

## **The Politics of Play**

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### **Abstract**

*By challenging the discourse of play as innocent, this paper argues that children enact and maintain social inequalities in their play in the early years' classroom. The social injustices that exist in society are acted out in children's play, which creates conditions for children to consciously exclude others. Using poststructural theories, this paper examines how dominant theories of play in early childhood education create the social conditions in the classroom that allow for society's inequalities and injustices to be recreated in children's play. This paper uses Foucault's notion of power, to examine how issues of power regulate children's play and examines how issues of power are related to children's play. This paper will argue that when educators do not attend to the issues of power that exist in children's play, children are marginalized and excluded in the classroom. When children are seen as innocent, educators fail to recognize that children do attend to social issues such as race, gender, and size and consciously or unconsciously exclude others. Most importantly, educators unintentionally use the dominant developmental discourse of child development to maintain their classrooms, which is reflected through their pedagogies, policies and procedures. Educators need to understand the importance of self-reflection and be aware of their role of constructing dominant discourses and stereotypes in the classroom. It is integral that an educator be aware of his/her responsibility to educate children on social inequalities and injustices.*

**Keywords:** *play, social relationships, inclusion, exclusion, power, self-reflective practice, social inequalities, injustice.*



Contrary to common beliefs, play is neither innocent nor right for all children. These beliefs create social injustices and inequalities that children enact in their play. This creates conditions that enable children to consciously exclude others. For instance, children exclude others by focusing upon skin color, a child's physical size, and gender (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). Further, this paper will challenge the discourses of play. Additionally, it challenges the dominant discourses that assume play is innocent and that it is an innate, natural way of being, a right for all children, and is enjoyable. Also the author argues that inequalities and social injustices arise in childcare centres and classrooms (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010).

To understand how children can be marginalized through free or structured play, we must investigate how play itself creates inequalities and social injustices. Grieshaber and McArdle (2010) discuss how play holds universal values and beliefs. These beliefs are centered around the idea that play is necessary for children's development, that it is a natural part of childhood, and that it is a right for all children. The notion that play is innocent has been partly influenced by the theorist J.J. Rousseau, whose idea that play is an innate and natural way of learning has been universally considered as the ideal standard (as cited in Grieshaber & McArdle 2010). These notions about play are highly problematic, largely because they ignore the fact that all children are not equal. Furthermore, they ignore the fact that power relations are involved in play and that these can create inequalities (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). Ailwood (2003) comments on the fact that play has been a dominant theme in early childhood education and curricula without considering how it perpetuates inequalities and social injustices. She asserts that play should not be abolished, nor deemed unimportant to development, but rather that we need to be apprehensive and focus on understanding how play does in fact marginalize children (Ailwood, 2003).

However, the discourse of child development is based on western psychology theories and does not offer a full perspective of how children from different cultures learn and grow. Thus, these theories cannot be appropriately assigned to all members of the community (Ailwood, 2003; Grieshaber & McArdle 2010). A poststructural perspective challenges this notion of learning and developmental theory as a universal truth. It also considers how play can recreate the politics of children's worlds (Ailwood, 2003). Despite coming from a poststructural lens, this notion of normalization in play has been influenced by dominant practices and languages used to describe the conventional understanding of play. This creates a belief that play must be a part of the curriculum or implicated in children's daily lives in order for children to become successful without looking at what

happens in play (Ailwood, 2003; Grieshaber & McArdle 2010). Consequently, this notion assumes that all children are competent to use their problem-solving skills without the interruption of adults. This assumption is problematic as it ignores the fact that children can exclude others by focusing on the age, size, socioeconomic status, and gender of their peers (Grieshaber & McArdle 2010).

Paley (1992) provides examples of the influences of everyday social injustices and inequalities that happen in classrooms. The author sheds light on the fact that children are conditioned to be in a classroom or in a centre. They do not have the right to choose to leave. Paley discusses a conversation she had with a child and the child told her that she does not play with certain children because they are outsiders and different. However, Paley suggests that children are not outsiders because they are different, but because the treatment they receive from others make them an outsider (1992).

Children can exclude their peers by focusing upon factors such as a child's race, a child's size, language abilities and gender (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). In order for educators to create change and to create an inclusive classroom that celebrates differences we must understand that children are not incapable of marginalizing others. Foucault recognized that children have power and that they recognize how power influences their relationships with others (as cited in Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). They also internalize their teachers' subtle actions when they interact with a member of the dominant culture and these learned behaviours teach them the privilege of whiteness (Clarke & Watson, 2014).

Children do make racist comments and recognize how a dominant race can hold power and privilege (Clarke & Watson, 2014). Grieshaber and McArdle (2010) argue that children are aware of stereotypes through the media and they recognize how powerful these truths are. For example, the authors describe how two boys who had been friends for two years at the daycare no longer remained friends due to stereotypical negative media coverage seen by one of the boys. They argue that the influence of media may have contributed to this child's understanding of race and influenced his actions. This study supports the assertion that children recognize the power of these truths through media, and apply it to their play (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). It's integral to understand how race is a social construct so we as educators are aware of these inequalities that occur within the classroom and can focus on preventing them.

It is argued that children exclude other children based on their perceived notions of difference (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). For example, children decide how they are included and excluded based on a child's preference of gender related toys or activities (Wood, 2014). Current research suggests that children understand the power behind excluding others and refer to specified stereotypical gender roles to assert dominance and control during play (Wood, 2014; Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). Children can exclude



others by not allowing them into play, using physical force, and ignoring the other child due to marginalizing one's gender.

