

Exploring Initiation and Conflict in Children's Underground Play at School

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ABSTRACT

When children are out of their teacher's sight, they often initiate play spontaneously. If this occurs at an unpermitted time or in an unpermitted way, then such play is called "underground play." This study aims to understand how young children initiate underground play and solve conflicts during underground play. A qualitative study design was employed, and participant observations were taken for data collection. A preschool indoor classroom with three separated spaces beneficial to underground play was purposively selected for this study. There were 28 young children aged 3-6 in the mixed age class. This study collected 128 observations which the researchers entered the class three or four times a week, and each time began at 8:00 and ended at 16:00. Additionally, interviews with the teachers were also collected for member checking. This study adopted the method of constant comparative analysis for data analysis, including unitizing, categorizing, framing, and checking. Through data analysis, this study found that the young children applied mimicking others, verbal challenge, and physical triggering to initiate underground play. When conflicts occur, the children applied the teacher's role and hidden physical attacks to attain control, implying the manipulation of social power by young children at school. During underground play, children were also engaged in their social grouping. Finally, this study provides suggestions for early childhood education and future studies.

Keywords: Peer Culture, Play, Social Interaction, Social Grouping, Social Power, Underground Play

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幼兒在學校的地下遊戲之啟動與衝突

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中文摘要

當幼兒離開教師的視線時，他們常自發性地啟動遊戲。如果他們的遊戲是發生在未被允許的時間，或者被禁止的方式，這種遊戲就稱為「地下遊戲」。本研究企圖了解幼兒在學校如何啟動地下遊戲，以及如何處理當中的衝突。本研究採質性研究法，立意擇取一個室內包含三個分隔空間以利幼兒地下遊戲產生的幼兒園班級進行研究，該班有 28 位三到六歲混齡幼兒進行觀察，以參與性觀察的方式來收集資料。一週入園觀察三次，每次從早上八點至下午四點，共收集 128 筆觀察資料，此外亦訪談教師以檢核資料。本研究的資料分析採持續比較分析法，包括資料單位化、分類、框架建構及檢核。研究發現幼兒運用行為模仿、言語挑釁，或肢體刺激來啟動地下遊戲。當衝突發生時，幼兒就會把教師角色搬出來，來威脅對方，或者運用隱匿的肢體攻擊方式來取得控制。這意味著幼兒操作社會權力的一種方式。在地下遊戲過程中，幼兒也暗中在組織他們的社交圈，在組成不同的團體中形成隱匿的社會階級。最後，本研究依研究發現對幼兒教育，以及未來之研究提出相關之建議。

關鍵字：同儕文化、地下遊戲、社會互動、社交群、社會權力、遊戲

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I. Introduction

When children first enter school, they have to learn the norms and behaviors that should be displayed during class in order to get along in society. In the process of socialization, a child learns to adjust himself to a group and behave in a manner approved by the group. From the views of social constructivism, children construct their social world through interpersonal interaction. In this social interaction, children's perspectives are continually changing and then internalizing the perspectives into their cognitive development. Internalization is "the internal reconstruction of an external operation" as well as "transformation of interpersonal processes to intrapersonal processes" (Vygotsky, 1978, pp. 56-57). Children interpret the information from the environment and construct their knowledge and skills. Children are also active agents in their society and create their unique peer culture. Children's production and participation in peer culture is a part of their socialization. Their peer culture is defined as "a stable set of activities or routines, artifacts, values, and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers" (Corsaro & Eder, 1990, p. 197), and this culture often emerges in spontaneous play (Corsaro, 1985, p. 289).

Children's play relates to their peer culture, and by deriving from their intrinsic motivation, it is characterized with flexibility, spontaneity, and voluntariness, allowing children to use the natural environment to facilitate their learning and social interaction (Kasari et al., 2013) and also allowing them to make decisions and actively participate without any particular purpose (Garvey, 1990, p. 4). In play, children explore in self-direction and learn through trial and error (Wong & Kasari, 2012), and eventually, they become active learners in their own social context (Frey & Kaiser, 2011). Play is intertwined with emotions and cognition, using cognition to resolve emotional conflicts and employing stable emotions to promote the development of cognition (Slade & Wolf, 1994, p.1). Play also promotes academic learning, cognition, and social development (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009, pp. 29-40).

