“Everything is dangerous.” Preschool teachers’ discursive practices and children’s positions

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The study of childhood must be able to understand the discourses and practices in which childhood is produced and the way that the positions within those practices are experienced and managed to produce particular configurations of subjectivity.

This paper is an attempt to partially respond to Walkerdine’s call through the analysis of some discursive practices observed in two Polish preschools. The aspect of the practices that I will focus upon is how they contribute to making specific subject positions available to children. From the poststructuralist perspective, discourses are viewed as ways of constituting knowledge, as well as social practices, forms of subjectivity and the power relations embedded within them. Discourses are not merely words; as people engage in actions prompted by particular discourses they create social structures. As Davies notices, these structures have very concrete consequences for individuals who become constrained by them, and the constraints experienced “provide the conceptual framework, the psychic patterns, the emotions through which individuals position themselves in relation to the social world.” In other words, the discourses, or more specifically discursive practices in which people engage, produce subject positions to take up. They define where we stand and how we can act. Davies and Harré claim that “[o]nce having taken up a particular position as one’s own, a person inevitably sees the world from the vantage point of that position and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, story lines and concepts which are made relevant within the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned.” Making particular subject positions available to children means therefore that specific ways of perceiving themselves and others, thinking, and acting, open up or close down for them.

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1 This article is a modified version of an excerpt from my PhD dissertation: K. Gawlicz, Preschools Play with Power: Constructing the Child, the Teacher and the Preschool in Two Polish Childcare Institutions. Graduate School in Lifelong Learning, Roskilde University, 2009. The article was completed during my fellowship at the GEXcel Gender Excellence Center at Linköping University, Sweden, and I am grateful for the support I received.


In Davies and Harré’s approach, the notion of positioning is important insofar as it enables one to concentrate on the dynamic dimensions of encounters and to demonstrate how individuals actively constitute themselves as subjects through a continuous process of responding to varied and often contradictory discourses. The discussion I undertake in this paper can therefore be considered only one step in the analysis of the process of positioning in preschools. For the most part I do not focus on the ways in which children reacted to the subject positions made available to them or established alternative positions themselves; instead, I want to identify the positions that opened up for children as a result of discursive practices operating in the preschools, and reflect on their potential consequences. I also argue that the specific subject positions made available contributed to the development of a normative construction of the child; the ideal of a proper preschooler that the children were supposed to take on as their own.

Furthermore, I reconstruct these subject positions (and the normative ideal of the child) not through listening to what the teachers had to say about how they perceived children and what they wanted them to be like, but through examining everyday practice. The focus on what is actually happening and being said can help bring to light those dimensions of life in the preschool that tend to disappear from teachers’ reflections. These are dimensions that dominant discourses of the child, the adult and the preschool institution have rendered obvious, natural, unquestionable and thus transparent. By scrutinizing everyday practice, they become visible and can be problematized.

The empirical material this analysis is based upon comes from research on power relations in two public preschools in one of largest Polish cities. In each preschool I followed one group of children over a period of 2.5 years. The preschools differed by their location and the socioeconomic background of the children enrolled. Preschool A was situated in a rather poor, destitute neighborhood. Many of the children enrolled lived in economically disadvantaged families and had parents with only a high school or vocational school education. According to the teachers, several children experienced serious emotional distress. Preschool B was located in one of the most attractive and affluent districts and was attended by children of professionals, academics and company owners from both the neighborhood and new residential areas on the outskirts of the city.

The subject positions constructed through everyday practice in the preschools are complex and contradictory. Here I want to concentrate only on some of them, and in particular on those that are entirely missing from, and even at odds with, explicit formulations of the ideal of the child. I will reconstruct them through examining discursive practices centered around two notions: the “well-behaved child” and the “self-reflecting child.”

