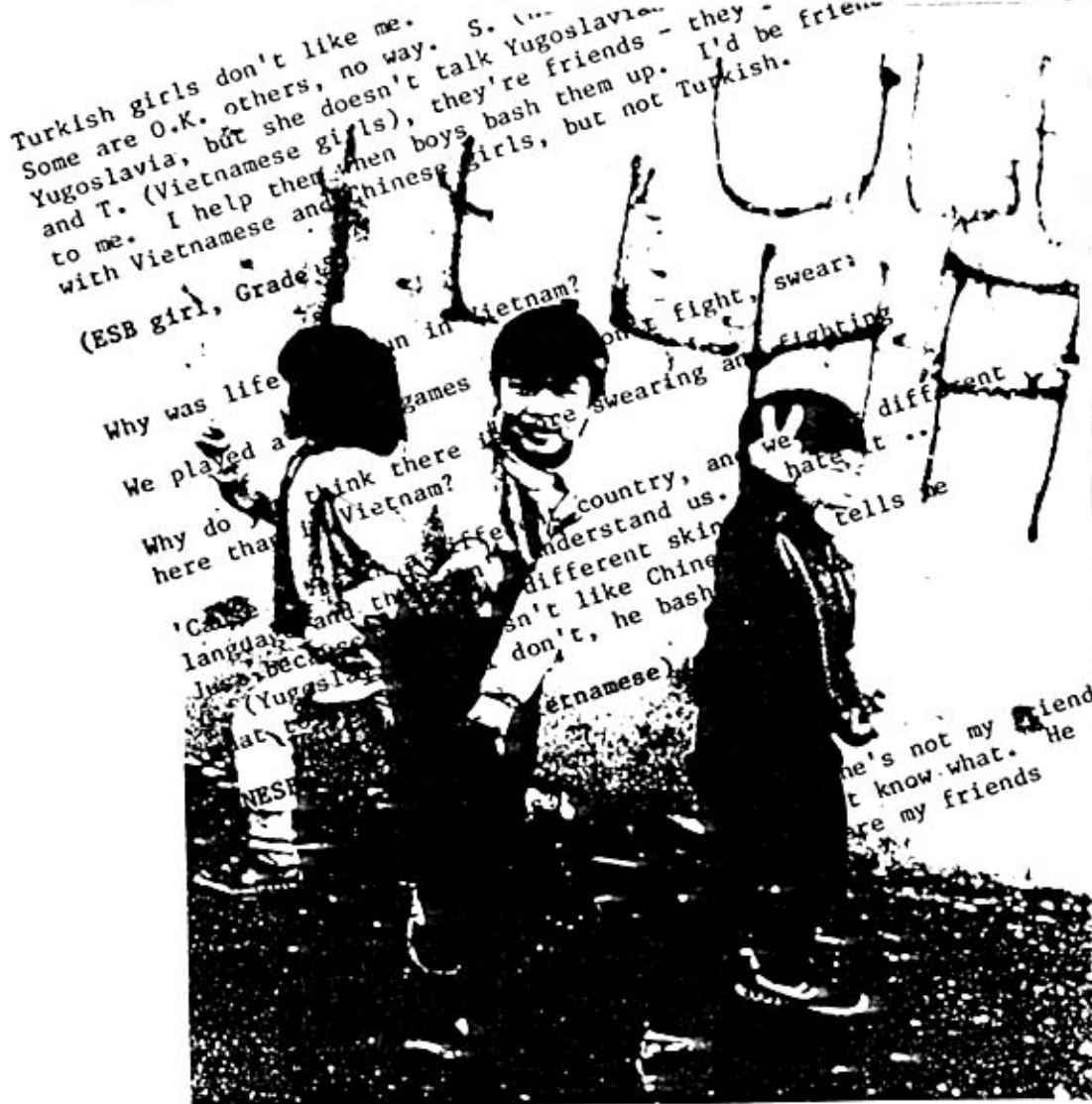


Play and Friendship in a Multi-Cultural Playground



BOOK LAUNCHING by Norma Ford, Commissioner, Human Rights Commission, Thursday, 13th March 1986

A tangible result of research into children's folklore at the IECD is the recently published report of an ethnographic playground study of an inner-suburban Melbourne school: Play and Friendship in a Multi-Cultural Playground. We print below the speech made at the launching party.

It was with a great deal of pleasure that I accepted the invitation to launch the latest publication from the Institute of Early Childhood Development: "Play and Friendship in a Multi-Cultural Playground" by Heather Russell, assisted by Gwenda Davey and June Factor.

It is always a pleasure to visit this Institute, as its reputation, and that of its staff members, became well known to me during my terms on VPSEC and the TEC Advanced Education Council - and I refer particularly to the unique expertise built up by the Institute in the area of the folk-lore of Australian children. The Australian community can be proud of the knowledge acquired through this interest in the life of children when they are not supervised and directed by adults.

