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Reclaiming Freedom in Play: A Critical Review of Early Childhood Education Discourse

Salsabila Rizqi Ramadhanty Alisa,^{*} Deasylina da Ary, Yuli Kurniawati Sugiyo Pranoto, and Ali For-men

Universitas Negeri Semarang, Semarang, Indonesia

^{*}Corresponding author: salsabilarizqira@students.unnes.ac.id

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Abstract

This study critically examines how the concept of Free Play has been constructed, represented, and contested within early childhood education (ECE) discourses between 2019 and 2025. Using a Critical Literature Review grounded in Teun A. van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this study investigates how language and ideology shape understandings of play, freedom, and childhood across global and local contexts, not only as a methodological approach but also as a form of critical ideology deconstruction. 25 peer-reviewed articles were analyzed from Scopus, Taylor Francis, ERIC, and SINTA databases, focusing on themes of play-based learning, child agency, and educational policy. Findings reveal four dominant themes. First, the academicization and instrumentalization of play illustrate how play is reframed as a tool for academic achievement, reducing its intrinsic value. Second, the negotiation of teacher authority and child agency highlights the tension between adult control and children's autonomy in play-based settings. Third, cultural contextualization of play demonstrates that meanings of play are embedded within moral and social values, differing across Western and non-Western traditions. Lastly, the ideological reconstruction of freedom exposes how policy rhetoric about autonomy and creativity often conceals regulatory control through assessments and standards. This study concludes that Free Play operates as a contested discursive field shaped by educational ideologies, institutional pressures, and cultural contexts. Reclaiming freedom in play requires reorienting pedagogy toward child-centered practices that value agency, participation, and human dignity. The findings offer implications for educators and policymakers seeking to align early education with democratic and inclusive values.

Keywords: Free Play, Critical Discourse Analysis, Early Childhood Education, Child Agency, Play-Based Learning

1. Introduction

In the evolving landscape of global education, the philosophy of Early Childhood Education (ECE) has progressively shifted from a focus on academic preparedness toward a more holistic, child-centered approach [1, 2]. Contemporary research and policy frameworks underscore the significance of viewing children as active participants in their own learning processes, rather than as pas-

sive recipients of knowledge [3, 4]. This pedagogical reorientation aligns with the global movement advocating for education grounded in the principles of democracy, inclusivity, and human rights.

Within this broader paradigm, free play—defined as spontaneous, self-directed, and intrinsically motivated play initiated by the child—has emerged as a cornerstone of early childhood pedagogy [5, 6]. It constitutes a vital modality of learning through which children explore their environments, develop autonomy, and construct personal meaning.

Play is globally acknowledged not only as a developmental necessity but also as a fundamental right, as articulated in international instruments such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) [7]. Within this framework, play functions not merely as recreation but as a critical process underpinning emotional, cognitive, and social development [8]. Furthermore, in the contemporary discourse on multilingual and intercultural education, play is increasingly recognized as a dynamic medium for language acquisition and the development of learner agency. It enables children to negotiate meanings, construct identities, and engage in authentic communicative interactions [9].

The recognition of play as a human right has been formally enshrined in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [10] which asserts that every child has the right to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to their age. This acknowledgment underscores play not merely as a developmental tool but as an expression of freedom, creativity, and agency [11, 12]. Scholars argue that Free Play allows children to exercise decision-making, negotiate social relationships, and express imagination beyond the confines of adult-imposed structures [13, 14]. Engagement in play enables children to cultivate emotional regulation, enhance problem-solving competencies, and exercise behavioral self-control, underscoring the dual cognitive and socio-emotional functions of play [6, 15].