**Discursive practices centered around the notion of the “well-behaved child”**

Ms. Zosia: “Scooby Doo, please sit down, I don’t want to see you with your legs up. Good. OK. Ms. Zosia is speaking. What do we agree on? Can I talk with the children? Look! Piękna is the one who sits most politely and most beautifully. Follow her example. (Piękna is sitting with her back upright, keeping her finger on her mouth, looking around with a happy face.) See how nicely she is playing. I can talk with such a girl.” (Preschool A, field notes)

Official preschool documents, such as bylaws, mission statements, educational programs or curriculum plans, communicated explicitly what the children should be like, what they should learn and achieve, and how the preschool institution is supposed to assist.
them in this. Clear references were made to the need to ensure the all-around development of the child and create conditions in which children could develop their “unique personalities” in accordance with their inborn potential. If this is the task the preschool institution is charged with, then this focus is surprisingly missing from the snippet of the teacher quoted above – one of numerous examples of its kind. Rather than children developing their potential, here we encounter children who are learning how to control and constrain their bodies – sitting straight, without fidgeting, not saying a word, immobilized. Strangely enough, this kind of posture is called “playing” and the girl who adopts it to the fullest is singled out by the teacher and rewarded by being granted her attention: “I can talk with such a girl,” says Ms. Zosia. But it is the term “politely” that I want to emphasize here as it refers to one of the most conspicuous dimensions of the discursive construction of a preschooler. Children in both preschools were supposed to behave well, and the category of a “good” or “polite” child (or behavior, action, posture, etc.) was evoked in numerous contexts. It could be explicitly presented as an ideal the children should aspire to or as a competence they were expected to acquire before moving to primary school. But the notion of “well-behaved” does not have any stable, intrinsic meaning; instead, it is defined by social actors drawing on their idea of what a child should be like as their resource. “Well-behaved” children constituted through everyday practice in the preschools had to obey their teachers and do what they were told to do; they also had to do the right thing at the right moment. Especially striking was the emphasis on being quiet: children needed to play in silence, eat in silence, sit in silence. In fact, in one incident a Preschool A teacher instructed children to “play very quietly as if you weren’t in the room,” which brings forth a rather disturbing image of a preschool with no kids. Discursive practices that centered around the notion of a “good,” “polite” child entailed a very specific subject position: of a child who is constrained, disciplined, obedient and closely watches their actions. Piękna’s example is instructive here. With her finger on her mouth, she became the embodiment of the “good girl.” The readiness with which she took up this position and the contentment emanating from her body point to her awareness of the existence of this kind of positioning and the pleasure that adopting it produced. Piękna’s knowledge of the meaning of the notion of a good child is embodied, but children could also easily explain the categories of well-behaved and misbehaved children:

- Robot Boy: [Well-behaved children] obey the teacher, eat politely, they don’t jump on the gym ladder, don’t hit other children, don’t push, don’t shout… (Preschool B)
- Kacper: Well-behaved children don’t interrupt at all and don’t fight at all, but do what the teacher asks them to do. (Preschool B)
- Harry: A well-behaved child is one who listens to the teacher very closely.
- Dorota: A well-behaved child plays quietly and…
- Maks: And will say ‘thank you’ when they get a candy.
- Dorota: And doesn’t beat kids. And plays with others, shares toys, and cleans up nicely and draws.
- KG: And misbehaved children?
- Dorota: Misbehaved children beat up kids, don’t eat, beat up kids.
- Maks: Show their teeth, show their tongue, beat up kids, pinch kids, scratch kids, lie.
- Dorota: And spread soap on them, and pee on the floor. (Preschool A)
The need to listen to and obey teachers recurs, which indicates that obedience was an important feature of the ideal of a proper preschooler. It also points to the existence of hierarchical power structures in those institutions where adult professionals have the right to give orders to children, who in turn are expected to follow them without arguing. The kids were frequently reminded that they were “not to discuss” with the teacher matters such as where to sit, stand or when to eat or go to wash their hands. In one rather telling incident in Preschool B, when a child did not want to give away her crayon, Ms. Patrycja told her: “OK, so please go to the other room. You feel like having a crayon, and I feel like you should go to the other room” and then added for the whole group: “There are people who think that they can do whatever they feel like doing.”

