

Construction of Power, Construction of Play: A Reflection of Children' Social World

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This study is fundamentally a descriptive case study. Based on the view that everyday talk is a major tool of children's socialization (Shieffelin & Ochs, 1986; Watson-Gegeo, 1988), the author aims to examine the process of language socialization of Japanese children attending a private nursery school in western Japan during a one-year period. All of the classroom procedures are viewed as various forms of social and cognitive learning processes guided by a teacher aiming to shape the children to be appropriate members of the community. In this study one conflictive episode was selected to illustrate how children skillfully repeated each other's utterances in order to gain control over an ongoing activity, whereas children who were marginalized by a dominant group made excellent use of access strategies and joined the activity in the end. The value of *kodomo rashisa* (childlike children) in early childhood education will also be discussed.

In Japan, more than 90% of children aged four and 98% of children aged five attended pre-elementary schools in 2008 (Ministry of Health, Welfare, and Labor, 2008). Such high enrollment rates are without parallel in the world, thus show a significant role Japanese preschools have played as a social and cultural institution. Uniqueness of Japanese preschools also appears in the emphasis of its role on children's emotional and social development rather than on their individual intellectual development (Izumi-Taylor, 2008). Closely related to this pedagogical philosophy is teachers' non-authoritative approach, which tends to be suggestive and advisory, in order to promote children's taking initiative to solve problems by themselves (Izumi-Taylor, 2008). Such approach is believed to promote children's *kodomo rashisa*, childlike children, which represents children's behavior appropriate for their age. Promoting this trait has been widely considered an integral part of the curriculum of Japanese human development (Johnson, 1993; Lewis, 1995; Peak, 1991; Tobin, Hsuch, & Karasawa, 2009; Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989).

The present study aims to explore how children's interactions occurring in a preschool classroom proceed as being guided by the uniqueness of Japanese preschool cultures. To better understand how children structure and restructure themselves as social actors, the author collected data from one conflictive episode involving eighteen children and their teacher. The focus of the study is to illustrate what is happening during the interaction. The research questions are, therefore, simple but important: (a) What are children doing in the course of this conflictive episode? (b) How is the teacher responding to the children's actions?

Literature Review

Children's Conflict

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Traditionally researchers studying children's conflict have focused on resolution as the heart of the importance of a conflicting process since conflicts are seen as undesirable events that adults should prevent. For instance, Eisenberg and Garvey (1981) reported that certain strategies such as compromising or proposing alternative resolutions appear to help children to reach a settlement more likely than other strategies.

Other researchers have argued that as participants in conflicts, children produce fundamental forms of social and political organization in their world and grow to be capable members of their community (Corsaro, 1979, 1985, 1986, 1988; Corsaro and Rizzo, 1990; Goodwin, 1990, 1993; Goodwin & Goodwin, 1987, 1990). For instance, based on the ethnographic data of urban African American children on their neighboring street, Goodwin (1990) demonstrated how children structure and restructure their social organization through ongoing talk and activities, and claimed that displaying differences to others is not a troublesome nor disruptive behavior, but "are opportunities to test or realign the current arrangement of social identities among peers; opposition provides an effective way to accomplish this" (p. 141-2). Interactions in conflicts, thus, are regarded as opportunities for children to recreate their adults' social world and positions them as developing members in their world.

