Children’s rough and tumble play: Perspectives of teachers in northern Canadian Indigenous communities

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Children’s playful aggression: perspectives of teachers in Northern Canadian Indigenous communities

Submitted by Shelley Stagg Peterson, Audrey Madsen, Jayson San Miguel, Soon Young Jang

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Abstract

Ten teachers in kindergarten and grade one classrooms in remote northern Canadian Ojibway communities, and two consultants from a First Nations Student Success Program participated in focus group discussions about the place of rough and tumble and superhero play, and teachers’ roles in preventing relational and physically aggressive play in school. This paper reports on issues related to sociocultural influences on perceptions of play involving objects to which Indigenous children assign implicit roles as guns, and teachers’ concerns about external perceptions of teachers’ roles vis-à-vis playful aggression in school. Implications for teacher practice and for teacher education include establishing boundaries and negotiating rules and consequences with students, and teaching problem-solving approaches. Teachers’ expressed need for exposure to research on playful aggression in teacher education and professional development initiatives is consistent with the findings of previous research. This study provides perspectives from teachers in a non-mainstream teaching context on a controversial topic with mixed views coming from researchers and media reports.

Introduction

Teachers in many jurisdictions are voicing concerns about the rough-and-tumble play and superhero play, which includes play with objects assigned roles as guns, of children in their classrooms. Rough-and-tumble play (R&T play) is characterized as fun, social-interactive behaviour that includes play fighting, wrestling and chasing behaviours (Freeman and Brown 2004; Pellegrini and Smith 1998), all the while laughing and showing a joy and willingness to continue with the play (Carlson 2009). Playgrounds are usually considered the appropriate place for rough-and-tumble play in school settings (Jarvis 2007). In super-hero play, children take up
roles as popular culture characters with superhuman capabilities that allow them to vanquish antagonists, often using violent means that include variants of guns (Boyd 1997). In research conducted in the USA, teachers have expressed concerns about children getting hurt or frightened by aggressive play and about the harmful lessons they might learn about how to treat others (Gestwicki 2011; Levin, 2003). These educators may perceive playful aggression as dangerous and inappropriate, and discourage or ban such play (Tannock 2008).

Similar concerns are the basis for what Holland (2003) describes as a “zero tolerance approach to war, weapon and superhero play” (2) in many early childhood settings in the United Kingdom. In place of longstanding research-supported views of rough and tumble play as contributing to children’s physical and social development (Pellegrini 1987), play is viewed as an expression of male violence. Instead of supporting children’s superhero play as an activity offering a sense of power to children in their adult-dominated world and a safe way to express anger and aggression (Carlsson-Paige and Levin 1990), some teachers ban such play in an effort to socialize children away from violent behaviour (Holland 2003).

Ten kindergarten and grade one teachers, three of whom are Indigenous and grew up in or near the northern Canadian Indigenous communities where they are teaching, are among the teachers asking questions about aggressive play. These teachers, who are participants in a six-year collaborative action research project on play-based learning that spans four provinces, said, in interviews conducted when they began participating in the project, that they wanted to know more about boundaries they should be placing on aggressive play in classrooms and on school playgrounds. We invited these teachers to participate in this branch of the research because they are teaching in cultural contexts that have not been represented in previous research on R&T
play. As such, these teachers introduce new perspectives on a controversial topic. Their contributions to focus group conversations help us to address these research questions:

1. What are kindergarten and grade one teachers’ perspectives on various types of R&T play and the place of such play in classrooms? How do socio-cultural differences across the group of teachers appear to influence teachers’ perceptions?