In his *Security, Territory, Population* Foucault discusses the concept of the pastorate. Of its particular importance to Christianity, this concept was defined by the principle of “pure obedience” that assumes the complete subordination of the sheep, i.e., someone to be guided, to a shepherd or a pastor who is to direct it. As Foucault says, this is a relationship in which one individual submits to another, not on the basis of any kind of a law, justified regulations or reason, but precisely because of the individual character of the relationship. It is this kind of positioning that rendered the teachers’ practices a very common feature of everyday preschool life. Like novices in a monastery whose perfection meant that doing anything without having been explicitly told so was perceived as an error, children had to wait for an order (or permission) and could be scolded for doing anything of their own free will:

The girls have finished eating. They rhythmically ask in unison: “Can-we-move-from-the-table?” The teacher tells them to stay. (Preschool B, field notes)

One of the kids wants to join in a conversation. The teacher: “Did I allow you to speak? Wait.” (Preschool A, field notes)

In both institutions good preschoolers were expected to contribute to keeping the classroom clean and tidy, and this obligation opened up a number of subject positions for children to take. One of them related to the role that the cleanliness obligation played in preventing children from playing the way they wanted to if this might entail creating disorder. In one incident, an aide in Preschool B complained about boys taking books from a shelf: she had just “tidied up the books, and the boys again made such a mess there.” In another situation Preschool A children were forbidden to play on the carpet because it had already been vacuumed. Such practices contribute to the construction of the subject position of a child who is expected to restrain themselves, adjust their activities to the requirements of the preschool, and to some extent sacrifice their needs and interests for the sake of the smooth perpetuation of the institution. It is also the child who is well-aware of their subordinate status that entails quietly complying with even the most groundless instructions of the adults.

The emphasis on keeping order could have specific consequences for the positioning of girls, as in this incident:

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7 Ibid., p. 228-9.
There are some toys, mostly dolls and their accessories, in the kitchen corner. The teacher notices them and tells a group of girls: “Girls, the corner is not tidied up.” Then, having noticed that the dolls’ clothes are taken off, she adds: “Aren’t you ashamed? Aren’t you girls ashamed that your dolls are naked?” The girls protest unconvincingly and try to explain that they have not played with the dolls, but the teacher shouts: “Am I supposed to put your toys away?!” (Preschool A, field notes)

The girls are positioned as responsible for maintaining order and their attempts to resist this kind of positioning are dismissed. Moreover, by making them responsible for cleaning up the kitchen corner and putting dolls away, thus assuming that they had played there, the teacher positions them within a very narrow and limited understanding of what girls can and like to do. This kind of positioning has a clear emotional dimension: the girls are expected to be ashamed of not taking care of their dolls properly, and – more precisely – of allowing the dolls’ naked bodies to stay exposed. Drawing a link between the girls’ feelings of shame and naked bodies (even if only dolls’ bodies) can be interpreted as a practice contributing to the positioning of girls as modest, innocent and having nothing to do (and not wanting to have anything to do) with sexuality.

Somewhat different kinds of subject positions emerged in relation to the ability to cooperate with others as a characteristic of the well-behaved child. This feature was stressed in particular in Preschool B, where the teachers often drew the children’s attention to the importance of being nice to each other, sharing toys and sweets, or playing peacefully and refraining from fights. Furthermore, one of the teachers strongly emphasized the need for children to become aware of the impact of their behavior on their peers. This is how she characterized a child who appeared to be well-behaved, but in her view was not:

This well-behaved child sometimes misbehaves. And it is not that she makes trouble, disturbs children, fights – she simply doesn’t abide by the group regulations, which makes other children feel rejected and causes resentment and conflicts. And nothing really happens to anyone, nobody calls anyone names, but because she rejects children, selects children, picks out children, the situation in the group gets awkward because children are resentful, some cry... No physical harm is being inflicted there, no apparent harm, but there is inner resentment. So generally speaking she is a well-behaved child, but her behavior makes other children upset. (Ms. Agnieszka, Preschool B, interview)