At the same time, children's construction of their membership is greatly facilitated and also restricted by how the world defines them, therefore conflict exchanges are often used to display dominant participants' power and skills (verbal or physical) to maintain their status within groups (Goodwin, 1990, 1993; Heath, 1983), as well as marginalized children's attempt to resist their status quo. For instance, research on gendered behaviors in conflicts generally states that boys' language use in conflicts tends to be more direct, forceful, and hierarchical than girls.' Goodwin (1990, 1993) and Goodwin and Goodwin (1987, 1990) claimed that boys' groups often argue over relative ranking in terms of their power and skills, whereas girls' groups tend to avoid the appearance of hierarchy. Boys' speech generates prohibitions five times as often as girls' (Sacks, 1987) and is inclined to be competition-oriented (Sheldon, 1993). Similar characteristics are found in adults' speech style (Gilligan, 1987; Tannen, 1990b). Tannen (1990a), for instance, defined female and male speech style as "rapport-talk" and "report-talk" respectively and argued that females negotiate to seek and provide support and confirmation to reach consensus as much as possible, whereas males negotiate to maintain their power and try to protect themselves from others who attempt to pull them down from their current status. Needless to say, gendered behavior is not the primary category of human behavior (Goodwin, 1990, 1993; Sheldon, 1993), and other variations such as ethnicity, class, or race, should be considered to reach more accurate understandings (Sheldon, 1993). Still, insights from researches on gender differences are informative to this study.

Another prominent feature of children's conflicts is their claiming ownership of ongoing activities (Corsaro, 1979, 1985, 1986, 1988, 1997; Corsaro & Rizzo, 1990). Preschool children often try to protect their space and activities from other children who attempt to gain access. According to Corsaro (1985), the most popular tactic observed in initial resistances to other children's attempts to join ongoing activities is verbal claim of the group's ownership of objects or space (46.8%). Children also state the space is overcrowding (17%); give sheer verbal refusal without justification (14.9%); deny friendship with the incomer (12.8%), point out arbitrary rules about the group's needs, for example, sex, size, or dress (8.5%). In the case of referring rules, children with ownership demonstrate their social standing and rights to outsiders and demand the outsiders to perform a particular action to ask for items that they

control. Those children who are positioned as outsiders should obey the demand to be admitted as insiders. Namely, it is a concise and effective technique for children to demonstrate the possessors' power and social status (Goodwin, 1990).

Childlike Children

It has been demonstrated in various research that in Japanese society, children's "kodomo rashisa" (childlike children) is highly valued (Johnson, 1993; Lewis, 1995; Peak, 1991; Tobin, Hsuch, & Karasawa, 2009; Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989). Tobin, Wu, and Davidson (1989), for example, visited three preschools in different cultures (Japan, China, and U.S.), videotaped and showed activities occurring there to members of the three school communities including parents, teachers, administrators, and faculties of children's education at universities. Tobin et al. concluded that Japanese preschool teachers tend to perceive that fighting by preschoolers, "especially among boys, is inevitable and even (within bounds) desirable, as it represents a display of age-appropriate behavior that is part of the human condition and thus part of the developmental curriculum of the childlike child" (p. 32). Therefore, it is unavoidable and sometimes necessary to lead children to be complete human beings. One of the Japanese preschool teachers commented that she worries:

about some of the other children who never misbehave.... It's easy to teach mischievous child to behave than to teach a too-good child to be naughty. In the old days children had more chance to play freely, without adults always peering over their shoulders. These days, children don't know how to play, to play like children, which includes being mischievous, right? (p. 32).

Due to the declining number of children per household, weakening sense of connectedness, and diluting human relationships in community, Japanese children nowadays lose chances to play freely with other children at home (Tokyo, 2007) and receive more adult instruction on proper behaviors than they used to receive (Okuyama & Sato, 2006). In 2009, Tobin revisited the three preschools for follow up study and confirmed that children's being involved in fights is mostly regarded as opportunities for them to experience the complexity of society.

The Study

Context and Participants

The one-year research was conducted in a Japanese preschool in Green Town, located in North Ward Kobe City. The data for the following analysis were recorded when the children were in the class of five years old. In principle, Green Town residents share so-called new middle class culture (Vogel, 1996) cross-sectionally seen in the present Japanese society: families live in nuclear households; the work-place and home-environments are clearly separated; fathers are salaried workers; mothers, even though many of them also work outside of the house, support children to meet their needs as primary caretakers. Many parents are concerned about their children's education and are eager to educate their children from early childhood. For example, taking English conversation lessons, piano lessons, swimming

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classes, or dancing classes, is quite common among the children there. It is not unusual for children of elementary school lower grades to go to three or four different types of lessons a week. However, as they grow older, many of them decrease the number of activity-type lessons, such as swimming or piano, and start going to *kyuku* (cram school) in order to prepare for the difficult examinations that they must pass so that they can enter competitive junior high schools.