2. What are teachers’ views of their roles vis-à-vis R&T play?

The 10 teachers have been participating in the Northern Oral language and Writing through Play (NOW Play) project for one or two years. The project’s focus on northern rural and Indigenous communities arises from the non-Indigenous principal investigator’s personal experience growing up and teaching in small rural Canadian communities and her observations that Canadian educational research studies have tended to be southern urban-centric. In agreement with Donehower, Hogg and Schell (2007) she believes that educational research is likely to “presume an urban or semi-urban setting and do[es] not account for the experiences and realities of rural places and peoples” (p. 12), particularly northern rural and Indigenous teachers and students. Accordingly, she situated the six-year project in northern Canadian communities in four provinces. Co-authors of this paper are two doctoral students, one who recently immigrated to Canada from Korea and the other a second-generation Filipino-Canadian. The fourth author, with northern European ancestry, is a recent graduate from a graduate initial teacher education program who moved to an urban center from a small southern rural community. We all have experience teaching in primary classrooms. All but one author is female.

In the following section, we present a brief summary of Ojibway cultural values and traditions, together with historical influences on the social lives of isolated First Nations community members that have potential to influence participating teachers’ views of children’s
R&T play. We would like to acknowledge that the branch of our collaborative action research reported in this paper is being carried out on Indigenous land in the Nishnawbe Aski Nation Territory, and we thank participating Indigenous community members for welcoming us to work and learn within their ancestral lands.

Cultural values, traditional ways of life, and historical influences on community and family life

Participating teachers are living and teaching in Ojibway communities where the Seven Grandfather Teachings are central to teaching within and beyond the classroom walls. These teachings, which include wisdom, love, respect, bravery, honesty, humility, and truth, are considered to be gifts from the Seven Grandfathers to the Ojibway people (Benton-Banai 2010). Children’s play and the learning that they construct from their play are expected to align with these teachings. Relationships to the land are also important. Zinga and Styres (2011) explain that “it is important to appreciate the fundamental being of Land and its role in the conceptualization of identity for Indigenous peoples” (62). Land is viewed as a living and life-nurturing and sustaining entity and as first teacher whose pedagogy is “grounded in interconnected and interdependent relationships” with physical, spiritual and cultural actions and knowledges (63). Relationships with the land include the physical actions of duck and moose hunting that contribute to food provision for the family; actions that have spiritual and cultural dimensions. Schools are closed for a week in the fall for families to go moose hunting, and in one participating community, the school is closed in the spring for duck hunting. This school holiday, called Traditional Week in all of the communities, is important for nurturing children’s relationships to the Land, and contributing to children’s positive sense of identity as members of
their First Nations communities. These experiences are part of the cultural knowledge, values and experiences that participating teachers draw upon when talking about classroom play activities.

Also mentioned in participating teachers’ focus group contributions are the effects of colonialist history and assimilative government policies, particularly the residential school system. Teachers talked about children in their classrooms not standing up for themselves when others intimidated or threatened them. As narrated in personal reflective stories by First Nations scholar-practitioners (e.g., Martin, 2015), mothers who are residential school survivors (e.g., Stout and Peters, 2011) and writers (e.g., Loyie and Brissenden, 2016), the resulting loss of culture, language, family bonding, and ties to Elders and traditional and spiritual teachings has contributed to unemployment, alcoholism, feelings of hopelessness and low self-esteem, family violence and suicide within many Canadian Indigenous communities.

**Literature review**

Our literature review is framed by the topics of our two research questions: characteristics of aggressive play and playful aggression; and teachers’ perceptions of roles and responses to playful aggression.

**Characteristics of playful aggression and aggressive play**

Rough-and-tumble (R&T) play, “a distinctive, universal form of play, which has been observed in many species” (Jarvis 2007, 173) and super-hero play are examples of playful aggression. R&T play is characterized as consensual, fun, dramatic role-play involving reciprocity of roles and without the intention of harm (Costabile et al. 1991; Freeman and Brown, 2004). Furthermore, R&T play is carried out among friends, and is an expression of bonds of friendship, particularly among boys (Reed, Brown and Roth 2000). Research shows that R&T play is
important in developing cooperation skills and increasing children’s sense of social roles, limits, and fairness (Maynes 2013). As Jarvis (2007) explains, playful aggression, including rough-and-tumble play and superhero play, “puts children into real situations where they can practice spontaneous and autonomous competitive and co-operative interactions simultaneously, developing complex social skills” (185).