It is worth noticing that the subject position that Ms. Agnieszka constructs here is highly gendered. What she expects of a good preschool child is what is socially expected of women: to be empathetic, sensitive and take others’ feelings and emotions into consideration. The child fails as a good girl; she is not guilty of fighting with or physically hurting other children – what bad boys might be doing – but of not being caring and loving enough. The fact that Ms. Agnieszka gave this example when a well-behaved child was inquired about may suggest that a “good child” was indeed conceived as a “good girl.”

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8 This is not to imply that only girls were positioned as responsible for cleaning in the preschool. The teachers insisted that all children participate in cleaning, although it frequently happened that girls did most of it.

9 However, my conversation with Preschool A children quoted earlier clearly shows that they were also aware of the need to get along with other children and be nice to each other.
In Preschool A well-behaved children were also positioned as the preschool’s citizens or hosts, expected to take responsibility for the preschool. One of the teachers put it this way:

Oftentimes moms would say: There is such order here in this room, it is so very tidy here. And I would say: Well, there are hosts here. (Ms. Małgorzata, Preschool A, interview)

Another teacher reminded the children who were getting ready for a performance that they had to represent the preschool properly:

Ms. Zosia tells the kids that all the parents will come in the afternoon, that the kids will make presents for them, and the parents will come to see “what beautiful actors you are, the citizens of this preschool, mature hosts, responsible, and how nicely you will present yourselves.” (Preschool A, fieldnotes)

This is a very interesting discursive practice. It makes children appear to be fully-fledged members of the preschool, entirely identified with it, as well as responsible, reliable and trustworthy. They are supposed to represent the preschool in an appropriate manner and the teachers seem confident that they will play their role properly and will not be a source of embarrassment. This kind of positioning, however, appears problematic given the fact that Preschool A children’s influence on their lives was minimal. It is quite possible that children who are usually refused any say in what to do in the preschool and how to do it would experience such a positioning as confusing, although it could also be argued that this discursive practice worked to create the child’s sense of identification with the preschool with the purpose of making them perform better.

As this discussion shows, the discursive practices centered around the category of the good, well-behaved child made a number of different subject positions available for the children to take up. Significantly, however, most of them contributed to constituting the child as subordinated, docile, “reined in”; as someone who has to obey powerful adults/teachers and cannot rebel. Further, it is the child who achieves mastery in following rules and who can ignore their own needs for the purpose of conforming to a predefined order. If taken up by the children – and this would frequently happen – these subject positions are disquietingly at odds with the stated ideal of the child. Discouraged from acting in their own interests and preferences because this would mean making a mess, children may find it difficult to establish themselves as independent, and being allowed to do only what they are told to do, they would have to strive very hard to become creative and resourceful. Symptomatically, a Preschool A girl asked what happens when a teacher tells her to do something she does not feel like doing, said: “I do what the teacher tells me to do. And I don’t listen to myself, but I only listen to the teacher.”

**Discursive practices centered around the notion of the self-reflecting child**

KG: What happens when kids misbehave in the preschool?

Harry: The teacher tells them to go stand in a corner so that they think over what they should do and what not to do. (Preschool A, field notes)

Two assumptions have been fundamental to the so-called new understanding of children. One is the idea that children are capable of reflecting on themselves and that they can act
upon the outcome of such introspection. Second is the conviction that pedagogical practice has to be grounded in the recognition of children as agents having the right to express their opinions, and for those opinions to be taken into consideration\(^\text{10}\). While at first sight appearing to open up the possibility for children to have an impact on their everyday lives in the educational institution rather than only being subject to adult decisions, the emphasis on self-reflection and self-regulation may turn into a disciplinary technology. In the early childhood education context, taking responsibility for one’s own learning and social development comes to be seen as a competence children are demanded to develop\(^\text{11}\). Self-introspection was also expected of children in my research, which may appear surprising given the strong emphasis put on obeying teachers and acting according to their instructions. However, its object was rather strictly and narrowly defined: children’s own behavior in relation to existing norms and regulations – and specifically the instances of their breaking them. For this reason the practice of self-reflection is closely linked with the notion of the well-behaved child.

