

Playing Heritage: Loose Parts and Traditional Emirati Play as Pathways to Culture and Identity in Early Childhood

Alueshima Jennifer Shaapera, Blossom Nursery & Preschool, United Arab Emirates
Nguyilan Shaaji, Emirates National School, United Arab Emirates

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Abstract

Early years settings commonly approach culture through what can be seen and displayed: national day celebrations, dress-up corners, food festivals, and themed weeks. Such experiences have their place, but they tend to hand culture to children as content rather than as something children live and remake. This paper reports an action research study carried out across five early years settings in the United Arab Emirates, in which educators drew on traditional Emirati play to design open-ended loose parts invitations for children aged three and four. The materials were deliberately ordinary—shells, stones, seeds, sand, fabric, baskets, and recycled objects—chosen both for their resemblance to what Emirati children once played with and for their refusal to dictate a single use. Across successive cycles of planning, enactment, observation and reflection, we generated pedagogical documentation, educator reflective journals and structured observations, and analysed them thematically. Loose parts worked as cultural mediators: shells became pearls, lengths of fabric became majlis spaces, and sand became terrain for storytelling and role play. Values associated with hospitality, generosity, collaboration and community recurred across all five settings, and they surfaced in what children did rather than in what they could say. Children also departed from the traditions that had inspired the invitations, folding in their own preoccupations and inventing variants—behaviour better described as interpretive reproduction than as transmission. We argue that culturally grounded loose parts play offers early years settings a workable alternative to representational approaches, and that it positions young children as participants in cultural life rather than as its audience.

Keywords: loose parts, cultural identity, Emirati heritage, play-based pedagogy, early childhood education, action research

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Introduction

Walk into most early years classrooms during a national celebration and culture is easy to spot. It is on the walls, in the costume box, on the snack table. What is harder to see is whether any of it has travelled inward—whether the three-year-old who wore the kandura on National Day carries anything of it into Tuesday morning's block corner. That gap between cultural display and cultural experience is the problem this study set out to work on.

The early years are a period in which children begin to locate themselves in relation to others, and the research consensus is that they do so through participation rather than instruction. Vygotsky (1978) placed cultural tools and social interaction at the centre of development, and Rogoff (2003) extended the argument by treating culture not as a variable acting on children but as the medium in which their development takes place. From this vantage point, a child learns what generosity means by being on both sides of it, not by being told a story about it. Corsaro (1992) pushed the point further: children do not simply absorb the adult world, they appropriate fragments of it and rework them into peer cultures of their own, a process he termed interpretive reproduction.

Curricular practice has been slower to follow. Culture in many settings still arrives as a topic—a week, a display, a visiting artefact—with the result that rich practices are compressed into symbols that sit at some distance from children's ordinary days. Gay (2018) and Ladson-Billings (1995) have both argued that culturally responsive education has to move past the celebratory register and into the daily fabric of pedagogy; Moll et al. (1992) made the complementary case that the knowledge children bring from home is a curricular resource rather than a decorative one. The critique is well established. What is less settled is what it looks like in a nursery classroom on an ordinary morning.

The UAE context sharpens the question in a particular way. Traditional Emirati children's games were inscribed on UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding in 2011, on the grounds that of roughly two hundred games documented by researchers in the 1990s, only twenty to thirty were still played (UNESCO, 2011). These were games built from what was to hand—sand, shells, stones, sticks, cloth, discarded metal—and organised around gathering, cooperation and improvisation. Baker (2018), working with fifty-two Emirati kindergarten teachers, described the resulting task facing educators as one of enriching a largely imported play pedagogy with Emirati cultural meanings rather than importing a further set of activities. Alhosani (2022) similarly found that while the national kindergarten curriculum framework foregrounds cultural and national identity, its delivery leans on content areas such as social and Islamic studies. Al-Qinneh and Abu-Ayyash (2022) add a further complication from the home side, reporting that a majority of Emirati children in their sample rarely engaged in undirected play at all.

There is, then, a strong policy commitment to heritage, a documented decline in the play practices that once carried it, and a pedagogical tradition of open-ended play that has not often been asked to do cultural work. Loose parts pedagogy seemed to us a plausible bridge. Nicholson (1971) proposed that the inventiveness available in any environment is proportional to the number of variables in it; the materials that filled traditional Emirati play were, in his terms, almost pure variables. The question was whether putting such materials back into the hands of very young children, framed by educators who understood what they had once meant, would produce anything more than pleasant sensory play.