Although most preschools provide children time to play, children still secretly initiate their play when they are out of their teacher's sight. In preschool, children challenge adults' authority and create another aspect of life, which is called "underlife" (Corsaro, 1985, pp. 254-268; Liang, 2011, pp. 6-7). Children's "underlife" belongs to "secondary adjustments" that Corsaro (2001) cited from Goffman's notion that "secondary adjustments" are a member who employs unauthorized means or reaches unauthorized ends in order to get around the organization's expectation as to what he should do, what he should get, or what he should be. In school underlife, children challenge adults' authority to gain control (Corsaro, 2003, p. 141; Corsaro & Eder, 1990), violate the rules without being caught (Corsaro, 2003, p. 193), create special

cases to push adults to relax the rules (Hatch, 1986), get satisfaction from breaking down the adult's control (Corsaro, 2001; Liang, 2011, p. 150), and redefine social norms while challenging mainstream ideologies (Lee, 2024, p. 345-346). Corsaro (1997, p. 153) noted that the central feature of young children's peer culture is resistance to adults' rules, leading them to develop a sense of collective identity and value. Since children's peer culture often emerges in spontaneous play (Corsaro, 1985, p. 289), resisting adult rules to emerge with a play called "underground play" is also an important part of such culture.

Underground play refers to a play that occurs at an unpermitted time or in an unpermitted way (Liang, 2011, p. 159). Examples include the following. When the teacher was teaching, a child out of the teacher's sight rolled up a sweater as a pet to play, children hid under the table with little toys in hands to play guessing game, or when children were lining up, a child turned his hands like a helicopter to attract other children to join (Hatch, 1986). In a restroom, boys were playing rough and tumble, and girls were gossiping and joking (Corsaro, 2003, p.27). During cleaning up, children pretended that they did not hear and hid in a corner to continue playing (Lash, 2008). Children "smuggled" small toys and snacks to school, and they played and shared when they were out of the teacher's sight (Corsaro, 2001, 2003, p.154; Liang, 2011, pp.136-141). Children occasionally engage in creative acts of "rule-breaking," such as mimicking rough-and-tumble play in the library (Corsaro & Everitt, 2023).

In underground play, children develop a high level of cover skills. For example, children usually observed the teacher and pretended to act nonchalant to avoid being discovered, and if they were caught by the teacher, they would cater to the teacher's expectation, showed regret, and later secretly discussed who made the action or voice so loud (Liang, 2011, pp. 136-141). Sometimes, conflict relating to verbal and physical aggression (Lee & Lee, 2024) may occur in underground play. For instance, a child sneaked a toy Superman into school, and another one saw it and took it to play, but he did not return it after playing for a long time. The child who brought the toy threatened to tell the teacher, and finally, he took it back and put it in his pocket. The child whose toy was taken back also threatened to tell the teacher. He walked over to the teacher and turned back again, and he did not say anything (Corsaro, 2003, p. 154). Children participate in unauthorized activities when the teacher is not paying attention but immediately revert to permitted activities when the teacher approaches (Köngäs et al., 2022, p. 1538-1539). In underground play, children learn to resolve the conflicts by themselves because the play occurs at an unpermitted time or in an unpermitted way.

Children do not always accept norms in the classroom, but challenge adults' authority and push their potential to the limit to collectively cross the boundaries of norms. They become the controllers of their own lives (Corsaro, 2001). For example, when instructed to tidy up their Lego creations, some children hid their unfinished projects to continue "really playing" during free activity time rather than following the teacher's instructions (Olsson, 2023, p. 329). Getting

bigger and gaining control are regarded as important values in young children's peer culture (Corsaro, 1985, pp. 179-180). They also symbolize a kind of power. For example, children competed for a higher level on climbing bars and shouted, "We're bigger than anybody else" (Corsaro, 2003, p. 48; 1985, p.186). The competition for reaching dominance seems to be a part of peer culture. In play, young children attempt to reach control to overcome their fear and uncertainty in the adult world (Corsaro, 1985, pp.273-275). Furthermore, children share their control of dangers and fears such as they run away together until the danger disappears and then cheer together (Corsaro, 2003, p. 99, 102). Challenging the adult's authority and gaining control are also common features of the global peer culture in young children (Corsaro & Eder, 1990). Eventually, young children develop their concepts of friendships (Corsaro, 1985, p. 150; Corsaro, 2003) and social identity (Corsaro, 2001) that further promote their pro-social behavior (Avgitidou, 2001).

