

A Foucauldian Analysis of Child Play: Case Study of a Preschool in the United States

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Abstract : Historically, young members (children) in the society have been oppressed by adults through direct violent acts. Direct violence was evident in rampant child labor and child maltreatment cases. After acknowledging the rights of children from the United Nations, it is believed in public that children have been protected against direct physical violence. Nevertheless, at present, this paper argues from Foucauldian and disability study standpoints that similar to the old times, children are oppressed objects in the context of child play, which is constructed by adults to substitute direct violence in regulating children. Particularly, this paper suggests that on the one hand, preschool play is a new way that adults adopt to oppress preschoolers and regulate the society as a whole; on the other hand, preschoolers are taught how to play as an acquired skill and master self-regulation through play. There is a line of contemporary research that centers on child play from social constructivism perspective. Yet, current teaching practices pertaining to child play including guided child play and free play, in fact, serve the interest of adults and society at large. By acknowledging and deconstructing the prevalence of 'evidence-based best practice' in early childhood education field within western society, reconstruction of child-adult power relation could be achieved and alternative truth could be found in early childhood education. To support the argument of this paper, an on-going observational case study is conducted in a preschool setting in the United States. Age range of children is 2.5 to 4 years old. Approximately 10 children (5 boys) are participating in this case study. Observation is conducted throughout the weekdays as children follow through the classroom routine with a lead and an assistant teacher. Classroom teachers are interviewed pertaining to their classroom management strategies. Preliminary research finding of this case study suggested that preschool teachers tended to utilize scenarios from preschoolers' dramatic play to impart core cultural values to young children. These values were pre-determined by adults. In addition, if young children have failed to follow teachers' guidance in terms of playing in a correct way, children ran the risk of being excluded from the play scenario by peers and adults. Furthermore, this study tended to indicate that through child play, preschoolers are obliged to develop an internal violence system, that is self-regulation skill to regulate their own behavior; and if this internal system is unestablished based on various assessments by adults, then potentially there will be consequences of negative labeling and disabling toward young children intended by adults. In conclusion, this paper applies Foucauldian analysis into the context of child play. At present, within preschool, child play is not free as it seems to be. Young children are expected to perform cultural tasks through their play activities designed by adults. Adults utilize child play as technologies of governmentality to further predict and regulate future society at large.

Keywords : child play, developmentally appropriate practice, DAP, poststructuralism, technologies of governmentality

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