Participants:*

Sin- boy, 5 years & 4 months

Seiji-boy, 4 years & 10 months

Manabu-boy, 4 years & 11 months

Yuusuke-boy, 4 years & 9 months

Yayoi-girl, 5 years & 6 months

Tooru -boy, 4 years & 11 months

Miss U-female teacher, 27 years

* All names used in this study are pseudonyms

Data Collection

The methodological framework for the analysis of the data is adapted from a paradigm of "microsociolinguistic analysis" (Goodwin, 1990; Corsaro & Rizzo, 1990). This approach focuses directly on the form and sequence of naturally occurring interactions within the participants' culture. Researchers intensively analyze audiotaped conversations using techniques consisting of the ethnographic approach advocated by Goffman (1967, 1974) and conversational analysis established by Sacks (1972, 1987) and his colleagues. Following this approach, the data presented in this paper were transcribed by the author and supplemented with additional ethnographic information about the participants, topics, and interactive settings, all being gained from the procedures of participant observation over an extended period of time. For convenience, the whole episode is divided into two sections (segment 1 & 2). Relevant transcription conventions are attached as an appendix A.

Field notes were also taken during and after every observation. Narrative accounts of the children's teacher, Miss U, were written down as much as possible, with children's utterances in relation to hers. Their voice volume, tone, facial expressions with other bodily movements were also written down, with the time and space in which these interactions took place. As soon as I returned home, I recreated the notes into more formal field notes based on Anderson's (1995) notetaking strategy, which consists of three categories of notes: observational notes, theoretical notes, and methodological notes. I wrote what happened in the classroom in detail with my comments in the observational notes, possible theoretical implications in the theoretical notes, and remarks or required improvement in terms of the research method in the methodological notes. In total I wrote a total of 248 pages of A4 size field notes

Findings

Securing the play space

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Data Segment 1

Participants: Sin (a boy), Seiji (a boy), Yuusuke (a boy), Manabu (a boy), Miss U (a teacher)
Description: Teacher and eighteen children (ten boys and eight girls) are in the special *tatami* room (about 20-meter square) with a 2-meter square, fifty-centimeter deep dent in the center. Before this episode children took a good half-hour keyboard harmonica practice for the coming Seikatsu Happyou Kai (children of all classes play music, sing songs, or act on the stage to show their performances to parents). After the lesson, the teacher asked the children to put away their harmonicas. Several boys packed theirs fairly quickly and started jumping into the dent. Due to the excitement of the children, the background noise level is surprisingly high.

Transcription

- 1) Sin: *Waa!*
Whoopee!
(Sin cheerfully jumps and joins three other boys already in the dent. Three girls come down after Sin and start getting in the dent.)
- 2) Seiji: *Akan yo, onna no ko wa.*
Girls cannot (play).
- 3) Sin: *SOU YA.=*
That's right.
- 4) Yuusuke: =*[Sou ya.*
That's right.
- 5) Seiji: =*[Sou ya, san nin sika hairare hen de.=*
That's right, only three can enter (the dent).
(Seiji seems to forget to include himself in the group. Girls in the dent embarrassedly look at each other.)
- 6) Miss U: =*nande onna no ko wa hairare hen no.*
Why can't girls enter?
- 7) Yuusuke: *Sou ya, san nin sika (0.1) 。yo nin sika hairare hen。=*
That's right, only three, only four can enter.
- 8) Sin: *Sou ya. Sou ya, ato wa hairare nai yo=*
That's right. That's right, the rest cannot enter.
- 9) Seiji: =*Ato wa hairare [nai yo*
The rest cannot enter.
- 10) Manabu: *[Maa kun wa?=
How about Maa?*
- 11) Yuusuke: =*A, ii yo=*
Oh, (you) can.
- 12) Sin: =*Otoko no ko WA ii yo. KAMON!*
Boys can (enter). Come on!
(Sin beckons other boys into the dent. Yuusuke jumps for joy.)

