through free exploration, Indigenous adults in Australia respectfully refrain from interfering in children's activities. It is important for children to have control over their own play (Warren, 2011). As one Indigenous participant in the Brisbane Indigenous kindergarten in Warren et al.'s study said, "[p]lay to me is an important part of learning, play takes the children wherever they want to go, who they want to be, or what they want to be" (p. 101).

Indigenous adults may provide gentle guidance when a child requests or requires assistance (Fasoli et al., 2010; Harrison et al., 2017). For example, they may support children during play through their use of non-verbal communication such as gaze, silence, tone of voice, and proximity (Harrison et al., 2017). Thus, the role of the adult during Indigenous children's play in the Australian context is to facilitate and observe rather than direct or interfere.

Although Indigenous children in the Australian context are encouraged to play independently and without adult supervision (Fasoli et al., 2010), they maintain a sense of belonging to their community, as they are continuously being supported by a large circle of family and friends (Harrison et al., 2017). No matter what has occurred, Aboriginal families in the Australian context welcome the child back without judgement or without attaching negativity to them as an individual (Dender & Stagnitti, 2017; Harrison et al., 2017).

Canada: In contrast, Peterson, Madsen, San Miguel, et al. (2018) found Indigenous adults living in northern rural Canadian Ojibway communities may set boundaries for play, particularly in situations concerning safety. For example, in dramatic play involving children assuming traditional hunting roles, they may set rules to emphasize gun safety.

Aboriginal adults consider children to be a gift from the creator, surrounded "in a 'sea' of love

and kindness" (Little Bear, 2000, p. 81). This may explain why, when adults do actively intervene in a play situation with children, they avoid using disciplining techniques that would cause the child to experience shame or embarrassment. Indigenous parents and other family members praise and celebrate childhood achievements in the community using public ceremonies and songs written and performed for that child (Little Bear, 2000). Indeed, Indigenous educators living in northern Canadian communities cite family and community encouragement as having a positive influence on childhood academic achievement as well as on the ways in which they work with children in their classrooms (Peterson, Jang, San Miguel et al., 2018).

Australia and Canada: Teachers working with Indigenous children in the Australian context may take on the role of planner, listening to the children and what they wish to enact, and creating the appropriate contexts to facilitate play and experiential learning (Warren, 2011). Canadian teachers may model ways in which to resolve problems, but step back to observe children working together (Peterson, Jang, San Miguel, et al., 2018).

Conclusion

In this paper, we explored various forms of play and experiential learning in Indigenous communities in Australia and Canada and highlighted the critical role of family and community in facilitating play. The literature shows that, while there are various forms of play in Indigenous culture in both contexts, a child's relationships with the land and other people are central to play. Through play, Indigenous children living in Australia and Canada, learn about Indigenous cultural practices, how to live on the land, and how to be responsible for themselves and others. Due to the adults' hands-off approach to play within these two contexts, Indigenous children have more control over their activities. Thus, the children also develop leadership skills and independence through play. Although they may set boundaries to ensure safety during play, Indigenous adults living in

both countries often see themselves as facilitators rather than directors of play.

We hope our review of the literature on Indigenous children's play and on Indigenous adults' perspectives on supporting their children through play in Australian and Canadian contexts will assist teachers in creating culturally and academically relevant learning environments for young Indigenous children.

Author Biography

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