When children initiate underground play, they have to observe the teacher to avoid getting caught and then instantly transmit a message to others. After receiving the message, the children have to make a quick decision to join or not. When they dive into play together and enjoy a moment of play, they also have to watch for the teacher to make sure they are out of the teacher's sight. How children make their tacit agreement to initiate underground play is worthy of further studies. In underground play, various conflicts may occur. The conflicts include verbal aggression such as threat or compulsion, and physical aggression such as physical attacks and compulsively taking away other's belongings. Since underground plays are "illegal," when conflicts occur, the children have to solve the conflicts by themselves. This study looks to understand young children's initiation of underground play and conflict handling in underground play. The findings can provide a deep insight into young children's world.

II. Research Questions

This study aims to understand young children's initiation of underground play. The research questions are: How do young children initiate underground play? When conflicts occur in underground play, how do young children deal with them?

III. Research Method

A qualitative method of naturalistic inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was employed to understand young children's underground play in the classroom.

The conditions required for purposive sampling in this context include a classroom with

multiple spaces, free play time, and young children's diverse backgrounds. Since young children's underground play frequently occurs in spaces teachers do not see, a classroom with multiple spaces is the first requirement. Because children's underground play occurs in a freer and more autonomous environment, the selected class providing free play is also required. Finally, children's diverse backgrounds of ages and social-economic status are conducive for rich information. To ensure the appropriateness of participants, a pilot study of four observations were also conducted before the study began.

Before the study began, the study proposal was reviewed by the Human Research Ethics Committee, and approval was granted. Informed consent was obtained from the teachers and the children's parents, and later, the children's verbal consent was also obtained. The children's verbal consent was asked by the two teachers privately after pilot study and receiving parent consent to ensure that the children were comfortable when they were observed or accompanied by the observers.

A. Study Field

The preschool is located in a metropolitan area in southern Taiwan and affiliated with a public elementary school. The selected class includes a classroom, a toilet area, and a sleeping room, and the three spaces are connected. The classroom was set up with a language area, socio-dramatic area, art area, science area, and block area, and the sleeping room was set up with a music area and physical exercise area. The children's schedule included outdoor play (9:30-10:00), group circle time (10:10-10:50), free play in learning areas (10:50-11:50), lunch time (12:00-12:40), nap time (13:00-14:20), and group circle time (14:20-15:20).

B. Study Participants

There were two teachers (T1, T2) in this classroom. Both teachers hold bachelor's degrees in early childhood education and teacher certificates. T1 has 26 years of teaching experience, and T2 has two years of teaching experience when the study began.

There were 28 children in this class: 10 children aged 5–6 years (7 boys, 3 girls), 12 children aged 4–5 years (8 boys, 4 girls), and 6 children aged 3–4 years (3 boys, 3 girls). Twenty children were from a middle-class household, seven children from a working-class household, and one child from a low-income household.

C. Data Collection

Collected observations serve as the main data source and interviews as auxiliary data. The data collection lasted for one school year. Participant observations were conducted that the

observers were children's playmates that the observers passively accepted children's invitation for play rather than initiated play or interrupt children's play structure. The data were collected four days a week in the first semester and three days a week in the second semester. In total, 128 days of data were collected, and each entry covered 8 hours (8:00-16:00). Observations were quickly written down and later, transcribed into anecdotes on computers.

The interview with the teachers was for triangulation that checked the correctness of the analysis. The researcher conducted informal and two semi-structured interviews with the two teachers. The informal interviews served to cross-check observational data and clarify the researcher's questions. The semi-structured interviews were held after data analysis when the researcher reported the findings and then conducted a dialogue.

D. Data Analysis

All archived data were dated and numbered. The sequence shown at the end of each entry indicates the type of data and the date. An example is O281218: 'O' means it is an observation, and 281218 means the datum was collected on the 28th of December 2018. All participants were given pseudonyms.

The collected anecdotes were analyzed using a method of constant comparison in the process of unitizing, categorizing, framing, and checking the anecdotes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 344-351). The analysis process went as follows.

- (A) The collected anecdotes were separated into units according to their intact meaning. *Yi-Yi bent down and attempted to hit Yong-Yong's belly with his head. //Yong-Yong waved his hands and ran away.* The anecdotes are separated by "//", marking each intact meaning.
- (B) The unitized anecdotes were coded and then categorized. "*Yi-Yi bent down and attempted to hit Yong-Yong's belly with his head*" was coded as "hitting initiation." "*Yong-Yong waved his hands and ran away*" was coded as "chasing play." Similar coding was re-examined to re-code until all coding showed consistency. The same coding was then categorized into a group for the mode of initiation.
- (C) The coded data were reorganized and linked through their unique meaning until a theme emerged. In this study, the theme of social power and social grouping emerged.
- (D) Interpretation and triangulation were made. The interviews with the teachers were used to triangulate the findings. The participant teachers read the first draft and cross-checked the content.