We therefore asked: *How does loose parts pedagogy informed by traditional Emirati play practices support young children's understanding of culture and identity in early childhood settings?*

Literature Review

Culture, Identity and Belonging in the Early Years

Culture, in the sense used here, is not a set of artefacts. Hall (1997) treated it as a system of shared meanings through which people make sense of their world and of each other, which places practices and relationships, rather than objects, at its centre. This matters pedagogically: if culture is meaning-making, then a display case cannot carry it, but a shared routine can.

Belonging is the strand of identity work most visible in early years settings, and it has been written into curriculum documents accordingly. The Australian Early Years Learning Framework places belonging alongside being and becoming as the ground of children's wellbeing and learning (AGDE, 2022). Sumsion and Wong (2011) offered a useful corrective to easy readings of that term, mapping belonging across emotional, social, spatial, temporal, cultural and political dimensions and noting that curriculum framings tend to be eloquent about the first few and silent about the last. Their analysis was helpful to us in a practical way: it kept us asking not only whether children felt comfortable, but whose ideas were shaping the play and who was in a position to include or exclude.

Running through this literature is a view of children as competent social actors. James and Prout (2015) argued that childhood is socially constructed and that children are worth studying as agents in their own right rather than as adults in preparation. That commitment has direct methodological consequences, discussed below.

Loose Parts and Open-Ended Materials

Nicholson's (1971) theory of loose parts is short, polemical and widely cited, and its core claim is deceptively simple: environments rich in movable, combinable, undefined materials generate more inventive behaviour than environments furnished with objects that already know what they are for. Daly and Beloglovsky (2015) translated the idea into early years practice, and Gull et al. (2019), in a scoping review, showed how loosely the term has been applied since—spanning natural materials, manufactured components and recycled objects, with definitional boundaries that shift by author.

The evidence base deserves an honest characterisation. Gibson et al. (2017) reviewed quantitative studies of loose parts interventions and concluded that the volume and quality of evidence were insufficient to establish effects on cognitive, social or emotional development, despite the enthusiasm of practitioners and policymakers. More recent syntheses reach similar conclusions about indoor loose parts play. This is not an argument against the pedagogy; it is an argument for modesty about what any single study, including this one, can claim. Much of the persuasive work in this field is qualitative and concerned with the character of children's engagement rather than with measurable gains, and that is the tradition in which we locate ourselves.

What is largely missing from the loose parts literature is culture. Materials tend to be discussed in terms of affordance, creativity and physical activity, with little attention to the fact that a

shell in Ras Al Khaimah is not the same object as a shell in a Scandinavian forest school. It is that omission the present study addresses.

Traditional Play as Cultural Practice

Sutton-Smith (1997) warned against tidy accounts of what play is for, and his ambivalence is worth keeping in view when traditional games are enlisted for educational purposes. Games do carry language, social norms and community values across generations, and UNESCO's (2011) nomination file makes exactly that case for the Emirati repertoire, noting that many games were accompanied by songs and lyrical exchanges and were learned by observation rather than instruction. But treating games primarily as vehicles of transmission risks a museum logic in which authenticity is measured by fidelity to a remembered original.

Corsaro (1992) offers the more productive frame. If children routinely appropriate and rework what they are given, then a traditional game reproduced exactly is arguably less culturally alive than one children have altered. Baker (2018) reaches a compatible conclusion from the Abu Dhabi context, arguing for teacher awareness of the cultural persuasions embedded in play rather than for the reinstatement of particular games. This distinction—between reviving practices and reactivating the principles inside them—became the organising decision of our pedagogical design.

Methodology

Design

We used cyclical action research, following the planning, acting, observing and reflecting spiral described by Kemmis et al. (2014). The choice was not incidental. The question we were asking is one that only becomes answerable through repeated attempts: a single set of play invitations tells you very little, whereas the third or fourth iteration, redesigned in light of what children actually did with the second, tells you a good deal. Action research also positions educators as practitioner-researchers, which suited a study concerned with what culturally grounded provision requires of adults as much as with what children do.

Each cycle ran as follows: educators planned an invitation grounded in an identified cultural principle; the invitation was set out and left genuinely open; children's engagement was documented; the team reflected collectively; and the next invitation was adjusted. Adjustments were frequently subtractive—removing a prompt, a prop or an adult framing that had been narrowing children's options.

Settings and Participants

The study was conducted across five early years settings in the United Arab Emirates, involving children aged three to four years and their educators. As is typical of UAE early years provision, the classrooms were culturally and linguistically mixed, with Emirati children learning alongside peers from a wide range of national backgrounds, and staff teams similarly diverse. This is worth stating plainly rather than treating as background: the study was not an exercise in delivering Emirati heritage to Emirati children. It was an exercise in whether the cultural principles carried by local traditional play could become shared ground in classrooms where most children were growing up in the UAE without inheriting those traditions at home.