The practice of self-reflection has its roots in the ancient Greek tradition of self-examination whose aim was to review and memorize the correct goals and rules of conduct for the sake of the perfection of one’s behavior\(^\text{12}\). The self-reflection that the preschoolers were expected to carry out resembles this practice:

Mateusz and Alina are running around the classroom. The teacher tells them to come to her and asks them what they are not to do. They say: “We are not to run.” The teacher: “So if you know that, sit down for 5 minutes, one of you here, and the other one over there, to think it over.” (Preschool B, field notes)

The purpose of “thinking it over” was to make sure that one remembered regulations concerning good behavior in the preschool and to evaluate one’s own actions in light of them. Seldom did this introspection encompass reflecting on one’s feelings and needs, and even less often doing so with the intention of planning one’s activities. Children rarely had the opportunity to talk about their emotions or interests, and when it did happen, not all their feelings could always be expressed. For instance, a teacher did not react at all to a child who, while talking about his experience of a relaxation activity, said that he felt bad. The teacher ignored a statement that clearly was at odds with the intended objective of the activity, which was to discover that it was nicer to calm down and relax than to shout. Introspection turned into a practice whereby the children could learn to what extent they had mastered the competence of subordinating their interests and preferences to the


regulations and objectives set out by others, and therefore further contributed to the construction of the obedient child. Moreover, the following exchange shows that the children’s capacity to reflect on themselves could be doubted so they needed an external point of reference:

Ms. Zosia: Do you know what you are being punished for? How many times did I instruct you and you still couldn’t behave and play? Did you count? I gave you five warnings and you just went on. So, are you going to work on yourself? (Sebastian nods.) In what way? (Inaudible.) Who do you promise this to? To the ladybird (there is an image of a ladybird on the wall) or to the teacher?

Sebastian: The teacher. (Preschool A, field notes)

Here the child is positioned as weak, incompetent and unreliable, who thus has to be overseen by a powerful adult who will notice all misdemeanors and inflict a penalty when necessary. Interestingly, Sebastian’s misbehavior is constructed here as a lack of ability (“I instructed you and you still couldn’t behave and play”) rather than resistance. He is refused the position of someone who does know the regulations, but purposefully breaks them, which denies him agency.

With the inability to follow the teacher’s instructions as a sign of incompetence, the desired subject position for children to take was one of a child who can control their behavior, not only in the sense of monitoring it, but also of being able to refrain from certain actions. The children in both preschools were expected to develop the ability to prevent themselves from getting involved in undesirable activities, and were rewarded or punished for their performance: either symbolically, with an appropriate sign on the evaluation chart in Preschool B, or in a more literal sense:

Ms. Zosia tells Harcon to behave well. He will get a personal reward from her, but his good behavior must continue until Friday. The same goes for Subaru and Scooby Doo. Then she tells Subaru to clean up nicely and to watch his step. She repeats “watch your step” several times to all three boys. (Preschool A, field notes)

Monitoring one’s behavior and stopping oneself from doing what was deemed inappropriate was part of a more general practice of self-control that covered multiple dimensions of the children’s everyday lives in the preschool. Children were required to control their bodies: not only how they moved, but also their physiology (e.g. using the toilet or eating and drinking when allowed or required, irrespective of whether they needed it or not) and emotions. They could not express their excitement too enthusiastically and had to make sure they did not get so involved in their play that they failed to remember to keep their voices down. Situations when the children were criticized for giving full expression to their emotions were numerous and could include anything from dancing dynamically to lively music, to running in my direction to give me a hug when I entered the room, to saying that they did not want to eat their meal. “Calm down” or “stop making yourself wound up” were common responses to such behavior. Such practices contributed to positioning children as composed, controlled and, in a sense, mature and distant.