Boys

The first prominent feature is boys' skillful ways to create their power over others. In turn 2, Seiji abruptly declares a rule, *Akan yo, onna no ko wa*. 'Girls cannot (enter the dent).' to guard the place and to hold control over the activity. As stated earlier, pointing out arbitrary

rules about the group's needs, in this case being a boy, is one of the common rituals preschoolers use to protect their activity or place from others (Corsaro, 1985). In this episode, Seiji's utterance plays a strong role to claim the boys' right to occupy the space to girls. Without giving any justification why the dent belongs to boys, Seiji holds power to make the rule which should be followed by others. His utterance splits children into two categories—ones with and without rights to use the space—and forces them to attend and respond to the rule. In addition, boys' frequent repetition of the previous utterances effectively contributes toward holding control over others. Right after Seiji's announcement of the rule (turn 2), two other boys (Sin and Yuusuke) actively express their support. *Sou ya*. 'That's right.' is repeated six times (turn 3, 4, 5, 7, 8) in the blink of an eye. The boys' enthusiastic usage of repetition creates a strong ground for and coherence to the original claim. Interestingly in turn 5, Seiji declares that only three boys (actually four boys including himself) can enter the dent, which conveys a contradictory message to his previous turn, "Girls cannot (play)." Yusuke in turn 7 and Sin in turn 8 quickly support this new claim and loudly declare that the rest of the children—except for the first four boys occupying the dent—can not enter the place. However, in order to meet Manabu's need in turn 10, Yusuke and Shin in turn 11 and 12, promptly redefine the rule and claim that boys have the rights.

In turn 10, Manabu inquires whether he can enter the dent or not directly to Seiji. Such an attempt to get permission from others is considered as the simplest form of various access rituals and is usually rejected by dominant children (Corsaro, 1986). However in this case, he was quickly accepted presumably because the act of acceptance itself serves to show off the boys' rights to enter the dent to others.

Girls

Girls' pervasive silence is quite noticeable in this segment. It does not mean that the girls never talked with each other during the episode. Rather, they talked in low voices so I could not catch any utterances of them when I observed this episode nor when I transcribed the data from the videotape. It is certain that the boys' frequent latch and overlap (turn 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12) prevent the girls from jumping into the conversational flow. Still, for example between turn 2 and 3, or after the teacher's intervention (turn 6), they could have refused the boys' claim and insisted on their right to enter the dent. They did not do so because of the dominant power of the boys who elaborately cooperated as core group members, whose role in children's peer culture has been noted by several researchers (Corsaro, 1997; Thorne, 1993). Working together, core group members often reject others due to the sheer fact that they are not the group members. Those who are excluded could be ultimately accepted if they follow values and references made by the core group, or they start playing together with others who are also rejected from the group (Corsaro, 1997). Corsaro notes that children will have serious effects on their emotional development if they are continually isolated from peer groups. In this segment, the girls are all together put in the marginal position by the core boys' group. Due to the dominant power displayed by the group, they choose to keep silence probably as understanding the risk they should take if they choose to insist on their rights. The girls' attitude here is thus considered as one of conflict management (Tannen, 1990b). By keeping silence, in other words, by masking their "strong unstated feelings" (p. 261), they protect themselves from participating in the direct confrontation with the boys.

