**LG-256713-OLS-24 - University of Wisconsin - Madison, Information School**

*Mapping Children's Play in Museums and Libraries,* University of Wisconsin-Madison

**Introduction:** University of Wisconsin-Madison's Information School and Department of Curriculum and Instruction are applying for a National Leadership Grant of $331,696 in the Applied Research category to take place from August 2024 to December 2026. Partners for Phase 2 of the project include libraries and museums in three diverse locations (urban, suburban and small town): Appleton Public Library and Appleton-based museum, Building for Kids; Madison Public Library and Madison Children's Museum; Sun Prairie Public Library and Sun Prairie-based Explore Children's Museum.

*Mapping Children's Play in Museums and Libraries* will create a typology of existing play offerings in libraries and museums that focuses on how librarians and museum educators view play including forms, purposes, materials, and theoretical underpinnings. The Map of Children's Play will be a downloadable resource that includes prompts for practitioners as well as accompanying professional development activities to assist reflective practice for design and assessment. Finally, the Map will connect with a Diversity Audit Tool for practitioners to examine their play programs and spaces for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility considerations. In alignment with NLG program Goal 5 and objectives 5.1-2, the aims of this project are to: 1) investigate how practitioners conceptualize and operationalize their approaches to play in museum and library spaces, and 2) co-design and implement conceptual tools that focus on equity, assessment, and advocacy for use in libraries and museums implementing play-based programs and spaces for children and families. Research questions are as follows:

1) Where and what types of play occur in libraries and museums? In what ways do practitioners in children's museums and libraries define and conceptualize play? How is play communicated to children, parents and caregivers?
2) How do localized play-based programs and spaces develop, what do they look like, and how can tools support different iterative processes in the development and assessment of these programs and spaces?
3) How might definitions of play, development of play-based programs, and communication about play be assessed for considerations of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA)?

**Project Justification:** Research has shown the importance of play for promoting children's brain development, creativity, resiliency, and physical health (e.g., Ginsburg et al., 2007; Schlesinger et al., 2020; Yogman et al., 2018). However, in the United States, the amount of time available to children for free play is on the decline, especially for children living in poverty (Beresin, 2011; Ginsburg et al., 2007), and play is often heavily regulated both inside and outside the home (Halpern, 2003; Zygmunt-Fillwalk & Bilello, 2005). Indeed, since the 1950s, children's play has become increasingly restricted and structured by adults (Gray, 2011), creating potential infringements on children's rights as named by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. These noted declines and regulations of play have been linked to many negative academic, mental health, and physical health outcomes for children (Kumar et al., 2022). Potentially countering these play deficits in children's home and school spaces, public libraries, and museums, which serve as valuable community resources for many families, have been investing in programs and spaces for children's play. These programs and spaces have been designed for a range of forms of children's play: role-playing in child-sized kitchens, building with curated play materials, doing finger-play in storytimes, exploring STEM materials in makerspaces, playing chess or Minecraft (Celano et al., 2018, Mayfield, 2005). Certainly, play is considered foundational for many children's museums and libraries across the country (Gray et al., 2022; Luke et al., 2017).

Yet, as fundamental play is to libraries and museums, definitions and purposes for play are rarely articulated in library and museum spaces, mission statements, or on websites. Play is notoriously ambiguous, as theorists have argued, and it can be difficult to define, despite various attempts to map different types, elements, purposes and rhetorics of play (Lancy, 2015; Sutton-Smith, 2001; Zosh et al., 2018). Libraries and museums stress different purposes for play, often focusing on young children: supporting cognitive skills including early literacy and STEM, contributing to social and emotional development, and encouraging civic engagement and creativity (Gray et al., 2022; Luke et al., 2017). However, there is little research on how practitioners understand play, why they believe in the importance of play, how play-based programs align with missions of libraries and museums, or how practitioners in museums and libraries are developing play-based programming (Campana et al., 2022; Luke et al., 2017). Additionally, it is not clear how libraries and museums are developing a culture of play within their spaces, and what norms, behaviors, policies, and practices they are supporting and reinforcing. As a result, play-based programs and spaces are difficult to advocate for; professionals and parents/caregivers may be unsure of how best to support children in the spaces; assessment of programs and spaces may not occur; alignment with program/institutional goals may be overlooked; and issues such as who might be included and excluded in these spaces might be ignored. Importantly, unspoken assumptions can privilege particular ideas about play, create hierarchies around what counts as acceptable play practices, and exclude some children's experiences of play. Further, adult-centric understandings of play might misrepresent children's experiences and create environments that ignore children's agency and voice. [Please see full list of references here.]