IV. Findings

The children initiated underground play secretly in a time, occasion, or manner that the teacher did not permit. Therefore, underground play occurred in situations where the teacher did not see them or in the context of cover. The initiation modes of underground play are mimicking others, verbal challenge, and physical triggering. The initiation behavior of underground play is underlined in following examples.

A. Mimicking Others

The initiation of mimicking others is a child's playful behavior of being imitated by the children around him, and then they join to play together.

During teeth brushing time, Zhu-Zhu spat water on the mirror, and Ping-Ping mimicked him and also spat water on the mirror. They were laughing and competing over spitting height. Accidentally, Ping-Ping's water sprayed on Zhu-Zhu, and they turned to spit on each other (O140918).

When children sneak into their underground play, it creates a fun atmosphere, and their interaction makes the play more exciting. However, not every child would like to join an underground play after watching it. Some children reacted differently.

In morning physical exercise, Fu-Fu was hiding in the language area to play. Wei-Wei saw it and soon joined Fu-Fu also hiding in the language area. Later, Yu-Yu saw them and shouted, "Teacher, they are playing." Wei-Wei and Fu-Fu ran out immediately after hearing this. T1 gave Wei-Wei and Fu-Fu a warning. Afterwards, when the children were doing exercise, Wei-Wei and Fu-Fu turned their bodies to squeeze Yu-Yu into a corner (O180918).

Unlike Wei-Wei, Yu-Yu was shouting out to tell the teacher rather than joining them. Later, Yu-Yu got the revenge of body squeezing. Sometimes, the conflicts in underground play come from a disagreement of termination or a continuation of play.

In the washroom, Xiang-Xiang poured water into the soap dish with his mouthwash cup and then caught the dripping water from the soap dish also with his cup. Chen-Chen came over and joined Xiang-Xiang to pour water into the soap dish. The two took turns pouring water and catching water. Afterwards, Xiang-Xiang wanted to leave and Chen-Chen said

to him, "Keep going. Otherwise, I will tell the teacher." At that time, T2 came over and said, "Are you two joking?" Xiang-Xiang and Chen-Chen hurried to leave (O150119).

After seeing Xiang-Xiang pouring water and catching water, Chen-Chen soon joined Xiang-Xiang with a mimicking action. After a while, Xiang-Xiang probably found that there were no other children in the washroom, and he wanted to leave, but Chen-Chen wanted to continue. Subsequently, Chen-Chen threatened Xiang-Xiang to continue by telling the teacher. The appearance of T2 naturally terminated their play. In mimicking others, children sometimes imitate other's working behaviors in an attempt to initiate competition play.

After lunch, Ting-Ting and Yan-Yan each took a small broom to sweep the crumbs and garbage on the floor. Whenever Ting-Ting found rubbish on the floor ready to sweep it, Yan-Yan rushed behind her to sweep it and even swept away the rubbish in Ting-Ting's dustpan. Ting-Ting blocked Yan-Yan with her hand and told her not to come, but Yan-Yan kept on sweeping after Ting-Ting. Afterwards, Ting-Ting struck Yan-Yan with her broom. Yan-Yan cried, and T2 came over (O221118).

Yan-Yan kept on following Ting-Ting to sweep the crumbs. By "mimicking others," Yan-Yan could trigger an underground play of a sweeping competition, but Ting-Ting had no interest in joining and gave Yan-Yan a signal to stop. Rather than stop, Yan-Yan kept on following Ting-Ting to race in sweeping. Consequently, Ting-Ting used a "physical attack" to force Yan-Yan to stop.

In underground play, not every child would like to join the play, such as when Yu-Yu informed the teacher rather than join the play, and Ting-Ting gave Yan-Yan signals to stop. Children's participation in underground play may refer to their social groupings. On the other hand, when disagreements occurred, children used "telling the teacher" or "physical attack" to make the other child surrender. It signals hidden social power in underground play.

B. Verbal Challenging

Verbal challenge stimulates others to participate in underground play unconsciously. A common example would be a child saying, "You can't catch me, can you?"

During cleaning time, Xin-Xin said to Fu-Fu, "You can't catch me." After Fu-Fu heard this, he started to chase after Xin-Xin. Ting-Ting saw they were running and followed Fu-Fu to chase Xin-Xin. Xin-Xin shouted, "Fu-Fu, block Ting-Ting." Ting-Ting speeded up, and the three children were running and chasing in the classroom until T1 stopped them (O211218).

