

Play and the production of subjectivities in kindergarten

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This talk is about children playing mathematical games in a kindergarten setting. What I am interested in is not how play allows children to develop mathematical ideas. What I am interested in is the opposite: to understand how mathematical ideas and play allow children (and their teachers) to inscribe themselves in the social world.

To look at play in this manner is to depart from the usual conception that reduces play (and other educational settings, from kindergarten to university and beyond) to a mere facilitator of knowledge construction. In this talk I want to continue exploring a line of inquiry that I outlined in (Radford, 2014) where the central idea is that play and all educational settings ubiquitously produce not only knowledge but individuals too. This line of inquiry is part of an invitation to envision mathematics education as something that is more than *knowing*: as something that also includes investigations into the dimension of *becoming*.

Naturally, the theoretical position that I am advocating here is at odds with the classical view of the child articulated during the Enlightenment and that has come down to us through the work of Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Piaget, and the mathematics education constructivist movement of the 20th century. In the Enlightened tradition, the child is portrayed as a constructor of ideas and the origin of her feelings, meaning, and intentionality. The child appears as a *give entity*; that is, someone who, in order to develop her own intellectual capacities, simply needs a stimulating social environment (Martin, 2004). To conceptualize the child, I take a different route: one that comes from a dialectical materialist philosophy and its conception of the human. Instead of being the origin of knowledge, feelings, meaning, and intentionality, the child is conceptualized as a *subjectivity*; that is, an entity in flux, in perpetual becoming—an entity who, through practical activity (like play) is continuously inscribing herself in the social world and, in doing so, she is continuously co-producing herself within the limits and possibilities of her culture. In this line of thought, becoming someone is “inseparable from existing in a space of moral issues . . . and how one ought to be. It is being able to find one’s standpoint in this space, being able to occupy, to *be* a perspective in it” (Taylor, 1989, p.112).

The problem that I want to address in this talk is, hence, the following: how play offers kindergarten children (and their teachers) a space to co-inscribe themselves in the social world. To do so, I investigate what I have termed in previous papers *processes of subjectification*; that is, the processes in the course of which the students come to occupy a space and to be a perspective in the social world (Radford, 2008); the processes where, co-producing themselves against the backdrop of culture and history, teachers and students *come into presence*. I explore these ideas through the analysis of episodes from kindergarten settings.

References

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