Teacher's tolerance

The last point to notice in this segment is Miss. U's gentle intervention in turn 7. She questions why girls can not enter the dent, without raising her voice. It can be inferred that in Yuusuke's first half utterance in turn 7, *Sou ya, san nin sika...* 'That's right, only three...', he simply cannot hear the teacher due to the exciting interactions among boys, but at any rate, the boys do not respond to her. However, she does not repeat the utterance nor use more forceful directives such as imperatives or prohibitions to end the boys' occupying the dent. As noted earlier, in contrast to their Western counterparts, Japanese caregivers tend to be more tolerant of children's misbehaviors and value childlike children, who can freely express their own feelings without worrying too much about adults' eyes. Tobin, et al. (1989) and Tobin, et al. (2009), for instance, describe that the most general pedagogical value of American nursery school teachers' as authoritative, which emphasizes their role in setting clear limitations on children's acceptable behavior, whereas that of Japanese as permissive, which waits for children to learn to resolve and mediate conflicts among themselves. It is a strategy called *mimamori*, or "observing and 'standing guard' instead of immediately taking action" (Tobin, et al., 2009, p.133), and in Japan it is considered to provide children with ample opportunities to manage complex situations in society including disputes and conflicts. In this episode, Miss U's take a back approach—not quickly stopping the boys' mischievous play, but waiting and seeing how it moves—echoes the *mimamori* pedagogy, which provides children ample opportunities to behave as childlike children.

Ire te. Let me in

Data Segment 2

Description: This is the second part of the whole episode. Girls gradually entered the dent and started playing with the boys. At this point, all of the children except for Yayoi (a girl), Tooru (a boy), and two others (a girl and a boy) are already inside the dent. Many children are crawling playfully and wildly.

- 1) Sin: *Yayoi tyan!* [*Yayoi tyan!*
Yayoi! Yayoi!
- 2) Unidentified boy: [*Yayoi tyan!*=
Yayoi!
- 3) Other three boys: =*Yayoi tyan!* *Yayoi tyan!* *Yayoi tyan!*
Yayoi! Yayoi! Yayoi!
(Yayoi stands on the edge of the *tatami* floor looking down at the boys.)
- 4) Yayoi: (5.0) *Ire te.*
Let me in.
- 5) Sin: *Ii yo.*=
Sure.
- 6) Unidentified girl: =*Ii yo*
Sure.
- 7) Sin: *KYOU WA WAU (unintelligible).* *Koko wa wan lando. OUTI TYAU.*
Wan wan wan!
TODAY IS A DOG (unintelligible). Here is a dogs' land. (It is) NOT A HOUSE. Bowwow, bowwow!

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(Suddenly Sin stands up and declares that they are in the dogs' land, then starts barking and crawling wildly. Several girls and boys quickly start barking.)

- 7) Tooru: ◦ *Ire te.*
Let me in.
(Because of the background noise, no one recognizes his soft voice. He keeps standing on the *tatami* floor looking at down others playing.)
- 8) Sin: *Wan wan do (unintelligible)!*
Dogs' land!
(As looking at others playing dogs, Tooru bends himself barking at others from the *tatami* floor. He starts fawning on other boys in the dent and running rather quietly around the dent. He stops near some boys and barks at them.)
- 9) Unidentified boy: *Tooru kun, haitte ii yo=*
Tooru, (you) can enter.
(One of the boys who bark back to Tooru allows him to enter the dent.)
- 10) Tooru: =*Un.*
Yes.

Access rituals

A conspicuous feature in this segment is access rituals made by two children. In turn 4, Yayoi approaches the boys of the core group and asks them to let her join *Ire te*. 'Let me in.' as using a very simple directive form. Also in turn 7, Tooru used the same expression, *Ire te*. Interestingly, Corsaro (1997) argues that such direct strategies are rarely found among the preschoolers he has observed (i.e. U.S. A. and Italy), because these strategies call for a direct response from the children who hold ongoing activities. He further argues that such responses are often negative since "interaction in the nursery school is fragile, and peer activities can break down with even minimal disruption" (p. 33). In contrast, this simple form of access ritual *Ire- te* 'Let me in' and the response to it *Ii yo* 'Sure' are commonly observed utterances among small children in Japan, as the above episode shows. These two utterances are firmly paired up like other formulaic expressions, so children who say *Ire te* to others generally expect to receive positive response, *Ii yo*.