Xin-Xin challenged Fu-Fu with “You can’t catch me,” and Fu-Fu immediately chased Xin-Xin to prove that he could catch her. Ting-Ting imitated Fu-Fu by running after Xin-Xin. Xin-Xin’s “block Ting-Ting” aroused Ting-Ting to speed up in a way that made the chasing become more exciting. “Guess what” is another common means of verbal challenge.

During lunch time, Li-Li put her hands under the table and hid her right hand in her sock. She asked Jun-Jun, “Guess which hand is in my sock?” Jun-Jun smiled and also put his right hand between his thighs, and he said, “Guess which hand I am hiding?” After hearing their conversation, Yi-Yi said, “I know it” and lay down under the table to watch. At the time, T2 was passing by, and Jun-Jun said to T2 that Yi-Yi didn’t eat his lunch (O271218).

Li-Li’s guessing play invoked another guessing play by Jun-Jun. Yi-Yi heard it and soon joined by bending down to watch. However, Jun-Jun did not want Yi-Yi to join and told T2 that Yi-Yi did not eat his lunch. T2 warned Yi-Yi to hurry up and eat. When children use a verbal challenge, they usually have a specific object. Li-Li only asked Jun-Jun who was sitting next to her, but she did not ask Yi-Yi who was sitting opposite. Jun-Jun responded to Li-Li with a rhetorical question. However, Yi-Yi’s participation was soon excluded by “telling the teacher.”

After the outdoor activity, Kai-Kai, Zhu-Zhu, and Yi-Yi went to the sleeping room to change their sweaty clothes. After changing clothes, Kai-Kai swung his wet shirt around. Yi-Yi saw it and also swung his own shirt, too. Kai-Kai said to Yi-Yi, “Throw it up... Throw it higher.”... When Yi-Yi was about to throw his shirt higher, T1 entered the room, and Kai-Kai saw T1 first and said to T1, “Yi-Yi keeps on throwing his shirt. I told him not to throw, but he kept on throwing.” T1 said, “What will it happen if you throw it high?” Zhu-Zhu said, “Your clothes will get stuck in the electric fan.” T1 said, “Right! Yi-Yi, come see me later” (O270519).

Yi-Yi mimicked Kai-Kai to swing his wet shirt, and later Kai-Kai said “throw it up.” Kai-Kai’s words initiated a competition play to see who could throw the shirt higher. However, T1 came in, and Kai-Kai made a false statement to avoid reprimand. Zhu-Zhu did not participate in their play from the beginning to the end, but he did not disclose Kai-Kai’s false statement either. Later, Yi-Yi was scolded by T1.

When children employ a verbal challenge to initiate underground play, the initiator usually has a specific object in mind like Xin-Xin to Fu-Fu, Li-Li to Jun-Jun, and Kai-Kai to Yi-Yi. Occasionally, the children around the initiator would like to join after hearing it, like Yi-Yi wanted to join Li-Li and Jun-Jun. However, the bystanders’ participation is not always welcome, and it might refer to children’s social grouping of inclusion and exclusion. Jun-Jun told the

teacher that Yi-Yi did not eat his lunch to resist Yi-Yi joining the play.

C. Physical Triggering

Physical triggering is a fast and direct way to initiate underground play, and it usually includes bumping, hitting, pulling, swinging, scratching, etc.

In the washroom, Yi-Yi bent down and attempted to hit Yong-Yong's belly with his head. Yong-Yong waved his hands and ran away. Yi-Yi chased after Yong-Yong. After seeing them running, Sheng-Sheng also ran and waved his hands behind them. Sheng-Sheng's waving hand hit Yi-Yi, and Yi-Yi turned towards Sheng-Sheng. When Yi-Yi bent down about to bump Sheng-Sheng, he accidentally hit Sheng-Sheng's head. Sheng-Sheng started to cry (O271118).

Yi-Yi's head bumping initiated a series of running and chasing. The triggering forced the children to run; otherwise, they would be hit. Similar behaviors also occurred during napping time in the sleeping room, such as when a child swung his quilt bag at others to initiate a running and chasing play (O241218, O030119, O180319). The excitement aroused the other children so that they could not help running. Physical triggering can also cause conflicts due to excessive force.

In front of a drinking fountain, A-Ting gently pulled Yong-Yong's mask and wanted to play with him, but Yong-Yong did not want to play. A-Ting pulled harder and harder and finally broke Yong-Yong's mask (O041218).

A-Ting attempted to initiate a running and chasing play by pulling Yong-Yong's mask, but Yong-Yong had no intention to join the play. A-Ting pulled harder rather than stop. Afterwards, Yong-Yong told T1 that A-Ting broke his mask, and A-Ting was reprimanded.

