
Position Paper

Uncovering Pretend-Play and Peer Culture among Kindergarten Children: A Developmental Perspective

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Abstract

In this paper, we draw upon three observation data to explore the concept of pretend play and peer cultures among kindergarten children situated in a childcare center of the Midwestern area of the U.S. Framed in this study, Paley's (1992) notion of dynamic play that exists within children that children behavior is changing over time and across ages. Pretend-play and peer culture are worth investigating to better understand children's social development that might have implication for their success in education. Two observation data were obtained from a university-based Child Care Center, and one from an Indonesian family who have lived in the U.S. for three years. 12 children aged three to four years old and two kindergarten teachers were involved during the observation. The observations lasted for about 40 minutes. The findings suggest that the children were involved in different kinds of play: (1) spontaneous fantasy, and (2) socio-dramatic play. Spontaneous fantasy is when children are involved in a less structured play or no strict rule that governs the activity. Socio-dramatic play is kinds of play when children take agency that exist in the society, such as mothers, fathers, workers, and other adulthood. Both types of pretend play embodied shared knowledge about how to play appropriately based on the theme and plot emerged.

Keywords

pretend play; peer culture; developmental perspective; kindergarten

Introduction

The idea of "you can't say you can't play" (Paley, 1992) challenges educators, particularly early childhood teachers and researchers to think about the dynamic play that exists within children. It is dynamic because children behavior is changing over time and across ages. Nothing is really stable in children life including the act of exclusion. But the effect of exclusion will last forever in the victim's life. Paley clearly highlighted that all older children in her study can easily remember their memories in kindergarten, especially all the bad things, and that is when being excluded from a play (p. 41).



As such, educators and researchers still need to take Paley's notion into account to further develop does this rule really work to date? If it works, what are the similarities and differences of children's behavior or reaction towards the rule compare to Paley's findings? These two questions become the background of investigation in this study.

For more perspective, the rule "you can't say you can't play" is still problematic. Paley's question (1992) still remains, if the rule works, does not it spoil the play? She does explain that it works for some children and not for the others. We argue that the bottom line is to put the rule into perspective of the children. They have to think in the position of being excluded and as the one who often does exclusion. We agree with Paley that often educators, including us, "still allow children to build domains of exclusivity in classrooms and playgrounds" (p. 22), which further become possible source of exclusion. The way we respond to exclusion within the play determines behavioral change of the child either we problem solved the case or spoil the game and the child. So, at this point, we maintain that "you can't say you can't play" is a neutral rule that put the decision in the child.

When Paley (1992) asked the kindergarteners and older students, for instances, their opinions of the rule are varied. Kindergarteners think the rule will only make the play worst, especially for those who often do exclusion. But for the victims the rule is like a rescue plan, so that they can be involved and included at any chances of the play. The second and third graders, in the other hand, seem to be more decisive whether to play or leave. The way they respond to Paley is also more straightforward. For example, from the excerpt when Paley asked a boy "What do you do when someone says you can't play?" A child gave a direct closed-short response, "Play alone. My mom told me to do that if people are mean" (p. 45). A third grader also openly expressed herself as the victim of exclusion when her classmate mentioned "No one wants to eat lunch with her", and Paley asked if this embarrassing her, and she replied "No, I want them to say it" (p. 51). The second and third graders do not hesitate to point the actor and the victim of exclusion at the first place.

According to the fifth and seventh graders, the above condition is meaner. At this ages, they tend to avoid frontal opinion and expression. As Paley (1992, p. 51) described they prefer to use utterances "the way people are" or "the way girls are". For them, the act of exclusion depends greatly on being nice at play and personal character, even for fourth graders. For example, the excerpt showed a condition of playing together is being nice. A boy said "If we are nice, we'd let him in. but what if that person doesn't play fair? Why should he be protected? I mean, even if he doesn't have friends, he still has to act nice, doesn't he?" (p. 62).

Building on the examples above, it seems clear that exclusion in the dynamic process of friendship consists of creativity and responsibility at the same time. The actors of exclusion are those who invent the play that makes them a boss to decide how to play, and who to include or exclude. Corsaro (2003) explained that "kids want to gain control of their live and they want to share that sense of control with each other" (p. 37). This personhood and agency play an important role in children's world because they trigger fresh ideas of a play and stimulate other children to do the same (Parlindungan, 2017). The only thing that matters is the victim of exclusion since what makes one excluded is preferences of like and dislike. That is why we argue that "you can't say you can't play" still remains dilemmatic, particularly in questioning what makes a child excluded?