**Project Work Plan:** The project will consist of three overlapping phases. Phase 1 will involve a literature review, observational research (textual analysis of a representative sample of library and museum websites and social media

posts), IRB application, and protocol development. This phase will develop initial drafts of the Map of Children's Play and the Diversity Audit Tool. Also in Phase 1, we will conduct interviews with parents and children who attend and do not attend play-based programs and spaces in libraries and museums. Interview data will inform our Diversity Audit Tool by shedding light on these key stakeholders' experiences and affective relationships to play-based programs and spaces. We will hire a consultant to conduct a two part review of the Diversity Audit Tool and related research activities or developed resources. In Phase 2, we will convene three Communities of Practice (CoPs) that include partnerships between libraries and museums and are all local to each other and to UW-Madison. This phase of the research will draw on the participatory research approach referred to as co-design which has been used in educational settings (e.g., Wardrip et al., 2023; Severance et al., 2016). In Phase 2, we will conduct introductory 'bootcamps' and monthly CoP meetings. Using the Map of Children's Play and Diversity Audit Tool in these meetings, we will pilot activities aimed at enhancing practitioners' processes of articulation, observation, assessment, and advocacy of play-based programs and spaces. These meetings will provide rich research data regarding practitioners' thinking about different types of play, purposes for play and alignment with their goals, support structures for play, role of professionals and parents/caregivers and so on. A majority of these meetings will be in-person with some virtual and hybrid meetings to provide proof-of-concept for Phase 3. In Phase 3, we will expand the project to develop 5-6 localized CoPs in other parts of the US. We will recruit applications for CoPs and select participants to create a diverse group of CoPs (based on geography, size of institutions, and populations served). This phase of the project will focus on refining training materials to accompany the Map of Children's Play and Diversity Audit Tool by implementing professional development processes developed in Phase 2 with only virtual support from researchers. Further, in Phase 3 we will follow the CoPs created in Phase 2 to observe longevity of use of the Map of Children's Play and Diversity Audit Tool. Phase 3 will include time for dissemination of findings and research-based tools and training materials.

**Research Methods:** All methods will be included in our IRB application. *Observations* - we will observe libraries' and museums' public communications about play, such as information on websites and social media; and in Phase 2 we will visit local libraries and museums to observe play-based programming and spaces. *Interviews* - we will interview 20 parents/caregivers and 10-15 children who attend and do not attend play programs in libraries and museums to help understand DEIA issues, including barriers and enablers to participation. *Community of Practice (CoP) Discussions* - as part of monthly meetings with museum and library partners, we will conduct activities, such as exercises to help facilitate discussion of conceptualizations of play. Activities will be audio recorded, and we will create visual artifacts for analysis, such as selections of photographs of children's play alongside discussions of those photographs. Data will also include practitioners' reflections. Initially, data will be analyzed thematically. Deeper analyses will draw on existing approaches and theoretical frameworks, particularly critical discourse analysis and Sutton-Smith's (2001) rhetorics of play.

**Project Results:** We will have a project website where we publish the Map of Children's Play, Diversity Audit Tool, case studies, academic conference papers, and summaries of findings. The Map will be accompanied by activities to assist practitioners in articulating conceptualizations of play, observing play-based programs, assessing the design and use of play materials and spaces, and using the Diversity Audit Tool for assessing play-based programs and spaces. Professional development materials (including brief videos) will be available on the project website to facilitate use of the tools. The Map will be explored more thoroughly through publications, including two academic articles and two articles in more practitioner-based journals, as well as academic and practitioner-based conferences throughout the project, including Madison-based *Power Up* and *Play, Make, Learn* conferences as well as ALA. The Map of Children's Play, Diversity Audit Tool, and accompanying professional development materials will be shared widely through a social media campaign that draws on contacts and institutions from the practitioners, advisory board, and researchers on the project.

**Key project staff:** The project is led by Co-PIs Professor Rebekah Willett and Assistant Professor Peter Wardrip, experienced researchers and PIs with strong track records of publishing in areas highly relevant to the project. A national advisory board made up of representatives from library and museum organizations such as ACM, ALSC, YALSA; state library consultants; and play researchers will be recruited to provide feedback and guidance around research design, protocols, and the generated tools for relevance, sensitivity, and validity. Ariana Flores, an Equity Architect at the [Equity Project] with experience of creating 'equity lenses' for museums and other public institutions, will be hired as a consultant to develop several elements of the Diversity Audit tool based on our findings.

**Budget summary:** *Salaries and Wages:* $38,697 summer salary for the PIs; $82,725 for 28 months of Project Assistant (PA) salary at 50%. *Fringe benefits:* $14,748 for PIs; $19,400 for PA. *Travel:* $2000 airfare for PIs and/or PA to present at conferences. *Supplies:* $4000 (transcribing costs, Dedoose subscriptions). *Student support:* $30,000 for tuition. *Other costs:* $8,000 advisory board stipends; $36,000 Fellowships to 18 participating libraries and museums to use as needed (e.g., food for meetings, play equipment); $1050 incentives for 35 interviewees; $10,000 consultant fee for Diversity Audit Tool; $2000 for conference fees and accommodations. *Indirect costs:* $83,076 (38%) *TOTAL:* $331,696