

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Society & Culture

2nd Edition

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Early Years

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Childforum, New Zealand

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The book covers:

- the dynamics of learning and teaching
- the nature of knowledge
- assessment
- evaluation and quality

This book is essential reading for undergraduate and advanced courses in early childhood studies.

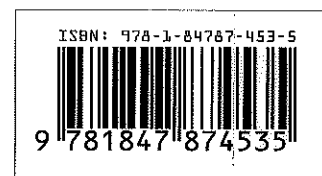
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CHAPTER 4

EXPLORING CRITICAL CONSTRUCTIVIST PERSPECTIVES ON CHILDREN'S LEARNING

Glenda MacNaughton

Introduction

Newborns enter a pre-existing world in which the objects, sounds, movements and smells that they meet have meaning. While they enter our world ignorant of these meanings, this rapidly changes and 'at birth the cultural past is, literally, thrust upon them' (Cole and Wertsch, 1996: 251). Yet, by as early as 4 years of age they have learnt the meanings of many of our cultural artefacts, to construct their own meanings in and through those artefacts and to manipulate meanings according to context.

In this chapter I will explore what Tom, a preschool child, had to say about a simple cultural artefact in his world and the gendered meanings embedded in it for him. Tom's stories arose in an 18-month Australian action research project in preschool services. In this project 12 Australian early childhood teachers and I documented preschool children's gendered play, talked with children about how they understood gender, and explored how gender equity is created in the classroom (see MacNaughton [2000a] for a detailed discussion of this project).

Tom by 4 years of age has learned that perfume bottles have cultural meaning and that those meanings are strongly linked to gender. What he has done with this knowledge is to construct different spaces in which he acts and thinks differently based on that knowledge. How did Tom achieve this complex space in which he could manage two meanings for his perfume bottle and in doing so create his own meanings for the cultural object that he held and talked with me about?

Introducing constructivists

For constructivists knowledge such as that which Tom has constructed is built through our experience of the world (Kincheloe, 2005). We can only imagine what might have happened when Tom first met a perfume bottle, touched it and interacted with it and what happened when he did the same with an aftershave bottle. But he has learnt through these interactions that perfume and aftershave bottles share enough in common for him to be able to 'fool' others through how he names a glass bottle that 'smells' nice.

Tom and the aftershave bottle

Tom is a 4-year-old Anglo-Australian boy who attends an early childhood programme in a predominantly Anglo-Australian middle-class suburban area of Melbourne. His mother is actively encouraging him to be non-sexist. His father is less certain about the need for this and about its impact on Tom.

Tom arrives at the centre clutching a small bottle with a gold top. He rushes over to where I am sitting and excitedly shows me his bottle. The conversation about the bottle unfolds like this:

Glenda: That looks interesting I wonder what it is?

[Tom moves closer to me and he whispers to me]

Tom: It's a perfume bottle. Smell how lovely it is.

[Tom offers me the bottle and I smell it]

[Tom whispers to me]

Tom: Don't tell the other boys it's a perfume bottle. I'll tell them it's an aftershave bottle.

Glenda: Why would you do that?

[Tom smiles at me]

Tom: You know.

I could certainly guess. Particularly when I combined this moment with a conversation we had had a couple of days previously. Then, Tom had told me that he didn't like being a boy because boys hurt other people and kill people lots. But, he didn't want anyone else to know.

Glenda: Whom can we tell about the perfume bottle?

Tom: Just us, I think.

Glenda: What about Carlie?

[Carlie was Tom's teacher. She had an active gender equity programme and often encouraged Tom in his difference.]

Tom: Not today. Maybe, if ... *[fades]*. We might tell her later, then.

What did Tom experience that helped him to construct 'boy' as a person who 'hurts' and 'kills'? Piaget, father of the modern constructivists, might argue that it was through Tom's own direct experience of the world that this knowledge built. For Piaget, as for all constructivists, learning occurs as we as individuals interact with and adapt to our environment.