During cleaning time, Hao-Hao was wiping the toy kitchen, and Kai-Kai and Jun-Jun were wiping the windows of a dollhouse. Hao-Hao glanced at them and kept on cleaning. Kai-Kai went over and snatched Hao-Hao's rag and later threw it on the ground. T2 came over and said, "Why are you two playing?" Hao-Hao said, "He (Kai-Kai) grabbed my rag." T2 asked Kai-Kai, "Did you grab Hao-Hao's rag?" Kai-Kai replied, "No, he dropped it by himself." Hao-Hao did not give any further defense (O181018).

Cleaning a socio-dramatic area as a form of cover, Kai-Kai and Jun-Jun sneaked into the

underground play. Hao-Hao saw them playing, but he did not imitate to join. Afterwards, Kai-Kai snatched Hao-Hao's rag and expected Hao-Hao to chase him, but Hao-Hao did not. Later, Kai-Kai threw the rag on the ground. By that time, T2 came over. Hao-Hao told T2 that Kai-Kai took his rag. When T2 asked Kai-Kai, and Kai-Kai made a false statement to exonerate himself from blame.

In the three initiation modes, mimicking others, verbal challenging, and physical triggering, the speaker of a verbal challenge or the actor of physical triggering is the initiator. However, in mimicking others, the initiator could be the spontaneous player or the imitator. Physical triggering, whose initiating behaviors include hitting, pulling, and snatching, is a more compulsive way to initiate underground play, and the initiated plays all belong to running and chasing. When the initiator is unaware of the other child's willingness to make an appropriate response in time, a conflict will arise, like A-Ting pulling Yong-Yong's mask. Sometimes, physical triggering with its compulsive nature is used as a conversion into the initiating strategies. For example, Kai-Kai knew that Hao-Hao saw them playing, but Hao-Hao did not mimic them to join. Kai-Kai would like Hao-Hao to join and switched into a more forceful strategy to push Hao-Hao to join by snatching the rag. Afterwards, when the teacher appeared, Kai-Kai's false defense symbolizes the social power generated in underground play.

There is another example. Yan-Yan mimicked Ting-Ting to sweep after her, and later, Yan-Yan took a further step to sweep the rubbish in Ting-Ting's dustpan. When Yan-Yan swept the rubbish in Ting-Ting's dustpan, Yan-Yan switched her initiating strategy from mimicking others to physical triggering, which was more forceful. Ting-Ting also increased the intensity from hand sign and verbal expression to physical attack to resisting Yan-Yan. When children apply physical triggering to initiate underground play, they frequently and inadvertently convert to "physical attacks." It violates the play principle that participation is based on mutual consent. When conflicts occur in underground play, the children use the teacher's role and conceal physical attacks to gain advantages. If the teacher happens to show up, false statements are also used to exonerate one's self from blame.

V. Discussions

A. Social Power

Underground play is a part of children's 'underlife' at preschool whereby they escape from the teacher's sight to initiate play and enjoy a moment of play. The initiator has to identify the appropriate occasion and pass a message in time. The receiver has to make a quick decision to sneak into the play. Underground play is children's "secondary adjustment" to adult's rules that

are also part of young children's peer culture, and through it, children develop friendships and construct social identity (Corsaro, 1985, p. 150; Corsaro, 2003; Corsaro, 2001). Occasionally, conflicts occur in underground such as one wants to initiate a play and the other does not want to join, one wants to end the play and the other wants to continue, a non-participant informing the teacher, and one makes a false statement to be exonerated from blame. When conflicts occur, children employ various strategies to reach dominance, unlike what early educators expect that children should solve conflicts through negotiation. Because the allowed time for underground play is relatively short, children have no time to deal with conflicts through negotiation. Therefore, using strategies to quickly gain advantages are common behaviors for underground play to deal with conflicts.

This study found a contradictory phenomenon in children's peer culture, whereby children attempt to escape from adult's control as seen in previous studies (Corsaro, 2003, p. 141; Corsaro & Eder, 1990), but they also manipulate adult's role to control others. The contradictory relation with an adult is the epitome of children's peer culture. When using the teacher role as a threat, the children usually do not really tell the teacher, because the reporters are also transgressors, unless the teacher just shows up. Although Chen-Chen employed telling the teacher to force Xiang-Xiang to continue with water play, Chen-Chen certainly would not tell the teacher, because he also was a transgressor until the teacher happened to show up to end their play. In hand guessing play, Jun-Jun did tell the teacher who just passed by. Rather than saying Yi-Yi was playing, Jun-Jun said, "Yi-Yi didn't eat his lunch," and successfully excluded Yi-Yi. Jun-Jun's claim diverted the teacher's attention to Yi-Yi's lunch eating to escape the fact that they were playing. The children skillfully manipulated the teacher's role to achieve their goals.

