

## ◆ Individual Folklore Activities

In recent years folklore rhymes have been seen as very much part of girls' culture (Grugeon, 1988). Girls have been largely resistant to the trend towards electronic computer games which increasingly occupy more of the boys' free time, meaning 'young females will increasingly be the keepers of tradition' (Carpenter, 2001, p.175). The nature of children's preferences and gender differences in play styles relates directly to children's involvement and knowledge of playground rhymes. The boys' dominance of the playground and their more open and aggressive play is contrasted to the girls' preference for more private and at times subversive involvement in folklore activities.

*Gender differences show up in playground rhymes. Boys prefer gross-outs, 'gotcha' and ball field banter – "We want a pitcher, not a belly-itcher! We want a catcher, not a belly-scratcher!" ..... Girls go for more complicated cheers, hand slapping chants, dances and jump rope rhymes. (Helms, 1995, p.2)*

## ◆ Rude and Crude

Boys and girls are both actively involved in rhymes that challenge and defy adult standards and conventions. These rhymes give children the opportunity to explore taboo subjects and adult themes within the safe environment of the school playground (Grugeon, 1988). Again the openness of boys is contrasted with the subversiveness of the girls. Thorne and Luria's (1986) observations of playground behaviour show the boys being more prepared to take risks.

*Both girls and boys know dirty words but flaunting of the words and risking punishment for their use is more frequent in boys' than in girls' groups. Dirty talk is a stable part of the repertoire of boys' groups. Such talk defines their groups as outside the reach of school discipline (pp.180-181)*

The more subversive and private nature of the girls' behaviour sees them partaking in 'giggling sessions' (p. 183) on carefully guarded topics.

In contrast to the Opies' (1959) claim that, 'genuinely erotic verse, however, is unusual' (p.115) in children's groups, Lowenstein's publication 'Shocking, Shocking, Shocking' (1974) exposed the large number of children's improper rhymes that were current in Australia during the 1960s and 1970s. She found that it was the 'good' girls who were the real experts in this area, rather than the 'bad' boys. Her findings challenged the belief that obscene rhymes were commonly circulated among boys and 'not very nice girls' or belonged to the 'ogre child' or 'delinquent' (Opie, 1959, pp.115-116). Also disputed was the finding that these rhymes were more likely to be known by working-class children than the sheltered middle-class girls, who were in fact the source of much of Lowenstein's material (p.6). Similarly, Factor (2000) commented that,

*In my experience there are students at the most expensive private girls' schools who have as extensive a repertoire of vulgar and abusive rituals as the toughest, roughest boys in the working class suburbs of our major cities (p.xxii)*

Although close interaction between the sexes generally does not occur during play, Factor (1988) observed that 'rhymes and games are shared throughout the school' (p.136). She also noted that with the changes in social values and attitudes, evidence of sparring between the sexes has become obvious in the development of some of the rhymes. The 60s rhyme,

*Girls are weak,  
Chuck 'em in the creek.  
Boys are strong,  
Like King Kong.*

has many variants from the 70s onwards that reflect this sparring and possibly the development of girl power.



Boys have the muscles,  
Girls have the brains.  
Boys are the stupidest,  
And we won the games. (p.140)

Likewise, Grudgeon (1988) commented that girls developed rhymes as a form of ammunition and defence against the presence of boys in the playground, with such rhymes as,

*My friend Billy had a ten foot willy,  
Showed it to the girl next door,  
Thought it was a snake,  
Hit it with a rake,  
And now it's only four foot four.*

There is also evidence that many of these rhymes are part of a culture of subversive acts of resistance against both adult authority and at times the other gender (Grugeon, 2001; Factor, 1988). Attempts by school authorities to ban or limit these rhymes as occurred in Australia (Factor, 1988, p.176) and in Britain (Grugeon, 2001, p.101), have only served to drive them underground or make children more cautious when near adults.