Children like Tom can do one of two things when they meet a boy who hits others. He can assimilate this experience into prior experiences of boys and if this has included boys hitting other people he can merely add it to his existing knowledge of boys. His knowledge is growing but in ways that do not disrupt or fundamentally alter his knowledge about boys. Or, if this is the first time Tom has seen a boy hit another person, he can accommodate (modify) his existing knowledge of boys and what they do in the light of his new experience. From this traditional Piagetian perspective on meaning construction we need the twin processes of assimilation and accommodation to generate knowledge.

As these processes occur within the individual, Piaget believed that we are capable of constructing our own knowledge (Piaget and Inhelder, 1969). Because Piaget believed that we construct our individual knowledge and meanings of the world through our explorations of it, he is often referred to as an individual constructivist.

Piaget would not be surprised to hear that Tom had given his own meanings to what it means to be a boy and that these meanings differed from those of other boys that Tom knew. For Tom, boys hit, like killing, don't like perfume bottles and do play with aftershave. This is not a common dictionary definition of what it means to be a boy. It is Tom's very own, individual meaning. It is not a classic dictionary definition of 'boy' nor is it a definition that you as an adult would be likely to produce.

However, Tom's definition of being a boy was problematic for Tom because he didn't fit within his own definition. He didn't hit, he didn't like killing and he did like perfume bottles. So, surely he couldn't be a boy? Rather than altering the meaning he created for being a boy, Tom had decided he didn't like being a boy. In doing so, he was beginning to construct a new meaning of who he was – a boy who was not really a boy. In Tom's world of individual meaning construction two sorts of boys existed – ones he didn't like and boys who weren't really boys.

So, if Tom is to build new meanings for being a boy that are more inclusive of himself and to engage in play using these, he will need to do this through his own activity. Tom's teacher would need to find materials that could interest and challenge Tom to rethink his sense of boys and what they do and he or she should allow Tom to solve the problem of different meanings for boys on his own. If the materials offered to him build on the twin processes of accommodation and assimilation then new knowledge will grow, new learning becomes possible and Tom will construct new meanings.

However, one of Piaget's closest theoretical 'relations', Lev Semenovich Vygotsky (1886–1934), would most likely disagree with this tactic. Vygotsky is often referred to as the father of the social constructivists because he gave much greater emphasis to the role of social contexts as drivers in our capacity to construct meaning, seeing 'development as participation in communities of practice' (Burman, 2008: 169).

For Vygotsky, social interactions and social experiences drive what children might learn and the processes through which they can learn (Crain, 2005). Specifically, cognitive development occurs as a result of collaboration between children and the more

experienced others in their environment. Vygotsky believed that knowledge was constructed through 'collaborative cognitive activity' (Vygotsky, 1932: 16) and planned 'assisted discovery' (Berk and Winsler, 1995: 108) with more competent others.

Consequently, for Tom, the way to new meanings about being a boy and new possibilities in his learning as a boy would be in collaboration with others and through planned assisted discovery of new possibilities. Tom's teachers would need to work with Tom to challenge him to rethink his sense of boys and what they do. They could work with Tom to solve the problem of his different meanings for boys.

In contrast, Jürgen Habermas – a key thinker for critical constructivists – would argue that Tom will never be able to construct a 'true' sense of what it means to be a boy until the possibility of power in collaborative activity and assisted discovery is removed. Meaning construction for the critical constructivists is something that we do as individuals but it is always inseparable from our culture and the power relations embedded in our culture (Kincheloe, 2005; MacNaughton, 2005).

Critical constructivists

Hence, for critical constructivists, we have the capacity to construct meaning but those meanings are bounded by our culture and the meanings we construct most often reflect the meanings of those who have the most power within our culture to articulate and circulate meanings (Kincheloe, 2005).