Males of all species that play are more likely than females to engage in R&T play (Pellegrini and Smith 1998). Explanations for gender differences can be drawn from bio-evolutionary research (e.g., Berenbaum and Snyder 1995), examining the effects of testosterone on behaviour, and from social constructionist research (e.g., O’Donnell and Sharpe 2004), which highlights the socially constructed categories of femininity and masculinity.

In contrast to playful aggression, children use physical aggression to gain social power, or in hopes of protecting a play space or group (Fanger et al. 2012). Physically aggressive play involves a child causing or threatening physical harm to others through such actions as hitting, shoving, pulling, or aggressively taking objects (Crick et al. 2006).

**Teachers’ perceptions of adult roles and responses to playful aggression**

Given the abundant research showing that R&T and superhero play are forms of socialization and that they contribute to children’s cognitive, social and physical development and their abilities to solve problems (e.g., Smith, Smees, and Pellegrini, 2004), researchers recommend that teachers and parents do not put obstacles in the way of children’s playful aggression (Freeman and Brown 2004; Scott and Panksepp 2003). Instead, adults “should support boys and girls in their play choices, recognizing that individuals need a repertoire of interactional styles that will enable them to get along with a wide variety of peers... [and to understand] the differences between consensual and non-consensual rough housing” (Freeman...
and Brown, 2004, 230). When R&T and superhero play behaviours are forbidden, children are not given opportunities to explore fully their ideas, thoughts, fears and questions (Hart and Tannock 2013; Smidt 2011), and they may acquire poor impulse control and violence control in later life (Brown 2009). Early childhood educators participating in a study where the zero tolerance rule against playful aggression was relaxed, described many positive outcomes of allowing such play, such as children’s increased creativity in the narratives they enacted and in their assignment of implicit meanings to objects. Teachers also identified the enhanced development of social skills and the creation of friendships among boys as outcomes of the changed practices. Early Childhood Educators said that they experienced less tension in their relationships with the children because they were not in a position of having to say ‘no’ to children. Additionally, they came to see that the children used weapons constructed from blocks and other materials as useful tools (e.g., swords to chop down trees and guns to cut metal), rather than to harm others (Holland 2003).

A number of studies of teachers’ and parents’ views on playful aggression and aggressive play show that many adults do not feel that R&T play, superhero play, nor war play and war toys have a place on the playground or in the classroom (Costabile et al. 1992; Reed et al. 2000). Such play has been viewed as a threat to teachers’ control within classroom and playground settings and an impediment to children’s attainment of curriculum standards. Allowing children to sustain their playful aggression has also been viewed as a reflection of incompetent teaching/supervision of children (Freeman and Brown 2004; Logue and Harvey 2010).

Gender plays a role in teachers’ and parents’ responses to playful aggression as women, who are most often the teachers of young children, tend to “create classrooms that reflect and value feminine ways of interacting and behaving” that are less likely to include R&T, super-hero
or war play (Freeman and Brown, 2004, 228). Female early childhood educators (ECE’s) and teachers are also less likely to engage in physical play with children (Sandberg and Pramling-Samuelsson 2005). These views were exemplified in female ECEs’ perceptions of children engaged in R&T play as less likely to be liked by peers than children engaged in less boisterous play, and contrasting perceptions of male ECEs (Bosacki et al. 2015). Similar gender contrasts were found decades earlier, when adult males were more likely to view children’s aggressive play as playful aggression and adult females were more likely to view playful aggression as aggressive play (Boulton 1993).

