
Book Reviews

Recess Battles: Playing, Fighting, and Storytelling

Anna R. Beresin

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Educators and child specialists have recently focused attention on the “play deficit” facing children in the twenty-first century. Increasingly, parents find it challenging to promote imaginative play, given the seductive draw of the screens of iPads, iPhones, and computers. Children have to be taught the playful pursuits in which past generations routinely participated. In addition, 40 percent of the schools in the United States have eliminated or curtailed recess, and parents have to protest loudly to bring it back.

Anna R. Beresin’s book *Recess Battles* comes at an opportune moment. This longitudinal ethnographic study documents the history of recess and the culture of children’s play in a particular working-class, multiracial, public elementary school in Philadelphia (the Mill School) between 1991 and 2004. As Beresin argues, this book is distinguished by its “documenta-

tion of children’s culturally stylized processes of invention within the framework of a particular urban historical context.” Readers can hear the songs and game stories that Beresin recorded for her study on a website associated with the book; and the website offers a link to a site for Recess Access, an advocacy project that grew out of her work.

Beresin deftly integrates theory and data as she explicates how children—beyond the surveillance of adults—craft stories, rhymes, songs, and games such as handball, hop scotch, and wrestling—all responsive to local power structures and geographies—as well as discusses the time periods in which they played. Adults, she notes for example, disliked the game of Sui (short for Suicide), a form of “old-school” dodgeball that uses tennis balls. The adults banned kids from playing the game in the gym. Nevertheless, the game was wildly popular with the children because of its sense of danger. In 1991 only boys played Sui, but by 1999 girls played it too. Girls on the playground showed agency by bringing their own balls from home to play Sui, prohibiting male intruders and maintaining an ever-vigilant watch for adults who might break up the game. Using audio and video

recordings, Beresin documented the ways in which children negotiated such things as taking turns, using space, possessing objects, gaining status, and making friends. She also incorporates recordings of students' interviews and commentaries on their interactions. She explains how African American double-Dutch songs such as "Butt like Mine," "Mini Skirt," and "All the Boys" allow the body to move in stylized ways. African American girls' steps-and-clap rhymes (sometimes combined with circle games such as "Down by the Banks of the Hanky Pank" from the 1890s) in effect convert rock 'n' roll into folk-dance music.

Beresin shows how commercially scripted rhymes (for companies such as McDonald's, Reebok, and Nike) edged out more traditional jump-rope rhymes. These companies promoted new tropes binding together children from diverse neighborhoods, social classes, and ethnicities. However, the corporate sponsorship by Nike or Reebok of sports events (double-Dutch leagues) simultaneously provoked longings for consumer goods unaffordable to working-class children.

Reflecting on historical change, Beresin found that in 1991 girls' games were racially segregated (though boys' games were not); by 1999 African American and white girls played together in jump rope and hopscotch. By 2004 "apartheid schooling" was uncommon.

With the demise of recess, Beresin worries that children are being deprived of a valuable space for learning how to form friendships and social networks and to manage conflict. Recess is curtailed in working-class neighborhoods because authorities perceive it as violent.

In upper middle-class neighborhoods, they perceive recess as a distraction from academics. Important research has argued that recess, even fifteen-minutes worth, promotes better behavior in the classroom. On the playground, children of diverse social classes and ethnicities mix and learn from one another. As Beresin so artfully argues, games and recess provide "a lending library for trying on 'otherness.'" While adults find the playground a risky and violent place, Beresin argues that it provides a space for "bodily ways of knowing." Children do not learn the art of negotiation in front of a computer screen.

Beresin's book provides a fascinating and much-needed perspective on children's play. Interested readers might also want to look at the considerable body of complementary work by linguistic anthropologists, sociologists of childhood, ethnomethodologists, conversation analysts, and folklorists including Linda Hughes, Ann-Carita Evaldsson, Susan Danby and Carolyn Baker, Amelia Church, Sigrid Berentzen, William A. Corsaro and Thomas A. Rizzo, and my own studies in children at play.

Anna Beresin's *Recess Battles* provides a masterful and well-documented account of how children socialize children in the midst of the battles they must fight on the playground. Her very readable and engaging text will certainly have a powerful impact on social scientists, educators, and anyone concerned with the nature of children's play.

—Marjorie Harness Goodwin, *UCLA, Los Angeles, CA*