Karl Marx captured the idea that individuals, culture, meaning and power are intimately connected and inseparable in his famous statement: 'Men make their own history but not under conditions of their own choosing'. To understand critical constructivism we can paraphrase this statement and say that: 'Children make their own meanings but not under conditions of their own choosing'. Instead, meanings are distorted, limited and silenced by the conditions in which meaning-making takes place. To illustrate, Tom can make his own meanings for being a boy but not under conditions in which he has chosen what is the normal and proper way to be a boy. Those conditions and understandings of boys were pre-existing at Tom's birth and he met them as he encountered the cultural artefacts and meanings of his particular culture – an Anglo-Australian, middle-class, late twentieth-century culture.

The conditions that most impact on children's learning they do not choose and I call them the conditions of power in what follows. I will now explore four conditions of power (ways of power) that impact on how children construct meaning and therefore on how children learn. I bring these four conditions of power to the fore using social and educational theory that has built from the critical 'isms' of feminism, feminist post-structuralism, postcolonialism and Marxism. The four conditions of power that the critical 'isms' emphasise in their analysis of the social world and the meanings we produce in it are these:

- Condition 1 – the power of pre-existing cultural imagery and cultural meanings
- Condition 2 – the power of expectations

ved that knowledge was (Lewin, 1932: 16) and planned to work with competent others.

being a boy and new positions with others and through which teachers would need to work to understand what they do. They could be doing things for boys.

Critical constructivists – would explore the use of what it means to be a boy and assisted discovery is something that we are aware of and the power relations (MacNaughton, 2005).

to construct meaning but meanings we construct most often are shaped by power within our culture to

meaning and power are intertwined: 'Men make their own history'. To understand critical constructivism that: 'Children make their own history'. Instead, meanings are constructed through which meaning-making takes place. Being a boy but not under control. The proper way to be a boy. Those things that at Tom's birth and he met the norms of his particular culture – culture.

They do not choose and I now explore four conditions to construct meaning and therefore the use of power to the fore using critical 'isms' of feminism, feminism. The four conditions of power within the social world and the meanings

and cultural meanings

- Condition 3 – the power of positions
- Condition 4 – the power of the marketplace.

Children enter a pre-existing world in which each of these conditions of power is already accomplished. They do not choose them and they do not choose to produce their learning within them. Yet children cannot escape producing meaning from within these conditions of power. It is for this reason that critical constructivists argue that we cannot produce any meaning we like. Our meanings are constrained and constructed in and through the dynamics of power.

Condition 1 – the power of pre-existing cultural imagery and cultural meanings

Children are born into a world with a history. For post-structuralists discourse (frameworks for giving meaning to the world) pre-exists each of us. We are born into an already discursive world in which cultural meanings are circulating and are constantly being sustained by cultural imagery and by cultural practices. In Foucault's terms these pre-existing discourses both normalise and regulate us (see MacNaughton, 2005). Through processes of normalisation and regulation we come to learn that certain ways of thinking and acting are natural, normal and preferred. These ways of thinking and acting arise at the intersections of gender, ethnicity, culture, language, social class and sexuality and our understandings and are always touched by these intersections (Ward and Robinson Wood, 2007; Reay 2007; Mellor and Epstein, 2007). We cannot be or think 'outside' of culture because its discourses and structures are pervasive.

For post-structuralists, children enter a pre-existing set of cultural meanings that are constantly reinforced through cultural imagery and cultural practices in ways that make some ways of thinking and being much more likely than others. Let's revisit Tom. Tom is constructing his meanings about being a boy. But they are intimately linked with and restricted to the conditions under which he has been able to access meanings and experiences about being a boy, especially by what is considered the normal way to be a boy.

Think about how possible it is for Tom to access a definition of being a boy that will enable him to include himself in it.

- How many images of boys loving perfume do you see?
- How many times will he be bought perfume as a gift?
- How often will his father wear perfume?
- How often will other boys around him come to kindergarten with a perfume bottle?
- How many times will he and other boys be bought guns/weapons as a gift?
- How often will other boys around him come to kindergarten with a gun?