However, Paley's notion "you can't say you can't play" (1992) helped us better understand peer cultures and interaction explained by Corsaro (2003) that in developing a play, children have a sense of sharing and control. Exclusion often takes place when they try to protect what they have been sharing (Renn & Arnold, 2003). Defining the victims of exclusion as outsiders makes more sense to me. As Paley (p. 68) said that children chose to whom to play with is not based on physical appearance or what they have in common. It is rather because they are treated as outsiders. This means exclusion is not "refusal to share", but "to keep control of their play" (Corsaro, p. 64). To this end, Corsaro highlighted that children will

develop skills how to gain access to the play when one is treated as outsiders. He refers to this as “access strategies” (p. 42), and also explained that basically children know more how to solve problem among them and get along with conflict without necessarily being intervened by adults.

Concerning on teaching children a moral value of exclusion, we support how Paley (1992) raised questions addressing the issue. We suspect that she was not being judgmental in giving such questions and rather to let children think from different perspectives. For example, her question to a fourth grader in response to Ruthie about being spoiled by a newcomer, the child said, “but the first one is having a really good time and then it’s all spoiled.” Paley at this point responded, “but which one is more important, that a person chooses to leave or that someone else isn’t even allowed to enter?” (p. 61). This question again is making children to think from different perspectives that Paley teaches “empathy” in an implicit way.

Another interesting point on teaching moral value about exclusion is the story telling. It is clear that the children internalize Paley’s story in their activities. The story itself is a metaphor of how to get along with exclusion. Although Paley (1992, p. 110) mentioned that children must be told explicit rules to follow rather than just telling a story, we argue that story is a powerful tool too to engage student’s concern on exclusion and other moral values. From an excerpt between Lisa and Hiroko (p. 116), for example, their imagination of castle, monster, and magic have crossed the boundaries of exclusion, even when Jennifer jumped into their play as a newcomer. In short, story does have influence on student’s significant behavior (Lynch, Lerner, & Leventhal, 2013). It might take times to see the effect, but as long as teachers consistently build the story in every moment, it will show its power.

Method

Two observation data were obtained from a university-based Child Care Center, and one from an Indonesian family who have lived in the U.S. for three years. The data were gathered by the first author; Firman. He came to the childcare center. In this setting, he had a chance to interact with approximately 12 children aged three to four years old. The observations lasted for about 40 minutes. There were two teachers in this classroom. They are basically student teachers employed by the university. Field note, observational data, documentation, and interview were gathered. The data was analyzed qualitatively by using grounded theory as a tool for analysis.

By the time we enter the setting, it was recess time or time to play outside that no more than 15 minutes. Firman saw 5 children were playing near the swing. Three females and one male student were playing on the ground with soil while the other one male and one female were playing with the swing. When Firman was approaching them, a female student directly said to him: “Are you gonna stay here”? and he responded her: “No, probably only for about 30 minutes”. This impromptu conversation was a good entry for Firman to get involved with them, so he said: “Do you mind if I join you guys?”. Another female student replied: “We are looking for worm”. We said: “Oh, I don’t know what it looks like”, and another female student said: “Here it is, I can show you”. This context illustrated how the data were gathered. Firman involved in a participant-observation standpoint. The second and third authors then helped the first author analyzed the data qualitatively.

Findings and Discussion

Firman got the entry point when he first started a conversation with the children. When he can get more involved in the play in this first setting. Firman’s conversation and play with those kids went along smoothly, until a boy came to him and said: “Can you help me passing that gallows?”. The boy wanted Firman to play with him with the gallows and Firman did help him. So, the rest of the observation in this setting focused on this boy named here as Jason. When the recess time was over, this boy was still with Firman, and he wanted to play with him inside with the cashier machine. He held Firman’s hand and



directed Firman to have a seat in the corner of the classroom. He took the cashier machine and placed it on the table right in front of Firman, and they had a fruitful conversation as the following.

Jason : “What do you want for dinner, sir?”

Firman: “Oh, I don’t know. What do you have best in here?”

Jason : “We got chicken sandwich, tacos, and pizza”.

Firman: “Alright, I would like to try your chicken sandwich then”.

Jason : “Sure, coming right away!” (Managing the cashier machine with a card, pushing some buttons on it, and handing me the card).

Firman: “Thank you”.

Jason : “Do you want anything else?”

The above conversation and play went for a couple of series with different menu that Firman ordered and mode of payments. Sometimes Jason said that he did not receive card in his restaurant; cash only. Also, he said that the chicken is sold out, so Firman had to order something else. Jason offered different menus, and sometime sat with Firman on the table enjoying the dishes he made. He even provided to-go box if Firman cannot finish my dishes in his restaurant.

The second setting of the observation was also in this classroom. This second observation lasted for about 60 minutes. Everybody in the classroom was getting ready to go the Muscle Room because it was raining outside. This time Firman focused on a girl named here as Jessica who approached him when he was sitting at a bench in the Muscle Room. She was hiding beneath the bench next to Firman. Firman asked her:

Firman: “What are you doing?”

Jessica: “I am hiding”.

Firman: “Hiding from what?”

Jessica: “A Iowa”

Firman: “What is Iowa?”