Research methods

Participants and their Indigenous communities

Eight teachers in three northern Canadian Ojibway communities and two consultants from a First Nations Student Success Program, who had previously taught in northern Indigenous communities and are now serving as curriculum consultants in the three schools, joined three of the four authors in focus group discussions. All participating teachers are part of our six-year action research project, though the three Moose Lake teachers (all names of teachers and communities are pseudonyms) are new to the project this year. Over the past two years, we have been visiting the Cougar Creek and Poplar Lake teachers’ classrooms, holding action research meetings after school and corresponding by email with the teachers. We had visited the Moose Lake teachers and their students once prior to the focus group meetings. The two consultants joined us on many of the school visits, so we already had a relationship with them prior to the focus group conversations.
A summary of the participants’ teaching experience, grades and home communities can be found in Figure 1. All are female except for Sylvester, a non-Indigenous kindergarten teacher from Cougar Creek.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Moose Lake is a large northern Indigenous community with a population of approximately 2000. In Moose Lake’s K-12 school, Ojibway is the language of instruction for kindergarten and English is the language of instruction for grades 1-12. Cougar Creek, accessible only by air and winter road, has a population of approximately 500 people. English is the primary language of instruction and Anishnaabemowin is taught for half an hour each day in Cougar Creek’s K-8 school. Poplar Lake, with a population of approximately 900 people, is accessible by road. English is the language of instruction in the K-8 school. All three communities have a police station, staffed by Indigenous and non-Indigenous police officers who live in the community on two-week rotations, a Northern Store, where community members pick up their mail and purchase food and other goods, and a nursing station and nursing housing, where mostly non-Indigenous nurses live in the community on two-week rotations. Indigenous schools are governed by the Local Education Authority, which is an arm of both the Local Band Council (through an Education Chair) and their regional Tribal Council. Classroom instruction follows the Ministry of Education curriculum.
Data collection

We draw on focus group data to learn about the perceptions and practices of teachers in relation to children’s R&T and superhero play. Prior to the focus group sessions, we created a two-page literature review and selected two articles that were written for teachers on the topic of playful aggression (Carlson 2009; Hart and Tannock 2013). We sent the summary and articles, along with the focus group protocol, to participating teachers to review before the focus group sessions.

We had planned to conduct a single focus group involving all participants because teachers who had participated in Year 1 of the project told us that they wanted to meet with other teachers from their province to hear their perspectives. However, the weather made it impossible for the plane we had chartered to land in all three communities on the scheduled day in November. The pilot was able to bring the three grade one teachers from Moose Lake, so we held a focus group with them on that day and then scheduled another focus group meeting for teachers from Cougar Creek and Poplar Lake in December. Both focus groups were held in a non-Indigenous community within an hour’s flight of participating teachers’ Indigenous communities where there were facilities for such a meeting and we could order food because there were restaurants in town. Additionally, teachers were able to get to hardware and department stores to pick up important items such as hockey tape for their son’s hockey sticks!

Focus group sessions were audio recorded. Each focus group session was divided into two parts. In the first part of the focus group session, we discussed the articles and resources previously given to the participants. We used the discussion questions (see Figure 2) as a guide to encourage conversation.

_______________________________

Insert Figure 2 about here
In the second part of the session, we selected three videos from YouTube, to show to the participants (see Figure 3). After the participants were shown a video, they shared their opinions, analysis, and experiences with the behaviours exhibited in the videos.

Data analysis

Focus group audio recordings were transcribed and analyzed inductively (Patton, 2015) using our research questions as a frame. We highlighted sentences and phrases that described teachers’ definitions of playful aggression, their views of teachers’ roles and issues around playful aggression and aggressive play, deriving the themes that are outlined in the next section. We brought an initial report of findings to all participating teachers during our April visits to their classrooms and asked for their thoughts on how their views and contributions to the focus group discussions had been represented. We revised the findings according to teachers’ feedback.

Findings

We organize this section using the themes derived from our analysis.

Playful aggression is natural, but children’s safety and external perceptions of teachers are concerns

All participating teachers said that playful aggression is natural for children. They observed that children in their classes, especially the boys, were “going to find a way to wrestle, no matter what,” as voiced by Geneviève. In their examples of playful aggression, teachers
included anecdotes about children making guns from blocks and classroom objects, wrestling (including toe wrestling on the carpet), children piling on top of each other, and children chasing each other. Katherina responded positively to the Wrestling Video (#1 in Figure 3), by saying, “The boys are both actively participating in it and one’s not pummelling the other” and Sylvester followed up: “When they’re engaged in something that they’re truly enjoying, they can in most cases solve their own problems. If I was their dad, I would be okay with that.” The two participants went on to say that as children, they had engaged in the same type of playful aggression with their brothers. Participants told us that, although they had not thought about the contributions of playful aggression to children’s development before reading the summary we gave them, they were open to applying what they had learned in their interactions with children in their classrooms and on the playground.