The Human Rights Commission was therefore pleased to be able to select, from the numerous expressions of interest it received for its project, "The School System and Students from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds", the application for

assistance towards research proposed by the Institute into children's play in the multi-cultural playground.

Until this research was undertaken by Heather Russell and her two assistants, we knew very little in Australia about how primary school children were responding to playground life which was multi-cultural and multi-lingual and where the family language of the majority of children was not English. In the case of the primary school studied by the authors, 82% of the children came from non-English speaking backgrounds.

The researchers wished to look at what children actually did in the school playground. They looked at aggression, at conflicts which might arise from inter-ethnic prejudices and tensions, the play traditions of the children from different ethnic backgrounds, and finally when the researcher now known as the "games lady" had won the children's confidence, she interviewed many of these children to discover their views.

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Research is one of the several functions of the Human Rights Commission, which was established in 1981 to protect and promote the observance of human rights throughout Australia within the limits of Commonwealth power. The Commission has the responsibility for the administration of three pieces of Commonwealth legislation - the Human Rights Commission Act 1981, the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 and the Sex Discrimination Act 1984. These three Acts specifically empowered the Commission to undertake research that would contribute to the promotion of understanding and acceptance of human rights.

The Commission is therefore proud to be associated with this pioneering research into play and friendships in the multi-cultural playground. It provides the Commission with vital information in our "ethnic prejudice in schools" series and raises many matters on which hard thinking must be done, and specifically indicates where further research should be undertaken.

The book will add to the Commission's, and therefore the community's information on a number of points crucial to the study of ethnic prejudice, especially although not only among second generation people on such topics as the age at which prejudice emerges, the role of the home versus that of the wider social network in the development of prejudice, and the correlation between sex differences and the growth and display of prejudice. The book demonstrates the importance of games, especially folk-lore games, as an acceptable expression of cultural diversity and a common resource for children from different ethnic backgrounds.

The authors make many important findings and I would like to refer to one or two of these. There was a significant difference between boys and girls concerning the children they would include in game playing - two thirds of girls played in mono-cultural groups, whereas two thirds of boys played in multi-cultural groups. Although children's best friends were always the same sex as themselves, girls' best friends generally came from their own ethnic groups whereas boys were more flexible. Do these preferences, I wonder, reflect home or playground influences?



Some extremely valuable information was obtained from interviews with the children. Because in the classroom children chose to sit with friends from their own ethnic groups, teachers did not perceive that there might be antagonism between the various groups. And whereas from observation alone, it could be concluded that there was little prejudice in the playground, interviews with the children themselves revealed a degree of inter-ethnic tension unrecognised by the school. This I believe is one of the major strengths of this study. Many children held antagonistic views towards children from other cultures. Although a widely held view suggests that it is the most recent arrivals in our community, namely the Vietnamese, against whom most prejudice is

series. Three of these studies consider institutional and direct discrimination against students from non-English speaking backgrounds and its effect on the students such as anti-Asian racism in schools in the Wollongong area, and whether some schools reduce students' legitimate employment aspirations on grounds of ethnic background and/or gender. A further three studies are being prepared by students and teachers examining their own institutions and practices and the effects they have, such as the students, staff and Council of the Yipirinya School formed by Aboriginal parents in Alice Springs, the special curriculum and adaptations at the Marian College in Sunshine, and research by high school students in the Geelong area.

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shown, this did not appear to be the case in this playground. Vietnamese children had play skills which were much in demand in the playground. However prejudice was a source of humiliation and shame for some children who were excluded from some play activities because of their ethnic background.

The research raises interesting questions of what level, and what kind of interference, are appropriate in children's play life. What steps should the community take regarding overt and covert racism in children's play life? Among several useful recommendations, the author suggests that further work needs to be done to broaden our understanding of prejudice and racial tension in the school community. The Human Rights Commission has done some hard thinking on this subject and has developed a kit for schools entitled "Teaching Human Rights" which looks at problems of racism, sexism, and other areas of infringement of human rights. The Commission is currently supporting six other research projects in its "ethnic prejudice in the schools"

The Commission feels itself fortunate that it has this unique work, "Play and Friendships in a Multi-Cultural Playground", which complements the other six pieces of research work, because it looks at a most important factor in children's school life - playground life - where friendships are made, leaders created and much of the child's physical, social, and educational development take place.

This is a valuable, substantial, eminently readable piece of scholarly work - one with which the Commission is proud to be associated. Complete within itself, it also suggests many further jumping off points for research. The photographs are a delight and the appendices a mine of information on games, rhymes, jokes, and riddles used by children. I hope that you will all obtain your own copies of this unique, pioneering work and read it for yourselves. In officially launching this book this evening, may I offer my warmest congratulations and that of the Human Rights Commission, to the author Heather Russell, together with Gwenda Davey and June Factor who so ably assisted her.