Designing the Play Invitations

Educators did not set out to reconstruct historical games. Instead, working from locally documented accounts of traditional play and from staff and family knowledge, they identified the principles those games appeared to run on: hospitality, cooperation, gathering and community, resourcefulness, storytelling, and social participation. Invitations were then designed to make those principles available rather than to require them.

Materials were chosen for their ordinariness and their ambiguity: shells, stones, sand, seeds, fabric pieces, wooden resources, natural baskets and recycled objects. Nothing in the collection announced a use. A basket could be a boat, a majlis floor, a pearl store or a hat. The resemblance to the materials of traditional Emirati childhood was deliberate, but the resemblance did the work through the materials themselves rather than through explanation.

Adults framed and then withdrew. Where a traditional practice was introduced at all, it was introduced as a story or a gathering rather than as a set of rules to be followed.

Generating Data

Three sources were used. Pedagogical documentation—photographs, children's constructions, learning stories and educator notes—was gathered in the Reggio-influenced sense described by Rinaldi (2006), that is, as material for interpretation and dialogue rather than as a record of achievement. Educator reflective journals tracked observations, uncertainties, design changes and professional shifts, and proved particularly useful for surfacing moments when adults had inadvertently closed play down. Structured observations focused on children's interactions, language, participation patterns and evidence of cultural meaning-making.

Analysis

Data were analysed thematically, following the reflexive approach set out by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022). Documentation, journals and observation records were read repeatedly, coded, and organised into candidate themes; themes were then tested against the full data set and against material from each of the five settings in turn. Where a pattern appeared in only one setting it was retained as a note rather than promoted to a theme. Collective interpretation across the educator team, and the comparison of themes across settings, served the trustworthiness of the account in the sense described by Lincoln and Guba (1985), though we make no claim that our reading is the only defensible one.

Findings and Discussion

Loose Parts as Cultural Mediators

The clearest finding was also the simplest: the materials did cultural work. Shells became pearls. Stones marked out gathering places. Lengths of fabric were spread and re-spread until they were majlis spaces, and sand became terrain across which stories were told and journeys taken. None of these transformations was suggested. They emerged from children handling objects that were open enough to become something and familiar enough to become something in particular.

This is more than the standard loose parts observation about imaginative flexibility. A shell can become anything; in these settings it repeatedly became a pearl. The materials appeared to carry a local semantic pull, activated by their placement in a setting where pearling, gathering and hospitality were part of the surrounding conversation. This suggests a qualification to how loose parts are usually theorised. Nicholson (1971) framed variables in largely formal terms—number, movability, combinability—and much subsequent work has followed him (Gull et al., 2019). What we observed is better described as cultural affordance: materials whose openness is real but not neutral, weighted by the meanings available in the setting around them. Culture, in other words, was mediated through objects and action, in a manner consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) account of cultural tools, rather than delivered through explanation.

Culture Enacted Rather Than Recited

Children demonstrated cultural understanding through what they did, not through what they could report. Asked directly about hospitality, a three-year-old has little to say. Observed over a morning, the same child repeatedly invited peers into a constructed gathering space, made room, and handed over materials without being prompted to share.

These actions align closely with values of hospitality, generosity and community participation, and they were among the most consistent patterns across all five settings. We are cautious about the inferential step here. Enacted hospitality in play is not proof that a child has internalised a cultural value, and it would be possible to read the same behaviour simply as sociable three-year-olds being sociable. What can be said with more confidence is that the provision made these particular forms of participation available and that children took them up readily, which is precisely what a representational approach to culture does not do. Hall's (1997) framing is useful: if culture is shared meaning, participation in the practice is not a route to the meaning but part of the meaning itself.

Collaboration and the Making of Common Ground

Collaborative play emerged in every setting. Children negotiated roles, pooled materials, solved construction problems jointly, and built narratives that outlasted individual contributions. The possessive plural was everywhere in their talk—"our home", "our place", "come sit with us"—and its frequency is itself informative. A group of children who have jointly assembled a space out of stones and fabric have made something that belongs to none of them individually.

Read through Sumsion and Wong's (2011) dimensions, what is happening here is spatial and social belonging generated by children rather than conferred by adults. It also raises the political dimension they identify as under-examined. "Come sit with us" is an invitation, but invitations imply a threshold and someone standing at it. Our documentation captured a great deal of inclusion and comparatively little of its opposite, which may reflect the reality of these classrooms, or may reflect what educators found it comfortable to document. We flag it as an open question rather than resolve it.