What chance is there of Tom really constructing his own unique meaning of what it means to be a boy? How could Tom build a meaning for being a boy that ignores the

dominant cultural images of boydom in his time? Could any child escape these images and remain untouched by them and the practices that are represented in and through them? Can any child construct meanings free from gender when gender never frees adults?

Tom didn't choose the particular cultural images and cultural practices about gender that are reinforced daily in his world. He didn't choose the conditions under which he learned about gender. But seeing and hearing from him how these conditions mediate his learning provokes me to ask:

- What are the pre-existing cultural images, meanings and practices that limit how young children learn?
- How might gender constrain the meanings circulating in our early childhood classrooms?
- What ways of being girls and boys are being normalised and regulated through the meanings circulating in our early childhood classrooms?

Condition 2 – the power of expectations

The second condition of power that touches young children's learning is the power of expectations that arises from the pre-existing social structures into which they are born. Social structures such as gender, 'race', class and ability prescribe and limit the possibilities for each of us from birth. Those of us who delimit our possibilities do so only by challenging the expectations of the structures into which we were born. Social structure refers to the 'underlying regularities, or patternings, in how people behave and in the relationships in which they stand with one another' (Giddens, 1989: 19), including the 'repetitions' (Giddens, 1989: 19) in how so many people relate to each other as male and female.

Social structures such as gender, class, 'race', ability and age are inescapable from birth (Burman, 2008; Macnaughton, 2008). The critical constructivists, drawing strongly on a lineage of Marxist thinking, argue that all of us, including children, construct meanings within these pre-existing social structures and that these structures place limits and expectations on how we should think and act (Darder, 2002; Livingstone, 2003).

Let's explore how gender structures work by revisiting Tom.

First some comments from 4-year-old girls in Tom's classroom. Their definitions of boys included the following:

- Boys they hurt you, they will kill you dead.
- Boys they knock your blocks down.
- Boys chase you and kill you.

child escape these images represented in and through her when gender never frees

cultural practices about gender choose the conditions under which from him how these condi-

and practices that limit how learning in our early childhood

and regulated through the means?

children's learning is the power structures into which they are born. Ability prescribe and limit the possibilities do so which we were born. Social meanings, in how people behave another' (Giddens, 1989: 19), many people relate to each

and age are inescapable from social constructivists, drawing on us, including children, contexts and that these structures think and act (Darder, 2002;

Tom.

classroom. Their definitions

Now listen to Sandra, another classmate of Tom's:

Glenda: I noticed in all the pictures I have taken of you playing in the sandpit you never seem to play with any of the boys. Why is that?

[Sandra shrugs her shoulders, grimaces and then laughs. Her laughter indicated I should know why. She then said:]

Sandra: 'Cos they are mean.

Glenda: How are they mean?

Sandra: They pinch your bottom, they pull your hair. *[Thinks for a bit]* ... they knock your blocks over.

Glenda: What do you think you can do about that?

Sandra: I don't like boys, they are not my friends.

Was it accidental that Tom's meanings about boys were shared by so many 4-year-old girls, or that the boys in the following moment of 'free play' with Barbie construct the meanings with her that they do?

Tom is pointing to the Olympic Barbie who is dressed in her tights and says to another boy, 'Take them off'. One of the boys starts stripping the Olympic Barbie. When the doll is naked Willie then grabs it and begins to kiss the Olympic Barbie. He then holds it up to Jamie's lips and makes loud kissing sounds. There are lots of giggles between the boys at this. One of the boys then says, 'Boobies, she's got boobies'. This is followed by lots of collective laughter from the boys. Willie then says to the research assistant, 'Heather look at this'. Heather is being invited by Willie to watch Tom press the naked Barbie's head to Jamie's lips. Jamie is being told by Willie to kiss the Barbie.

Can we reasonably believe that these meanings are merely discovered by Tom as a result of individual exploration?