Jessica: “Iowa is a boy from other class, and he is like a monster. He will chase after me”.

Firman: “How do monster look like?” (Imitating and mimicking monster’s sound and acting out as a monster).

That was how Firman turned to be a monster, and the whole class ended up with playing and running from a monster. As the raining stopped for a while, the male teacher said we can play outside with our jacket on. The monster thing continued outside. Firman ran and chased after the whole class including the teachers. They hide under a tree, and a male student said: “You can’t enter the tree, it’s safe from monster, there is a pony lives in here”. Listening to him that Firman responded: “Then I changed into a dinosaurs”. He surprisingly said: “We don’t have dinosaurs for real!”. The play suddenly ended when the male teacher asked everybody to go inside the classroom.

The third observation was on an Indonesian family. Firman had a chance twice a week to meet the family for family gathering and chatting. There were at least five kids involved. One was a five years old boy, two twin boys aged three years old, and two females aged eight and 10 years old. Firman observed that they were playing together with some marbles, books, and scarfs. The five years old boys acted as a



dragon who was looking for his valuable things: dragon diamond. They used the marbles as the diamond, which was hiding by everybody else. The girls acted as fairy with the scarf as their wings and the twin boys as Spiderman. Firman jumped in their play by acting as “The scorpion” who is certainly the enemy of Spiderman and the fairy, and yet a friend of the dragon. Look at the following excerpt of our conversation.

The dragon : “You have to help me getting back my diamond”.

Firman : “Yes, absolutely, I will attack the Spiderman, and you handle the fairy”.

Fairy A : “You can’t beat us, we are immortal”.

The dragon : “Not with my fire”.

Fairy B : “You can try!”.

Dragon : “We have to have a strategy to beat them”

Firman : “Okay, what’s the plan?”

The play went well for about 30 minutes and ended up when the twin boys went home. Firman noticed that the older kids in this play have more control over the younger kids. They set the plot and managed what the younger kids should do. The younger kids indeed followed the plot and seemed to have no objection, so the play was not spoiled at all. The dragon, however, became the main character as he was the one who needed his diamond back. The Spiderman did not talk much, if any in Indonesian language, because their oral language is still limited or are still mumbling when speaking.

Departing from the three observations above, Corsaro (2003) explained two different kinds of play that children may have: (1) spontaneous fantasy, and (2) socio-dramatic play. Spontaneous fantasy is when children are involved in a less structured play or no strict rule that governs the activity. They become animals, monsters, pirates, and the structure of the play emerges spontaneously as they are playing. Socio-dramatic play is kinds of play when children take agency that exist in the society, such as mothers, fathers, workers, and other adulthood. Based on these two categories of pretend play, we argue that Firman’s interaction with Jason in the first observation was about socio-dramatic play in which Jason was acting as a cashier and waiter, and Firman was as the customer. In the other front, the second and third observations were more about spontaneous fantasy in which everybody takes roles to be different objects which were imaginative.

In addition to the above argument, both types of pretend play embodied shared knowledge about how to play appropriately based on the theme and plot emerged. From the interaction between Jason and Firman, for instance, we have the consensus or collaborative pretend activity that are related to real life experiences. According to Corsaro (2003), choice of words and actions during socio-dramatic play are based on “Kids’ appropriation and embellishment of adult models about status, power, and control” (p. 112). In spontaneous play, on the other hand, kids use paralinguistic cues, such as voice quality and pitch, to fit into the fantasy play. As such, kids in both type of play should agree on the storylines so that they will have meaning making process.

Moreover, the interactions during the pretend play above showed how children produce and participate in a series of peer cultures. It can be seen from the language use and action that they perform. Corsaro (2015) mentioned that “Children creatively appropriate information from the adult world to produce their own, unique peer cultures”. This idea explains how Jason’s understanding about the role of a waiter transformed into knowledge and skills necessary to participate in the adult world. The dragon’s assertion that “We have to have a strategy to beat them” is a reproduction of adulthood in solving a problem.

Finally, the action and interaction of the pretend play are different across ages of whom to take control and direct the play, which further explain different peer cultures (Carlson, & White, 2013; Zarbatany,



McDougall, & Hymell, 2002). For example, in the second observation, the children are relatively at the same age, three to four years old. They were collectively created spontaneous play that no suggestions and stages of direction about the plan how the play will be (Corsaro, 2003). Research continue to show that culture is an important aspect in educational setting (Parlindungan, Rifai, & Safriani, 2018; Lash, 2008), including peer culture. However, in the third observation, the older kids took initiative to plot and direct the play of how the younger kids should act and how the story should go. Corsaro (2015) explained that structural form of childhood is different across ages, which inform different peer cultures at any given time and space. Thus, it makes the interaction during the play is different.

Author Contribution and Competing Interest

The first author who is the main investigator collected the data and managed the overall research process. The second and third authors helped the first author in analyzing the data. No competing interest were found related to this study.

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