Grieshaber and McArdle (2010) shed light on how physical size affects the roles that are negotiated within play. For instance, a child who is taller and bigger is able to "control space, objects and people" (p.85). If the child is smaller they can use their size to create a vulnerable role in play. The size of a group affects how children carry out roles and control in play situations. Size can positively or negatively affect a child's identity. For instance if a costume does not fit, they can be excluded from the role (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). Most importantly, we need to consider how size can exclude children and our role as educators is to be aware of the capability of young children to marginalize others.

It is essential for educators to understand their role in creating, perpetuating and enabling conditions that allow social injustices and inequalities to occur and remain maintained in classrooms and childcare centres. However, educators need to consider the fact that it is possible to intentionally allow these social injustices to continue and to be maintained. Educators need to be aware of how children do marginalize others in play. It is only after understanding this that teachers will be able to create a fair environment for all children. Further, there are times when educators are involved in creating conditions for children to be able to exclude their peers. As previously mentioned, young children do not have a choice to leave the classroom or childcare centre, therefore the children who are being excluded cannot leave when unfair treatment occurs (Paley, 1992).

Educators can influence and construct behaviours of racism in the classroom through curriculum pedagogies mainly being white practices based on white developmental theories, and language educators use to assimilate students (Battiste, 2013; Clarke & Watson, 2014). Battiste (2013) argues that teachers maintain the whiteness discourse and enable these dominant practices that create inequities in the classroom and centres. Additionally, an educators' own values and beliefs can construct ideas of whiteness that are thus normalized in the classroom and enable white privilege (Battiste, 2013). Clark and Watson (2014) suggest educators consider how their values and beliefs enable dominant white practices. Educators should eliminate the notion of white and black and encourage children to see how many different shades of skin colour exist.

Thinking with a poststructural lens, educators need to consider how their policies and procedures reflect dominant practices (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2015). For instance, encouraging children to only speak English in the classroom and neglecting to be open to a family's cultural practices, we will not be able to change our thinking and eliminate racism in the classroom (Kummen, personal communication, 2016). Educators need to be aware

of how the dominant discourse can influence the classroom environment in children's actions (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010).

Teachers need to listen to children's play and call upon children who are making racist, sexist, and exclusionary comments towards other children. These are uncomfortable and hard topics to discuss with young children, but ignoring the fact that children are being mean and isolating is allowing social injustices and inequities to exist and be maintained in classrooms (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). If educators were to consider facilitating language around fairness and tolerance for others it could lead to a decrease in the unjust exclusion of peers. Grieshaber and McArdle (2010) argue that by not paying attention to how some children use exclusionary remarks related to gender, race and size, educators are dehumanizing the situation.

Educators need to be aware of how power is involved in children's play and eliminate the notion that play is innocent and a universal right. Educators need to reflect on how their own beliefs and values can influence the culture of the classroom. A curriculum that reflects the dominant ideologies can allow marginalization to happen. Recognizing that play creates social injustices and inequities and conditions that enable marginalization to occur, we must facilitate a fair environment for all children (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). Paley (1992) asked the children what would happen in their classroom if they had a rule that said, "you can't say, you can't play" (p.33). This question created a dialogue amongst the students about the exclusion that was happening in the classroom resulting in the students finding positive ways to express their differences. Paley's work offers possibilities for examining the notion of mean, unfriendly, and isolating comments that children are a part of. As educators we need to begin to deconstruct these practices that have been universally happening for many years and create a fair environment for all children to strive (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010).

Lastly, educators in British Columbia can consider using the Early Learning Framework to reflect upon their own practice as they work with young children in eliminating racism, gender stereotypes and other exclusionary practices. The British Columbia Early Learning Framework (2008) discusses and honours the history of Aboriginal peoples and "ancestral languages" and explains how British Columbia is diverse in its population (The British Columbia Early Learning Framework, 2008). The Early Learning Framework can be a resource to help educators engage differently in the classroom by ensuring that all children receive fair treatment. Educators can critically reflect on how the Early Learning Framework touches on the importance of play, how children learn, and how the environment acts as a third teacher.

Educators can use this tool to reflect on the importance of understanding how the environment acts a third teacher. It allows teachers to pay attention to conversations that



are happening in children's play and address them if children exclude others (Ministry of Education, 2008). If a child is making racist remarks, alluding to stereotypical gender roles, commenting on a child's size, or isolating a child, an educator can take action and engage in conversations with that child and not ignore what is happening. It is important to consider Battiste's notion that we need to honour and recognize our implications in constructing dominant discourses, and that the educator's reactions, their beliefs, and values are important in creating a safe environment (Battiste, 2015).

By implementing the learning goals stated in the British Columbia Early Learning Framework, educators can develop activities and curriculum pedagogies to guide their practice. For instance, one of the learning goals is, "to feel safe and respected" reflecting on this goal one can consider the question asked in the Early Learning Framework, "how do adults show children that they are accepted without reservations" when they're working with children (Ministry of Education, 2008, p.19).

To conclude, it is important to consider that social injustices are created through the notion that play is universally innocent and a right for all children and to recognize the dominant discourses of play (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). In order to become aware, we must understand that inequalities and social injustices can arise during play. As educators we are responsible for the conditions in the classroom that can marginalize young children. Further, educators in British Columbia can consider using the British Columbia Early Learning Framework to guide their own practices and pedagogies with young children. It is important to recognize how play is culturally specific and sculpts power relations between a child, their peers and adults (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). However, it is important to recognize that there are positive benefits of play that create a lot of opportunities for children to develop friendships, learn problem-solving skills and foster self-awareness (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010; Ministry of Education, 2008). It is important to remember that despite the benefits of play, it can also create isolation and perpetuate inequities and social injustices. Moreover, it is important to understand our responsibility as educators to teach children about social inequalities and injustices.

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