Critical theorists would argue that Tom's meaning construction was not accidental, nor purely individual but fundamentally mediated in and through the social structures into which he was born. Feminists would emphasise that he was born into a culture where gender structures who we are, what we can reasonably do, and so how we should be. So Tom's meanings are mediated in and through these social structures of gender, class, 'race', age and ability. Cannella (2001), working from within postmodern and postcolonialist perspectives argues that adult/child categories create an ageism that privileges adults' meanings over those of children.

This will ensure that it is never Tom's definitions of being a boy that will enter the dictionary and be part of the pre-existing gender discourses that the next generation

encounters. After all, his meaning is cute, amusing, mistaken – a child's meaning? How could we recast our meanings as adults about boys and subsume them to his?

The point of critical scholarship about meaning construction, whether it is post-modern, postcolonial or post-structuralist feminist, is to explore the effects of our position in the cultural structures we have created on the meanings and possibilities for ourselves we produce and reproduce (Cannella and Viruru, 2004) and to use this as a basis of social reform (Eckersley, 2004). In education, the point of critical constructivism is to explore the effects of cultural and structural positions on how and what children can and do know and learn (Darder, 2002) and to seek to challenge and to change those that work to oppress and discriminate (Kincheloe, 2005).

Moreover, the point is never to lose sight of how gender, 'race', class, etc. mediate learning. Indeed, the point is to ask how this meaning is made possible because of gender, 'race', class and the position of the child and the teacher within these structures. It is the feminists' concern with gender relations that reminds us to search for the effects of gender (MacNaughton, 2008). The Marxists' concern with class relations reminds us to search for the effects of class (Darder, 2002; Kincheloe, 2005). The post-colonialists' concern with 'race' relations reminds us to search for the effects of 'race' and ethnicity (Chambers and Curti, 1996) and to be alert to ongoing processes of colonisation and their effects in children's lives (Cannella and Viruru, 2004). Without these reminders it is easy to ignore that where, when and into which family we were born fundamentally structures what knowledges we access, what experiences we have and therefore what meanings we give to our life.

The point for each of the critical 'isms' is to reflect on how they distort, privilege and silence meanings and to find ways to build teaching and learning relationships that make these distortions, silences and patterns of privilege less likely. For Habermas, as a critical Marxist, it is only once this occurs that we can find freedom and truth in our learning journey (Darder, 2002). For Foucault, as a post-structuralist, it is only once this occurs that we can understand why some meanings are produced and others are silenced and therefore begin work to bring the silenced and marginalised meanings to the centre (Foucault, 1982). For postcolonialists, this requires deep attention to what has been 'othered' and to the effects of the diaspora on what possibilities we can construct for ourselves (Ghandi, 1998). The effects of the diasporic are those effects of colonisation that caused and continue to cause the dispersal of people from their homelands. For feminists the centring of gender in all analysis of social possibilities, including learning, is essential if we are to avoid the gendered silences and patterns of privilege that have dominated the majority of Western theories of the child (Burman, 2008).

Drawing on the critical 'isms' to reflect on young children's learning raises the following questions about teaching and learning processes for early childhood educators:

- What relations of power have already been accomplished between teachers and children and between children and children that distort and silence some meanings and privilege others? What meanings compete in our classrooms for a privileged position?

- How do these impact on the meanings children construct in our classrooms?
- How do these impact on the meanings children choose to share or not in our classrooms?

Condition 3 – the power of positions

The basic premise of the third condition of power is that children construct meanings in situations in which power relations have already been accomplished and in which competing meanings vie for power. As you read the next story, consider what power teachers currently exercise because of their gender, 'race', socioeconomic and ability positions.

In this story, Olivia, a persona doll that I sometimes work with in my research about how young children understand and construct gender, 'race' and class (MacNaughton, 2001), is given a blue badge for her birthday that has a '5' on it. She is so excited by the badge that she wears it to her preschool to show her friends. Her friends laugh at her and say it can't really be her badge because it's blue. We ask the children, 'Do you think that Olivia's friends are right?' The reply in unison from the eight children listening to the story is 'No'. Heather asks, 'Why?' 'Well, girls and boys can wear any colour they like' comes the response, once again in unison. It is clear that the children have been told this regularly by the staff. Heather then asks, 'Why do you think that Olivia's friends said what they did?' The response comes back, 'Because, well, pink's really for girls and blue is really for boys'.