Agency and Cultural Authorship

Children did not reproduce traditional practices. They altered them, and the alterations were the most theoretically interesting thing we observed. Constructed gathering spaces acquired functions well outside their traditional referent, becoming community centres of the children's

own devising. Boats stopped being pearling boats and became vehicles for adventure narratives. Shell collections evolved into systems of exchange with rules that had to be explained to newcomers.

Judged against a preservation standard, this is drift. Judged against Corsaro's (1992) account of interpretive reproduction, it is exactly what cultural vitality looks like: children taking material from the adult world, working it over with their peers, and producing something that belongs to their own culture while remaining connected to its source. The finding matters practically for heritage education in the UAE. UNESCO's (2011) safeguarding rationale rests on transmission, and transmission is often operationalised as accurate reproduction. Our observations suggest that a game children have changed may be in better health than one they have merely performed correctly, and that the safeguarding question for early years settings is less how to preserve the games than how to keep the principles inside them in circulation. This is consistent with Baker's (2018) argument for cultural awareness in pedagogy over the reinstatement of specific practices. It also puts pressure on deficit readings of very young children. Three- and four-year-olds here were not receiving culture pending the age at which they might contribute to it. They were contributing already.

Identity and Belonging as Process

Identity did not appear in our data as an outcome that could be observed arriving. It appeared as something continuously produced in relation to others—in being invited, in having a suggestion adopted, in being the one who knows how the shell exchange works. Opportunities to contribute ideas and shape the direction of play were associated with visible increases in children's ownership of the learning environment.

Given the composition of these classrooms, this has a further implication. Children who had no prior connection to Emirati traditions participated in the same play, on the same terms, and helped author what it became. The cultural material did not function as a marker separating those who owned it from those who did not; it functioned as common ground. For settings serving highly diverse populations, this may be the most useful practical finding in the study, and it echoes Moll et al.'s (1992) point that cultural knowledge becomes educationally powerful when it is put into circulation rather than kept as the property of those it originates with.

Limitations

Several constraints bound what can be claimed. The study was small, involving five settings and a single age band, and action research of this kind is designed to improve local practice rather than to support generalisation; readers will need to judge transferability against their own contexts. Educators were both practitioners and researchers, which gave us access to interpretation that an external observer could not have reached but also meant that those with a stake in the invitations were the ones deciding what to document. We took cross-setting comparison and collective interpretation as partial safeguards, but they are partial.

The data are also adult-generated. Despite a theoretical commitment to children as social actors (James & Prout, 2015), children's own accounts of what they were making and why were not systematically gathered, and a study that took that commitment fully seriously would find methods for doing so. Finally, we documented what happened during the cycles and cannot speak to what persisted afterwards. Whether the dispositions we observed have any durability is a question this design cannot answer.

Conclusion and Implications

Loose parts pedagogy informed by traditional Emirati play gave children in five UAE settings a way into culture that display-based approaches do not offer. Ordinary materials—shells, stones, sand, fabric—functioned as cultural mediators, and children used them to enact hospitality, generosity, cooperation and belonging rather than to represent them. They then changed what they had been given, which we read, following Corsaro (1992), as evidence of cultural participation rather than of failed transmission.

For educators, the practical implications are less about materials than about restraint. The invitations that worked were the ones adults framed and then left alone; the recurring correction across cycles was the removal of adult scaffolding that had quietly specified an outcome. Cultural grounding in this model is a matter of what is made available and of how the surrounding conversation is held, not of instruction.

For leaders and policymakers, the study offers a modest case that heritage objectives and play-based pedagogy need not be in tension, and that the two are often kept separate by curricular habit rather than by necessity. Given the documented decline in traditional Emirati children's games (UNESCO, 2011) and the equally documented decline in undirected play at home (Al-Qinneh & Abu-Ayyash, 2022), settings that can address both at once are worth resourcing.

Three directions seem most worth pursuing. Families and elders were absent from this study and are the obvious holders of the knowledge it drew on second-hand. Longitudinal work would test whether anything we observed persists. And the approach should be tried where the heritage in question is not the dominant local one, which would establish whether what we saw depends on cultural congruence with the setting or on the openness of the materials themselves.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The authors declare that generative AI tools were used to support academic editing, language refinement, the organisation of ideas and the identification of relevant literature during manuscript preparation. All research design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of findings, and all final decisions regarding content, remain the responsibility of the authors. The authors reviewed, verified and approved all content, including all cited sources, prior to submission.

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