As well as the gender differences that are apparent in the type of rhymes used by boys and girls, there is also a recognition by researchers in the gendered nature of the content of the rhymes themselves. Grugeon (2001) expressed a strong interest in the

*gendered nature of the content of the singing games played by girls in the first four years at school, in the way these games parody adult norms and behaviour, often dealing with taboo subjects through mocking and subversive texts. (p.99)*

Rhymes such as the prolific 'When Suzy was a baby' rhyme allow young girls to explore the possibilities of adult life and the new roles they will soon be encountering in terms of the passage of life from infancy to death and after. (Arleo, 2001; Factor, 1988) These rhymes allow children a 'freedom from customary propriety' (Factor, 1988, p.174) and to explore issues not available in their non-play lives. Sexually suggestive verses have been added and adapted across 'social, political, linguistic and geographical barriers' (Arleo, 2001, p.130).

*When Suzy was a teenager, a teenager, a teenager  
When Suzy was a teenager, she used to go like this:  
'Ooh, aah, I lost my bra in my boyfriend's car,  
I don't know where my knickers are.  
Ooh, aah, there they are -  
Hanging in my boyfriend's car. (Arleo, p.131)*

Grugeon (2001) also examined the use of Spice Girl songs being parodied by young girls and accompanied by explicitly sexual and provocative actions, in terms of the process of media texts being adapted to the playground. Such rhymes demonstrate the ease with which popular culture and mass media can be absorbed into children's play (Ackerley, 2002).



Many of the gender clashes and differences are played out in the language of playground rhymes, with examples such as

*Boys are rotten, made out of cotton,*

*Girls are dandy, made out of candy. (Zumwalt, 1999, p.34)*

The good little girl and the bad boy clash also appears in the following jump rope song:

*Down by the ocean, down by the sea,*

*Johnny broke a bottle and he blamed it on me.*

*I told Ma, Ma told Pa,*

*Johnny got a lickin'*

*So ha,ha,ha,*

*How many lickins did Johnny get?*

*1,2,3,4,5..... (Zumwalt, 1999, p.35)*

## ◆ **Skipping and Hand-clapping Games**

Developing from the traditional singing games of the past, the area where girls rule supreme, is in the category of skipping and hand-clapping rhymes. A singing game is defined as a 'game which occurs in a playground context and involves rhythmic text (either chanted or sung) and movement' (Marsh, 2001, p.94). These activities require fine body and motor movements as well as rhythmic ability and can become very complex, involving extensive negotiation of rules (Goodwin, 1999; Lindsay & Palmer, 1981). 'Boys seem to lack the sense of regulated rhythm which girls tend to acquire through such play activities as clapping games' (Lindsay & Palmer, 1981, p.9). The rhymes that accompany these games deal with universal issues of growing up, sexuality, parenthood, aging and death and often parody adult norms and behaviour (Arleo,2001; Grugeon,2001).

Boys' involvement in these games seems to be in the form of invasion of space, or mocking the procedures and rituals of the girls.

*On the rare occasions when boys were observed in these activities the purpose seemed to be directed to pain and endurance as they clapped partners' hands with a resounding smack and 'manfully' displayed pink hands as the chant came to an end. With girls, the emphasis was upon completion without error rather than upon extraneous outcomes and, consequently, speed was used to increase difficulty. (Lindsay & Palmer, 1981, p.9)*

## ◆ **Counting-out Rhymes**

One area common to boys and girls is that of counting out rhymes (Turner, 1969; Factor, 1988). This process of deciding who is 'it' or 'he' is referred to as 'dipping' in England. It can also be used to decide who has priority in turn-taking games. 'Counting-out rhymes are accordingly shared by boys and girls' (Turner, 1969, p.157). Curtis (2001) chose to look at counting-out rhymes in her study, 'Who knows what in the playground' (p.62), for the very reason that 'they were used by both boys and girls' (p.67).