This research moment reminds me how readily children learn to share those meanings with us we want to hear and raises many questions about how this third condition of power might be attended to by adults involved in young children's learning.

- To what extent do the power relationships that have already been accomplished between adults and children, and within that teachers and children, mediate what meanings children construct, and how and when they choose to share them with us?
- Have these children at 4 years of age already learned to silence some meanings and parrot others?
- To what extent do teacher-child relationships come between what a child might learn or share? How do the power relations embedded in teacher-child relationships mediate what a child in your classroom learns and what meanings they construct with you?

More interestingly, how did they come to construct an understanding that:

- you need to tell teachers what they want to hear;
- what the children really think and know about 'blue' and 'pink' is different from what the teachers know;
- their knowledge of blue and pink as children was so obviously right and therefore true.

As children learn to tame their ideas around adults they demonstrate how clearly they understand what adults have hidden. The power of position and the meanings are generated, accepted and therefore recirculated. Drawing on feminist post-structuralist perspectives, Walkerdine (2000) believed that as children learn to tame gendered discourses with adults we ignore the emotion and desire within children that are implicated in their ways of being gendered and their desires to maintain particular gender boundaries, such as those that Tom wants to maintain between his way of being a boy and that of other boys. Walkerdine argued that as we focus on learning in young children and how learning occurs we have established a 'cognitivism' (2000: 13) that ignores the place of emotion and sexuality in children's ways of being and thinking.

Can we make sense of young children's learning and what they choose to share with us as adults, as powerful people in their lives, if we ignore the irrational and emotional in their lives? Or if we ignore how we have placed ourselves in a privileged position over them as meaning-makers?

Condition 4 – the power of the marketplace

The fourth condition of power that it is impossible to escape is that children construct meanings within an increasingly globalised and commodified world in which increasingly narrow cultural meanings are being articulated and circulated. Building from the work of Karl Marx and the Frankfurt School in Germany, critical theorists (see Kincheloe, 2005) are interested in how capitalism in all its changing forms continues to produce 'domination, injustice and subjugation' (Gephart, 1999: 3) that distorts and restricts the knowledge that we construct. That influence begins when a newborn is thrust into a cultural present where globalised capital increasingly commodifies every aspect of social and cultural life. Children's entertainment and the toy industry is just one example of how global capital produces the material culture through which children construct their meanings.

Now, as in no time before, the cultural past is increasingly commodified and access to wealth buys you access to a very different set of cultural artefacts and cultural meanings from those you would access if you lived in poverty. Under these conditions, how can we believe that the knowledge children construct is separate from, innocent of and unmediated by global capital? Capitalism and the global marketplace are conditions of power children did not create but which fundamentally mediate

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their learning. Serious questions emerge that we should attend to when we are trying to make sense of young children's learning:

- What effect does the power of the marketplace have on the meanings that children can construct?
- Can children construct any meanings free from the effects of global capitalism and the commodification of the fashion, entertainment and lifestyle industries?
- What silences does the marketplace produce?

Furthermore, the ways in which the marketplace is shifting the possibilities for children's learning is intimately connected with the access that they have to new technologies (Hughes, 2005; Luke, 2000). For those children born into families where there is insufficient money to purchase what the marketplace offers, learning will be fundamentally different in content and processes from that of those children born into wealthy families.

Conclusion

If we are to understand knowledge production and what makes learning possible we must understand the conditions that limit it and how those conditions impact very specifically on the children that we work with. Critical theorists reject the idea that meaning, knowledge and, therefore, learning is a uniquely individual, value-free cognitive pursuit. Instead they believe that knowledge and thus learning is always social and always embodies ethics, values and politics (Foucault, 1982). It is always accomplished within a dynamic of power and the specific conditions that produce that dynamic will inevitably produce much of what is constructed and learned.