However in this segment, the two children's *Ire te* brings very different results. In Yayoi's case (turn 4), several children including Shin, who is a member of a core group, have called her name beforehand. Therefore, acceptance of her entry is, in fact, already guaranteed. Encouraged by these calls, she utters *Ire te* very firmly, and her attempt to join the activity is quickly accepted by Sin and one more girl.

On the other hand, Tooru's attempt (turn 7) is not noticed due to his small voice volume, a loud background noise, and probably his eyes which are not directed to any particular child. As a result, Tooru is left alone on the *tatami* floor without having any response to his utterance. After a while, however, he starts mimicking other's behavior, acts like a dog, and barks at others. He succeeds in interacting with a couple of boys and gets permission from one boy in the end. Development psychologist Catherine Garvey (1984) reports that one of the children's most effective entry strategies to a new activity is to understand what the target

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group is doing and their play structure, then to slip into the activities by commenting on the concerning issues or by acting like them as if the child is already a group member. Tooru's behavior in this episode shows that after his *Ire te* being ignored, he uses a more complex strategy—mimicking other children—to help him to acquire their recognition. In the first segment, he positions himself as marginalized even though he is a 'boy', not a 'girl' who is barred from the dent. Yet he actively seeks occasions to join the on-going activity and well succeeds in realigning his marginal status.

Discussion

The whole episode reveals the complexity of children's interactions. In the first segment, the boys skillfully built up a core group by excluding the girls from an interactive space. Their frequent repetition of the self-serving rule "Girls cannot (play)." and "That's right." empowers them to maintain control and a dominant position over the ongoing activity. The girls in this episode are positioned as marginalized because of the boys' skillful cooperation and active display of their power, and kept silent to prevent the interaction from having a direct confrontation.

In the second segment, both boys and girls played freely in the dent with total oblivion of the rule "Girls cannot play." The two children used a simple access ritual, *Ire te*, which delivers quite opposite outcomes. Yayoi is warmly welcomed from the beginning, but Tooru's first attempt is flatly neglected.

Clancy (1986) points out that in terms of language usage in Japan, one of the striking aspects is the existence of a wide range of formulaic expressions. Due to a widespread codification of contexts, Japanese experience their intentions are appropriately conveyed to others and responded to by others without giving personal and individualized expressions. Japanese speakers expect to hold particular feelings toward the specific verbal formula, such as *Itadakimasu* "I will receive it" when they start to eat or *Situeisimasu* "I will leave now" when they leave somebody's house. "An important goal of socialization in Japan is to promote the unanimity in feeling that will support the norms of verbal agreement and empathy" (p. 216). Therefore, upon being requested by the formula, *Ire te*, Japanese children are, in principle, expected to welcome a new comer. The access ritual *Ire te* articulated by Yayoi and Tooru in this event shows how Japanese children are encouraged to have sensitivity to understanding others' needs and accept them, and say *Ii yo* to new comers even how fragile their ongoing activities are.

Conclusion

Studies on children's social identities and linguistic and behavioral interactions hold infinite possibilities to reveal their beliefs, values, and cultures. Since children's social status is fragile and fluid, constantly challenged and recreated, they actively attempt to find the space they can display their power. Children positioned as peripheral members tirelessly seek opportunities to restructure their social identities. In this paper, I have tried to identify a small portion of Japanese preschoolers' hidden curricula in a short conflictive episode based on qualitative information. Clearly, further studies are needed to reinforce the findings. Japanese formulaic expressions used by children and their inherent social meanings, is also an area in need of further research.

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Appendix A: Transcription conventions

[]	overlapping talk
=	latched utterances
(0.0)	timed pause (in seconds)
(.)	a short pause
,	fall in intonation (final)
,	continuing intonation (non-final)
?	raising intonation (final)
Capital	loud talk
<u>underline</u>	emphasis
◦ ◦	passage of talk that is quieter than surrounding talk
()	comment by a transcriber
(unintelligible)	problematic hearing that the transcriber is not certain about