At the same time, teachers voiced concerns regarding the potential of playful aggression evolving into aggressive play and about perceptions of their competence as teachers and supervisors. Maria, for example, said that she could accept that “kids need to be energetic; they need that cardio-vascular activity. . . But when they get excited, these things happen.” She was concerned about losing control of the situation, resulting in children getting physically harmed when engaging in wrestling and chasing each other. Samantha worried about the small classroom spaces and the potential for injury in a small space with many bodies. She said, “Every day, I have that fight. “No running in the classroom. That’s what outside is for.” Trisha added, “I don’t want to be responsible for any of my kids getting hurt. I won’t do it at all.”

Participants talked about external perceptions—those of colleagues, parents, school administrators and the broader community—when discussing playful aggression. Maria expressed concerns about being viewed as an incompetent teacher: “And if, God forbid,
something happens, people will be penalized, scrutinized; that it was our shortcoming. We neglected the kids.” Concerns about colleagues’ perceptions were voiced by Ruby: “Anyone can see our kids. And they can say, ‘Clearly these teachers don’t know what they’re doing.’” Concerns about judgements of parents, colleagues and school administrators seemed to be tied to views of the teacher as being responsible for children’s welfare and for controlling the classroom environment to ensure their well-being. Teachers from Poplar Lake and Cougar Creek were also concerned about parents’ perceptions. Samantha, for example, said, “What if one of the kids get hurt, and the parents come and say ‘well, why are you allowing that at the school?’” Sylvester added, “If the children go home and they say something happened, it’s automatic that the finger gets pointed in the direction of the teacher. And so we are placed on the defensive a lot of times, simply because the children are believed over the adults.”

**Cultural conflicts regarding guns**

The three urban-oriented teachers, Genviève, Ruby and Maria, expressed great inner conflicts between the perspectives on guns held by family and neighbours in their urban communities and those held by members of the Indigenous community in which they were teaching. The tug-of-war of values was expressed by Geneviève:

> I don’t know how I feel about gun play. Guns are not an issue for violence in Moose Lake. It’s not like down south where guns are an issue for violence. Here, guns are used for hunting. I see it in the game my students play. I’m torn because they’re not saying, ‘I’m going to hurt you’ because that’s not how guns are used and that’s not how they’re taught to use guns. I know they’re learning it from
somewhere. But in my heart of hearts, gun play is wrong. I’m conflicted with it. I don’t know where to go with that.

Ruby also found it difficult to reconcile Indigenous perspectives and values with her own. She said, “I need to check my bias at the door because I’m from down south where gun play is wrong. But we know pretending you’re a hunter and you’re hunting moose is okay. So I really probably should work on how I perceive gun play because they’re not doing anything inherently bad. But that’s my bias and something I have to work on.” Maria, the more experienced teacher who had taught in Moose Lake for many years, said that the rule of thumb in her class is: “No guns towards people. Always point guns toward moose and other animals.”

Consultants and teachers from Cougar Creek and Poplar Lake, three of whom were Indigenous and four who had grown up in rural communities, did not seem as conflicted about the cultural role of hunting with guns in Indigenous communities. These teachers mentioned how traditional hunting practices – including hunting with guns – are taught to young family members and how children are exposed to hunting culture from a young age. Samantha explained how those traditions are evident in her non-Indigenous family, as well. She said, “My nephew, … he’s fifteen now and these past couple years, he’s been going out [hunting] with his dad. … It’s been a tradition in our family forever.” These teachers expect that children will bring these Indigenous traditions into classroom play settings.