Besides manipulating the teacher's role for social power, children also employ "physical attack" to attain power. Ting-Ting struck Yan-Yan to force her to stop. Wei-Wei and Fu-Fu squeezed Yu-Yu with their bodies in revenge for him informing the teacher. There is a hidden boundary between "physical attack" and "physical triggering." In pulling the mask, when A-Ting increased his strength to force Yong-Yong to join, he had crossed the boundary from physical triggering to physical attack. In addition, the children used quilt bag swinging, belly hitting, and prop grabbing to initiate underground play, in which the initiations are offensive and compulsive, which violate the play principle of mutual agreement. Therefore, children who use physical triggering to initiate play might implicitly manipulate social power to force the other to participate.

Making false statements without being revealed is another form of social power. Kai-Kai made false statements twice, and Zhu-Zhu, Yi-Yi, and Hao-Hao around him had heard what Kai-Kai said, but they did not refute him. Kai-Kai reached the power to get control and exonerate himself from blame. In this study, Jun-Jun, Chen-Chen, and Kai-Kai were good at

manipulating social power to get control. They were inclined to superordinate children in the class. On the contrary, Zhu-Zhu, Yi-Yi, and Hao-Hao were inclined to being subordinates. Therefore, the hierarchical status of social power may covertly germinate in young children's classroom.

Previous studies found that children apply classroom rules to achieve personal goals (Tholander, 2007), consolidate their control over resources (Cobb-Moor et al., 2009), and resist being dominated (Jones, 2008; Jordan et al., 1995). Children apply group relations to interpret the rules to exclude or include certain persons (Cobb-Moor et al., 2009; Löfdahl & Hägglund, 2006; Williams, 2001) and ultimately establish their social status (Tholander, 2007). This study found that children frequently employed the teacher's role to get control rather than classroom rules because in preschool the teacher is often the person who establishes the rules. Furthermore, this study found that young children also employed false statements and physical attack/triggering to reach dominance. While children experiencing 'false statement' and 'teacher's role' as available strategies to get control rather than negotiation, they eventually internalize it congruent with social constructionism that internalizing the perspectives into their cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 56-57). However, children's perspectives are continually changing from external operation. How the teacher guide children to build 'altruism' as part of peer culture is suggested in the implication section.

B. Social Grouping

Children manipulated social power (informing the teacher) to exclude a participant and safeguard their social group like Jun-Jun resisted Yi-Yi by informing the teacher as previous study that children's conflicts frequently serve to organize the social group and to strengthen interpersonal alliance (Goodwin, 1990). It is also congruent with Corsaro's studies (1985, 1990, 2001, 2003) that in the process of inclusion and exclusion, children build their social groups, and furthermore, build their social identity within the group.

On the other hand, the success of play initiation also relates to the existing social group, whereby the children belonging to the same group are more likely to join the play. For example, Yu-Yu informed the teacher rather than join Wei-Wei and Fu-Fu (O180918), because Yu-Yu did not belong to Wei-Wei and Fu-Fu's social circle. Sheng-Sheng could easily join Yi-Yi and Yong-Yong because they frequently play together (O271118). Although children tend to participate in underground play of the same social group, children's social group is also frequently reorganizing, enlarging, or converting, like Ting-Ting who successfully joined Xin-Xin and Fu-Fu's running and chasing play (O211218) although Ting-Ting did not belong to Xin-Xin and Fu-Fu's circle. It provides teachers an opportunity to re-organize children's social groups and break up possible hierarchical groups in the classroom.

VI. Implications for Early Childhood Education

In the process of socialization, school teachers play a crucial guide for children to develop positive interpersonal relationships. When a child uses a certain power over other children, a relation of superordinate and subordinate might germinate in the classroom. If the children have never been taught, then they may think such a relationship is allowed in the classroom. If these behaviors appear repeatedly for a period of time, then they will eventually become a part of classroom culture. Furthermore, children internalize what they have observed, and someday they may have learned the “strategies” to oppress others. On the other hand, when children group their social circles through inclusion and exclusion, some children may keep on being rejected. The teacher, in addition to helping these children being accepted, also needs to appropriately intervene in children's social grouping to avoid asymmetrical power relations among groups. According to the findings, this study provides the following suggestions for early childhood education.

