

Play, regulation and resistance ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The neoliberal emphasis upon standardisation and accountability in education poses particular challenges for play in early childhood. In the eyes of the state, play must earn its place in the classroom and, in a climate of performativity, justification for play must be made on the basis of its capacity to propel children's progress towards predetermined curriculum goals. As such, the requirement for 'planned, purposeful play' (DfE, 2017, p.9) reflects a neoliberal policy agenda for early childhood education in England in which emphasis is placed upon 'reaching children for school and, eventually, employment' (DfE, 2013, p.6). Thus, children are expected to play within the confines of a predetermined curriculum in which little value is placed upon children's individual and collective interests, inquiries and fascinations, beyond those that are ordained as compatible with the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum.

Neoliberalism, as a form of governance, therefore imposes fixed and striated expectations upon young children's play. Accordingly, in my study of play in a Reception class, a neoliberal discourse of play was made visible through the outward-facing documentation of teachers' planning, assessment and record-keeping. At the beginning of the eight-month study, teachers' interpretations of play were closely tethered to the requirements of the EYFS; just as their planning identified specific learning outcomes for play, their observations framed play as 'evidence' for children's progress towards these outcomes.

However, through using filmed footage of play as a provocation to explore children's, parents' and teachers' perspectives, I identified numerous instances in which this regulatory discourse was subverted within the play culture of the classroom. Locating my study within critical sociocultural theory (Lewis et al., 2007) I drew upon participants' perspectives to illuminate the diverse inquiries and interests that are characteristic of play cultures. These episodes of play transgressed the instrumental and linear restrictions of a neoliberal discourse. By contrast, the examples embodied the plurality of knowledge and experiences that children bring to their play; a plurality that blurs, collides and interweaves, leading to play evolving in uncertain and complex directions. I argue that such instances are laden with possibilities – and also with tensions – associated with the potential afforded by play to transform children's relationships and interactions. However, the unpredictable and messy directions in which such instances of play unfold are likely to be incongruent with the narrow interpretations of learning that are upheld in the EYFS. As neoliberalism tightens its grip upon early childhood education, the capacity for teachers to recognise and engage with children's complex and uncertain enactments of play continues to be an important topic for critical discussion and further investigation.

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