All teachers were in agreement, however, about the negative influence of popular culture, including movies and video games, on children’s dramatic play. Sylvester, for example, said, “the media is prime and in particular the games, the Xbox games as well as the iPad games. They go for the violence. . . the re-enactment of what they’re seeing in media that they go home to look at.” Teachers were concerned that traditional views of guns as hunting tools were being
supplanted by views drawn from children’s exposure to popular culture texts where guns are weapons used in person-to-person violence.

**Teacher’s role is to observe and set boundaries**

Teachers pointed out that they were responsible for more than 20 students in their classes and it was challenging to ensure the safety of all children when some were engaged in rough and tumble and superhero play. Shania and Sylvester emphasized the need for teachers to be ever-vigilant when children are playing in their classrooms and on the playground. Shania said, “I’m always looking around. . . because I don’t want incidents” and Sylvester agreed, “You have to be a keen observer; an unobtrusive observer who can look at something and say, ‘This is not going right,’ or ‘Yeah, this is going right. I really like what I see.’” Samantha said she watches for cues in facial expressions as she observes play: “You know when the person at the receiving end of this rough and tumble is not having fun.” In response to the YouTube video with two boys wrestling, all participating teachers agreed with Maria, who said, “When it comes to kicking or physical injury, then it’s time to intervene.”

Teachers talked about setting boundaries for children’s play. Trisha stated that she does not allow playful aggression because she has observed that many of her students appear not to have learned in their home environments how to read social cues and take turns in their play. As their teacher, she felt it was necessary to explain and demonstrate how to carry out these social skills. Monica explained that it is necessary to “teach children the difference between rough and tumble playing for sport and just fighting.” The Moose Lake teachers talked also about creating boundaries to ensure children’s safety, including the class rule: “No guns towards people.” Monica added, “Tell them to make a longer gun,” intending for the students to mimic hunting
behaviours. Teachers talked about how their responses to children’s play created the boundaries for what was considered acceptable play. Sylvester explained, “The children watch and see that you’re accepting something. . . and they would attempt something similar and then they could get hurt. So you’re always wondering just how far you can let something go.”

Prevention is viewed as important, as well. Teachers described specific classroom rules that they either had established or would establish to ensure children’s safety during play. Ruby emphasized the importance of co-constructing the rules with children: “I want to get them more involved in the classroom rules so that they they’ll know their boundaries because they’ve set them. It’s not me just saying, ‘You do this and you’re going to the principal’s office.’”

**Teacher’s role: teach problem-solving and empathy**

All teachers agreed that it was important for teachers to “teach the kids to advocate for themselves.” Whenever they viewed children in the sample videos responding to a peer’s aggressive behaviour by saying, “No, I don’t like that,” teachers applauded the child for standing up for themselves. Ruby explained, “It’s important to give them the opportunity to try and solve the problems themselves. They’re gaining skills through that. But if you see that somebody’s clearly getting hurt in the situation, then maybe you intervene and ask them: ‘How would it make you feel?’ And then that gets them speaking about their feelings and getting to see somebody else’s perspective.” Maria offered another approach: “There’s books about everything, so you can probably find a book about it. . . and have a discussion without singling out a student in the class.”

Teachers were concerned about children’s tendency to be silent about aggression directed toward them. They agreed that teaching children to “speak up for themselves” and “not become
too adult-dependent” when peers subjected them to physical aggression was an important part of their role vis-à-vis aggressive play. Sadie said, “I get a lot of that in my room: ‘Teacher, they’re being mean.’ I started telling them, “You tell them in your own words how you feel and to be nice.” Trisha added that she tells children “to go play with someone else” who is more compatible when she sees two children playing together whose personalities lead to conflict in their play.

Conclusions and implications

Socio-cultural influences on teachers’ perceptions

We acknowledge that assumptions underpinning the larger action research project, regarding the need for northern rural and Indigenous perspectives to be considered in educational conversations, have placed us in a position where certain patterns in the data that align with our assumptions are foregrounded. Accordingly, we offer our conclusions with an invitation to other researchers to replicate our study in other northern contexts. While also recognizing that the generalizability of our findings is limited due to the small sample size, we offer the following synthesis of participants’ views as starting points for considering socio-cultural influences on teachers’ responses to playful aggression in classrooms and on playgrounds.