A. Teacher's Role for Children's Socialization

The children who are in underground play are escaping from the adults' supervision and enjoying their play. When children are confronted with conflicts, they use the teacher's role and false statement to threaten others. When the teacher happens to appear in children's underground play, she may not understand the whole context. Therefore, the teacher's intervention might have negative effects on children's socialization process. Kai-Kai made up false statements twice without being accused, and Jun-Jun's complaint successfully redirected the teacher's attention. Furthermore, during the event of sweeping crumbs, Yan-Yan's crying made Ting-Ting get a warning. The teacher's intervention made Yan-Yan lose the opportunity to learn the social skills of reading a signal and responding properly.

Underground play is a part of children's joyful life at school that the teachers are unaware of the context of children's underground play. When a teacher steps into children's underground play for any reason, the teacher may make unfair judgement from children's false statement that disturbs children's positive socialization. This study suggests the teachers to avoid of false judgement by allowing children to clarify their situation and rethinking different positions, so as to reshaping interpersonal relationships and resolving conflicts. Furthermore, from the finding of children's social power, it also suggests school teachers to be aware of the hierarchy of social power in class, and to create a fair and altruistic environment for learning.

B. Discussing Physical Triggering in Circle Time

Based on the classroom management of a democratic atmosphere, the participation of underground play requires mutual agreement just like usual play. When disagreement occurs in underground play, there is no time for negotiation. Therefore, understanding signals and responding properly are important for children to join the play. When a child transmits a rejection signal, the initiator should respond properly rather than increase strength or switch to a stronger initiation mode like A-Ting pulling Yong-Yong's mask or Kai-Kai switching to physical triggering. Physical triggering has a compulsive nature. When someone swung a quilt bag at others, children began running and screaming. The researcher asked the running children if they liked the play. Most children said, "No," and declared that they had to run or they would be hit. Regarding children's willingness for play, this study suggests the teacher to bring out physical triggering as an issue to circle time, which allows children to express their opinions and understand how others feel. Therefore, children may modify their behavior from others' perspectives to grow their empathy.

C. Intervention of Children's Socially Grouping

In underground play, children are also recruiting their social groups. On the other hand, children may manipulate social power to get control, and finally, the hierarchical relation may have been germinating among various groups. This study suggests that the teachers occasionally re-group children's social circles so that there are heterogeneous combinations in various activities. Interacting with different partners is beneficial for children to enhance their interpersonal relationships. It also provides chances to break down the hierarchical status of groups in class.

D. Teaching Social Skills

While the teachers reading the study draft, they were surprised that the rich underground play occurred underneath the class, and they completely had no ideas what was going on about the underground play (I180119, I270619). Underground play is superbly fun and exciting because it escapes from adult's guard. While examining the social power, the teachers found that the children frequently manipulating social power to oppress others were also unpopular children in the class (I270619). Through the teachers' reflections, they wished to have taught more social skills in the past year (I270619). Therefore, this study suggests preschool teachers pay attention on children's social behavior of empathy and altruism, and design curricula to enhance children positive socialization by circle time, picture book, socio-dramatic play etc. besides daily routine.

VII. Implications for Studies

A teacher's beliefs affect her curriculum design. If the teacher is inclined toward child-choice making, then her class tends to rely on small collaborative groups, while if the teacher's belief is inclined toward teacher-directed, then her class tends to rely on the whole group of children and is very rule-bound (McMullen et al., 2006). The curriculum is built under the teacher's beliefs, and the teacher's different beliefs construct different curricula that influence children's interaction. Therefore, a study of children's social power and social grouping under different teachers' beliefs is suggested, and the finding can contribute to a teacher training program.

In the study, a five-year-old child said that five-year-olds are the bosses, and a three-year-old child said that I had other friends and I didn't need a five-year-old child's help. There is no obvious age effect in this study except for two five-year-old children (Kai-Kai and Chen-Chen) who repeatedly used the teacher's role to threaten others. Although this study chose a mixed-age class, the findings might be different from a same-age class, because the same-age class is more competitive and less cooperative (Wilson, 1992). Studying young children's social power and socially grouping in the same-age class is also suggested for further study.

Finally, there are different adult-child relationships in the West and the East. Western adult-child relationships are more egalitarian, while eastern ones are more hierarchical (Cho & Cheon, 2005). Therefore, the finding of using the teacher's role to threaten others may not appear in western countries. Further comparative cross-country studies of children's social power are suggested.

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