In Preschool B, however, there was another dimension to the practice of reflecting and working on oneself. Just as in the case of the construction of the well-behaved child, its main object was the child’s performance as a group member. Moreover, it became a formalized practice. The group teacher introduced a number of tools whose purpose was
for the children to evaluate themselves and assign themselves a color or symbol corresponding to their performance. This is how the teacher summarized this practice:

The children assigned themselves colors on the basis of their behavior. It was not the group assessing them, it was each and every child assessing himself or herself ... what did I do well today, what did I do that was bad; did I hurt anyone, was I able to play in peace, not to quarrel. So that the kids start to realize that certain types of behavior result in the specific reactions of others. (Ms. Agnieszka, Preschool B, interview)

Children are constituted here as reflexive ethical subjects who can recall and assess their own deeds in light of the regulations, but also in terms of their moral weight. They are positioned as members of a group with a good deal of responsibility for the well-being of others. An important (if not the principal) objective of the assessment sessions was for the children to realize what kind of impact their actions had on others with the purpose of improving relationships within the group. In fact the teacher made such a purpose explicit. When children were complaining a lot about some of their peers during one assessment session, she said: “You seem to be very happy when someone gets a black mark. And the point is that all children behave well and we all feel good.” Thus, the intention behind the requirement that children work on themselves was not only that they improve themselves, but also that their community becomes better. The children were expected to control their behavior not for the sake of blindly following a rule, but in order to avoid hurting others. This kind of positioning of children as members of a collective, responsible for ensuring that everyone feels well and welcomed in the group was emphasized in the middle-class Preschool B and was almost entirely missing from the working-class Preschool A. The position of the child as obedient, knowing and following the rules, while present in both places, was particularly pronounced in Preschool A, where the emphasis was also on self-reflection as a means of perfecting one’s knowledge of regulations for its own sake. While it is not possible to generalize from these two cases, these differences suggest that social class plays a role in the positioning of children.

Is the proper preschooler a girl?

Davies claims that children operate within a discourse of the male-female binary, in which femininity is identified with weakness and subordination to masculinity, which is in turn associated with power. She demonstrates how children feel compelled to achieve such positions in order to appear socially competent. At the same time, however, children in general are positioned as subordinate in relation to adults – or, more precisely, adults often attempt to position them as subordinate. The parallels between discursive constructions of femininity and childhood are striking, and indeed Burman posits that the category of childhood has been culturally constructed as feminine through associations with vulnerability, a need for care and protection, and passivity. As the analysis of subject positions made available for children in my research indicates, what emerges from preschool practices centered around the notions of a well-behaved child and a self-reflecting...

13 Davies, Frogs and Snails and Feminist Tales...
and self-controlled child is the ideal of the submissive, obedient, powerless person who is sensitive to the needs of others and willing to yield to others, which closely resembles the understanding of femininity in the discourse of the male-female binary. Furthermore, young children in Francis’ research tended to take up polarized positions of the “sensible selfless” and “silly selfish”\(^\text{15}\). The former is feminine: “maturity, obedience and neatness are the valued ‘sensible’ qualities, which naturally lead to ‘selflessness’ – giving and facilitating”\(^\text{16}\). The latter is masculine, and is characterized by “immaturity, messiness and naughtiness, leading to ‘selfishness’ – taking and demanding”\(^\text{17}\). Well-behaved and self-reflecting children constructed through preschool teachers’ discursive practices are clearly approaching the sensible selfless ideal.