Although it is true that, as in previous research studies, gender was influential in participating teachers’ responses to playful aggression, it cannot fully account for variations in teachers’ perceptions. Sylvester’s acceptance of rough and tumble and superhero play certainly mirrors that of male early childhood educators participating in previous research (Bosacki, Woods and Coplan 2015; Boulton, 1993; Logue & Harvey, 2010; Sandberg and Pramling-Samuelsson 2005). However, Indigenous teachers, Shania, Trisha and Sadie, together with
Katherina and Samantha, non-Indigenous teachers who had grown up playing with brothers in rural communities and had many years of experience teaching in Indigenous communities, also gave positive assessments of the wrestling in one of the video clips. They talked about their childhood memories of playful aggression and of a family tradition of hunting. Like the children in Holland’s (2003) study of R&T and gun play, these teachers viewed guns as practical tools for hunting. Participating Indigenous and rural-based teachers talked about observing children’s facial expressions to assure themselves that children were engaging in playful aggression and not aggressive play. They felt that dramatic play, where children take up traditional hunting roles, was acceptable, as long as there were rules in place that emphasized gun safety and guns being used as part of culturally acceptable hunting practices.

In contrast, Ruby and Geneviève, who had grown up in large southern urban communities and had only taught in an Indigenous community for one year, associated gun play with criminal activity. The two urban-oriented teachers were less open to play that involved objects to which children assigned implicit roles as guns and other weapons than were their Indigenous and non-Indigenous rural-oriented colleagues. All teachers felt it necessary, however, to offer counter-narratives to dramatic play, drawn from plots of violent video games and movies, where children aim gun-like objects that they have made from blocks at other children. These counter-narratives are based on traditional views of the Land, where humans have harmonious relationships with other living things and honour the Seven Grandfather teachings of love and respect for others.

Participants’ focus group responses indicate that future research on children’s playful aggression should take into account socio-cultural influences in non-mainstream communities. Our own research, for example, would be enriched by exploring the perspectives of community members and parents in the Indigenous communities in which participants teach. The study’s
results also provide considerations for policy developers and providers of professional
development for teachers teaching in communities whose cultural values may be dramatically
different from their own. It is important that policy and professional development conversations
move beyond assumptions that are centered in urban middle-class contexts.

Teacher’s role

Participating teachers’ constructions of playful aggression parallel those of teachers in
previous research in many respects (Freeman and Brown 2004; Logue and Harvey 2010). They
shared a concern, for example, about issues of safety, and worried that children’s exuberance
during playful aggression could result in physical injury. They equated teachers’ condoning of
play activities that could potentially imperil children’s safety with irresponsible behaviour on the
part of the teacher. Additionally, like kindergarten teachers participating in Logue and Harvey’s
research (2010), they worried about unfavourable external judgement of their teaching
competence if they created space for these types of play in their classrooms. Participants
perceived that colleagues, parents or other community members would disapprove of rough-and-
tumble and superhero play as classroom or playground activity.

In accordance with recommendations from previous research (e.g., Gestwicki 2011;
Smidt 2011), participants identified specific preventative actions, such as establishing boundaries
and negotiating rules and consequences with students, in order to create spaces for children to
benefit from playful aggression. Also in line with researchers’ recommendations (e.g., Wettstein
et al. 2013), participants talked about empowering students to solve problems collaboratively.
They added to these recommendations by saying that it is important to instil in children a sense
of empathy for peers who are targeted in aggressive play. Additionally, participants, who are
teaching in three different Indigenous communities, identified culturally-appropriate responses to
playful aggression for their communities. Teachers gave examples of situations where they encouraged students to speak for themselves, as many children in their classrooms are generally quiet and do not stand up for themselves when they are the target of peer aggression.

