

Playing for Keeps: Life and Learning on a Public School Playground

Deborah Meier, Brenda S. Engel,
and Beth Taylor

New York: Teachers College Press, 2010.
Contents, images, appendix, references,
index. 127 pp. \$19.95 paper.
ISBN: 9780807750957

This charming book describes the wistful imaginings, inventive games, and general good humor in an unusual public school in Boston. Written by the school's founders and staff, it is a love letter to an institution and a Whitmanesque account of the play worlds of the elementary-school children as witnessed by their teachers. *Playing for Keeps* reads like a series of brief but thoughtful journal entries, and its fault lies only in their brevity.

Part 1, "Sources of Play" describes domestic play, outdoor play, and children's fears. We read about the surrealism of family scenes, monsters, and the inventive use of nature. The school's policy encourages children to play with natural elements—mud, water, tree limbs, and bugs. Holes became year-long excavations; homemade bridges evoked fairy tales and heroes. To the authors' credit, they do not romanticize childhood itself, and they address its dangers (both imaginary and real) and acknowledge its conflicts. They show a sense of reverence for what anthropologist Victor Turner called "the human seriousness of play" in his *From Ritual to Theatre* (1982). They record their students at play: "We are burying the fairy . . . The fairy died. One of the trolls got him." "A worm house is built 'so the worms won't be freezing in the fall and winter.'" The

excerpts remind the reader of the descriptive nursery-school studies of Vivian Gussin Paley.

A transitional chapter at the end of part 1 addresses the school's curriculum and discusses how writing and the humanities mix with play and then emerge on the playground. Useful for educators, the chapter raises questions about the artificial separation of children's thinking into inside-the-school categories and outside-the-school categories. Isn't digging archaeological? Isn't tree exploration botany?

The second section of the book, "Aspects of Play," echoes Sigmund Freud, Jean Piaget, and John Dewey with its views on wishful thinking, laws, and the utility of play. The authors describe the yard games not so much in terms of their rules or variations but in terms of their genesis. Often a staff member plays the games with the children: "Helen (staff) played touch football with a group of boys and the group has grown to two games of football with the assistant principal," they note. Then, they add: "One day there was a lively game of hide-and-seek on the grass with Amy (intern)." These examples offer a model for practitioners who are trying to make the most of their own playgrounds.

The last two chapters address, in part, the wider cultural world. "Age, Gender, and Race" describes the school's intentional multiage playtime, at a time when so many schools are creating age-graded recess time. The book tells of many mixed-gender games, showing their fluidity and the children's own flexibility. Yet, given the school's location in the Roxbury part of Boston and Boston's history of racial divide, it was surprising that there was not a greater emphasis in the book on race,

racism, or social class, or any of the corresponding literature about the subjects. The final chapter, also brief, addresses “Influence of Media” on the children’s play and concludes that there was relatively little of it here, perhaps because of the richness of the natural environment. The epilogue, “Wondering about the Future,” questions the school’s future as an alternative model and the authors’ own conviction of their methods. They imply that play itself involves wondering.

The authors seem worried about whether their book, *Playing for Keeps*, is about their alternative school or about play itself. These are ordinary, brilliant children in an extraordinary school yard. I wish that all of our public-school children could be so lucky to have real dirt to play in, to enjoy freedom of expression, and to be supervised by grown-ups who actually listen. Until they do, we need more books like this one.

—Anna R. Beresin, *University of the Arts, Philadelphia, PA*

Reclaiming Childhood: Freedom and Play in an Age of Fear

Helene Guldberg

New York: Routledge, 2009. Contents, afterword, bibliography, index. 205 pp. \$31.95 paper. ISBN: 9780415477239

Helene Guldberg grew up in Norway playing outside in all kinds of weather. With siblings and friends, she played happily unsupervised until called to the family’s evening meal. Her later experience as a

primary-school teacher, as well as her research as a Ph.D. candidate, underscored her commitment to the importance of unsupervised play in a child’s social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development. Guldberg urges parents to overcome the paralysis of the barrage of expert and media reports bemoaning the disastrous state of childhood today; she encourages readers not to take the doomsday findings and headlines at face value. She writes in her introduction: “Children need to be given space away from adults’ watchful eyes—in order to play, experiment, take risks (within a sensible framework provided by adults), test boundaries, have arguments, fight, and learn how to resolve conflicts.” In her concluding paragraphs, the author sensibly and clearly summarizes what many believe: “Adults need to allow children to grow and flourish, balancing sensible guidance with youthful independence.” She promotes an understanding of the methodology, validity of research, and the motive and objective of each source.

Guldberg states that reading between the lines is important—and it is. *Reclaiming Childhood* is at once an admonition and a plea to parents, suggesting we all calm down and take a step back from today’s safety-obsessed culture. The author’s underlying message is, as the philosophical comic-strip possum character Pogo said, “We have met the enemy, and he is us.”

Unfortunately, Guldberg, a managing editor of the radical website *spiked*, sets a polemical rather than academic tone. Guldberg quotes the mission of *spiked* as: “raising the horizons of humanity by waging a culture war of words against misan-