If the proper child positioned through discursive practices organized around the notions of a good behavior and self-reflection was constructed as a girl, this could have very specific consequences for boys. Given the importance for children of properly positioning oneself as a girl or a boy, the boys’ resistance and misbehavior could be possibly recognized as an attempt to position themselves as properly masculine. However, my research also suggests that this kind of gendered construction of a proper preschooler had rather problematic consequences for girls, and in particular for those in Preschool A. With the focus on obedience, quietness and subordination the positioning of the proper child as a girl was clear, yet girls often tended to be criticized for being sluggish, lacking spirit or behaving like a “sleeping beauty,” i.e. for fully taking up the position of a well-behaved child. However, they could also be denounced for not yielding to boys or engaging in arguments or fights. This suggests that the girls faced a very difficult task of skillfully balancing and negotiating their positioning if they wanted to appear to be good preschoolers/girls.

**Conclusion**

One could argue that paying so much attention to what teachers say is unnecessary. After all, we all say things without giving them too much thought. “I might have said something like that, but I don’t even know if the children remember it,” answered a Preschool B teacher when I asked her if she had told the boys in her group to play first on the computer, and the girls to wait. Not only did the children remember it well, but also used her words as a resource to position themselves in such a way that boys appeared dominant and powerful, and girls became marginalized. Discursive practices are not innocuous. Easily dismissed as just words, they have very specific, almost tangible consequences. Discursive practices that provide subject positions for children enable them to make meaning of their experience in one way or another, depending on how they are positioned. When the emphasis is put on strictly following rules, promising to the teacher that one would work on one’s behavior, and controlling one’s bodily activity to the point of becoming immobilized and mute, children can easily experience themselves as inferior, subordinated, unimportant and inept. Perhaps it is not accidental that I frequently heard Preschool A children say “I don’t know how to do this.”


\(^\text{16}\) Ibid.

\(^\text{17}\) Ibid.
Moreover, it is important to remember that unconscious story lines, as Davies names them, may thwart ambitious plans. She describes a teacher who explicitly claimed that he wanted to provide his students with skills that would enable them to challenge or even change society, yet who still differently positioned boys and girls, constructing the former as active and powerful, and the latter as weak and vulnerable\textsuperscript{18}. Preschool teachers may be truly devoted to ensuring that children develop their potential and cultivate their abilities and talents, and at the same time prevent them from doing so by engaging in discursive practices that make such achievements impossible. This points directly to the need for teachers to reflect on their own practices, to stop and consider the potential consequences of what they do and say. As the oft-quoted Foucaultian line states, „everything is dangerous”\textsuperscript{19} including – or beginning with – practices we believe we know so well.

Finally, to finish on a more positive note, as Weedon points out, discourses offer other subject positions besides the dominant one, including positions that may eventually reverse a given discourse\textsuperscript{20}. Opposing positioning is possible, although it can be difficult and painful. Moreover, children constantly resist being positioned as weak, inferior and marginalized. Although some will take up the position of a submissive, subordinated and docile child, others will try to seek alternative positionings that will give them more sense of control over their lives. This, however, should not be an excuse for the teachers not to seriously grapple with their own practices and their consequences.

**Summary**

“Everything is dangerous”. Preschool teachers’ discursive practices and children’s positions

Drawing on data from ethnographic research in two Polish preschools and taking a poststructuralist perspective as its interpretational framework, this paper examines the ways in which teachers’ discursive practices centered around notions of the well-behaved child and the self-reflecting child, worked to position children. These discursive practices appeared to constitute the children as obedient and quiet, as knowing the rules and regulations, of doing only what they were told to do, of being capable of controlling their bodies and behavior, and accepting hierarchies and authority, rather than developing their own “unique personalities” as stated in the official preschool documents. However, one of the preschools, with children enrolled from the middle-class, also positioned them as moral subjects capable of taking into consideration the needs and feelings of others as well as being responsible for their peers’ well-being. Furthermore, the dominant positioning was gendered, as the submissive, passive and powerless child corresponded closely to common understandings of femininity. Discursive practices that teachers engage in may position children in ways that are very different from the teachers’ intentions, often becoming problematic. The paper therefore emphasizes the importance for teachers to reflect upon their discursive practices and to become aware of what they may bring about because of them.


\textsuperscript{20} Ch. Weedon, *Feminist Practice...*, p. 106.