As in previous research (e.g., Tannock, 2008), participants said that they had not encountered research showing the positive outcomes of playful aggression (e.g., Gestwicki 2011; Hart and Tannock, 2013; Maynes 2013) prior to preparing for our focus group discussions. They were open to learning more and to applying what they had learned through the readings we had provided. Teachers said that R&T play was a natural part of children’s interactions with each other. They wanted to know more about how to respond to such play in their classrooms. Indeed, teachers’ desire to learn more about playful aggression was the impetus for this branch of the larger action research study. In this respect, our findings have implications for initial teacher education and professional development. Given that response to playful aggression and aggressive play are of concern to teachers, it is important to present research reflecting a wide range of perspectives on how teachers might create spaces for play that honours all children’s play choices and the local community’s cultural practices, and at the same time, respects teachers’ perspectives on their roles and relationships with the children in their classrooms.

References


Behavior, and Social Preference in Predicting Resource Control in Young Children.”


**Figure 1: Participating Educators**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Years of Teaching Experience</th>
<th>Grade Currently Taught</th>
<th>Home Community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Geneviève</td>
<td>Moose Lake</td>
<td>First Year</td>
<td>Grade 1</td>
<td>Large urban in south</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katherina</td>
<td>First Nations</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Rural community in same province</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student Success</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Program</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Maria</td>
<td>Moose Lake</td>
<td>13 Years</td>
<td>Grade 1</td>
<td>Large urban in south</td>
</tr>
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<td>Monica</td>
<td>First Nations</td>
<td>7 Years</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
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<td>Ruby</td>
<td>Moose Lake</td>
<td>First Year</td>
<td>Grade 1</td>
<td>Large urban in south</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadie</td>
<td>Poplar Lake</td>
<td>17 Years</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>Poplar Lake – Sadie is an</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>School</td>
<td>Years of Teaching Experience</td>
<td>Grade Currently Taught</td>
<td>Home Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
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<td>------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>Poplar Lake</td>
<td>7 Years</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>Indigenous educator</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shania</td>
<td>Cougar Creek</td>
<td>17 Years</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>Cougar Creek – Shania is an Indigenous educator</td>
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<td>Cougar Creek</td>
<td>14 Years</td>
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<td>Rural community in another province</td>
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<td>Trisha</td>
<td>Poplar Lake</td>
<td>11 Years</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>Indigenous community nearby – Trisha is an Indigenous educator</td>
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</table>
Focus Group Protocol

1. What new things have you learned about children’s aggressive behaviours during free-play? Or, what stood out for you as something interesting or surprising in the articles?

2. What parts of the articles do you agree and what parts do you disagree with? Please explain.

3. What concerns you most about rough and tumble or super-hero play? What do you value most about rough-and-tumble play and super-hero play?

4. In your view, what is the teacher’s role when children are playing in the classroom?

5. How do you decide when you should step in when children are playing aggressively?

6. Describe a situation where you witnessed physical aggression during children’s play. How did you respond? Is there anything else that you wish you had done?

7. What do you find works well to prevent from children harming each other during their play?

8. What strategies do you use to diffuse aggressive acts in children’s play?
Figure 3: Video Descriptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Video Descriptions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Wrestling Ring Video – From YouTube <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K2EBPeq_bTM">Link</a> (video total is 5:05; we viewed first 2 minutes) Playing in a sand-pit at a playground, a group of boys about 10-12 years old, have set up a playground wrestling ring. Two boys wrestle, trying to force the opponent outside the. Chosen as example of playful aggression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Walking Home from School – From YouTube <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qhfs-kumvyQ">Link</a> (0:45) Fifteen students (between ages approx. 6 - 13) walk home from school. There’s a physical altercation between two boys, where one boy is obviously the attacker, putting the other boy in a headlock and tripping him to the ground. Chosen as example of aggressive play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. That’s My Mustang! – From YouTube <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=04pCPR6roYk">Link</a> (0:59) Two three-year-old boys argue intensely with one another over the ownership of a toy car. One boy eventually hits the other. Chosen as example of aggressive play.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>