## **Issues arising and possibilities for further research**

Two key issues emerge from a wide range of research related to children's play and folklore. First is the trend away from the consideration and collection of **what** children play, to the investigation of **why** and **how** these folklore traditions are kept alive. The comprehensive collections of the past decades (Opie, 1959; Opie, 1969; Turner, 1969; Kelsey, 1962-1990), though still of great value, have given way to greater consideration of the conditions under which such play occurs (Grugeon, 2001; Bishop & Curtis, 2001; Thorne, 1993).

McMahon & Sutton-Smith (1999) have recognised and encouraged a trend towards interpretive research and observations of context, both 'historical and situational' (p.306) with a caution against being over zealous in 'reading into children's folklore what simply isn't there' (p.306). The research cited in this review occurs almost exclusively in the school playground. Gender characteristics may be quite different had observations been carried out in the neighborhood or home environments. The social context of such research is of vital importance.

Limitations of earlier research collections have included the problems of the biases of the collectors and their methods (Turner, 1969; Grugeon, 1988). Turner speculated that early collections such as Bolton's (1888) collection of counting-out rhymes did not include rude rhymes because the children he collected them from did not 'want to offend him' (p.158).

The second issue is related to the danger of creating a mind-set prior to carrying out research. Thorne (1993) warns against the 'different culture' mind-set when considering gender issues. If observers concentrate their observations on distinct gender groupings, then results will be different to observations with a focus on interaction between the two groups. Thorne (1993) advises starting 'with a sense of the whole rather than an assumption of gender as separation and difference' (p. 108).

Similarly verbal folklore should not be considered as entirely distinct from the adult world, as much of this language play results from observations and mimicry of adults. With a recognised increase in verbal play with age, the boundaries between adult and children's humour are less defined, especially when considering the more vulgar rhymes. So much so that 'in their mid teens, it is difficult to divide their rude rhymes and jokes from the adult tradition' (Lowenstein, 1974, p.1).

There is an undeniable necessity for continued scholarship and research in the area of children's folklore. Since the studies of Sutton-Smith in the fifties and sixties there has been little research in New Zealand in children's folklore play. A recent study, looking mainly at dialectal variation in the playground vocabulary of New Zealand children, carried out through the Victoria University of Wellington by Laurie and Winifred Bauer (2002), has resulted in a collection of children's play rhymes. The Christchurch College of Education's National Diploma of Children's Literature (1994) has also resulted in the development of a comprehensive collection of children's playground rhymes. These collections could provide the raw material for further studies of the folklore tradition within New Zealand. As the latter collection includes gender details this is one area that could be open for further study.

Another possibility related to gender would be the consideration of gender issues within the rhymes themselves, providing the researchers are aware of the problems of adult speculation mentioned earlier, (McMahon & Sutton-Smith, 2001). Within New Zealand the area for folklore studies is wide open with so many avenues unexplored in terms of the how and why, and with much of the raw data still in the process of being collected.



## Conclusion

This literature review has attempted to consider the gender differences in children's play in general, and the implications as they apply to the verbal folklore heard in the school playground. These studies show that primary school aged children prefer same sex play groupings, and that these preferences increase with age through to puberty. There is a strong historical influence, going back to the decades of gender divided nature of playgrounds. Environmental and social changes have seen a move from physical folklore play to more emphasis on the verbal and symbolic.

There is evidence of different gender-based play styles in a school setting, but consideration must be given to the fact that these conclusions were based on playground observations and not in the child's home or neighborhood environment. The differences relate to competitiveness, activity and use of playground space.

Girls are shown to be the bearers and preservers of the traditional playground rhymes, especially those related to skipping and hand-clapping games. The traditional bearers however, are more evenly spread when vulgar rhymes and counting-out rhymes are under consideration.

*Janice Ackerley teaches at Christchurch College of Education, New Zealand.*



Hampstead Primary School – Ashburton, New Zealand  
(photo source Janice Ackerley)

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