A growing body of empirical research has demonstrated that the benefits of free play extend well beyond mere entertainment, exerting significant influence on children's creativity, executive functioning, and self-regulation [5, 16]. Engagement in play-based activities fosters neural development, stimulates curiosity, and enhances social competence [17, 18]. Furthermore, play as a democratic practice resonates with constructivist and sociocultural theories of learning, particularly those advanced by Vygotsky and Dewey, which conceptualize learning as an interactive and participatory process situated within social and cultural contexts. When children are provided with authentic opportunities for free play, they not only acquire cognitive and social skills but also cultivate an intrinsic sense of belonging and agency—qualities that are foundational to the development of democratic citizenship [3, 4]. An intrinsic sense of belonging and agency qualities fundamental to democratic citizenship [3, 4].

However, despite its theoretical and developmental significance, the implementation of Free Play in formal ECE settings remains highly inconsistent. In many institutional contexts, play is still regarded as a supplementary or recreational activity, secondary to "real learning" [19, 20]. The dominance of accountability systems and standardized curricula often forces teachers to align play with measurable academic outcomes, thereby reducing its spontaneity [21, 22]. This pedagogical paradox between the ideal of child autonomy and the reality of institutional control illustrates how educational ideologies shape practice. Even when teachers recognize the developmental importance of play, they frequently encounter administrative pressures to justify learning in terms of quantifiable results [13, 23]. Consequently, Free Play becomes "structured freedom," mediated by adult agendas and constrained by time, space, and curriculum guidelines.

The implementation of free play is inherently complex, particularly within developing contexts where social, cultural, and economic factors exert a substantial influence on pedagogical practices [24, 25]. In Indonesia, for example, although the Merdeka Belajar ("Freedom to Learn") policy aspires to foster creativity and flexibility in education, its extension into Merdeka Bermain ("Freedom to

Play") remains largely rhetorical and underdeveloped in practice [18, 21]. Teachers frequently navigate a dual system of expectations—balancing the imperative to encourage creative exploration with the obligation to uphold classroom discipline and satisfy parental demands for academic achievement [26]. Moreover, deeply rooted cultural values emphasizing obedience, collectivism, and respect for authority may unintentionally constrain opportunities for authentic free play experiences [27]. These socio-cultural dynamics underscore the interdependence between educational practice and the broader ideological and moral frameworks within which it operates [1, 13].

The discrepancy between policy rhetoric and pedagogical reality exposes the underlying power relations embedded within educational discourse. As Teun A. van Dijk [28] contends, discourse not only reflects but also constructs social structures by embedding ideological assumptions within language. The manner in which teachers, policymakers, and scholars articulate the concept of free play significantly shapes how it is interpreted, implemented, and valued in educational settings. For instance, framing play as "productive" or "educationally useful" tends to privilege adult-centered perspectives, thereby marginalizing children's voices and lived experiences [2, 3]. In this regard, free play should not be viewed as a neutral pedagogical practice but rather as a contested domain where competing ideologies—such as control versus freedom and standardization versus agency—are continuously negotiated [5, 12].

Despite the growing attention to Free Play in early childhood education research, few studies have critically examined how the concept is discursively constructed across diverse educational and cultural contexts. Most existing works focus primarily on developmental or pedagogical outcomes, overlooking the ideological dimensions that shape teachers' and policymakers' understandings of play. Therefore, the gap this paper addresses lies in the limited application of critical discourse perspectives to uncover how language and ideology construct, constrain, and reframe the notion of Free Play in early childhood education discourses published between 2019 and 2025.

Given this theoretical and contextual complexity, there is a pressing need for critical inquiry that examines Free Play not merely as an instructional method but as a discourse shaped by power, policy, and culture. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as conceptualized by van Dijk [28] provides a valuable lens to uncover how linguistic choices and institutional narratives sustain particular ideologies about childhood, learning, and authority. By applying CDA, this study seeks to map how Free Play has been represented, normalized, or challenged in scholarly discussions between 2019 and 2025. It explores how these discourses influence teacher cognition, curriculum design, and children's everyday experiences in ECE settings, particularly in the Global South where educational reforms often intersect with postcolonial realities [12, 18].

Therefore, this review aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To critically analyze the representation of Free Play
2. To identify the ideological constructs shaping policy
3. To explore how discourses impacts child agency

Ultimately, this review positions Free Play as both a pedagogical practice and a political act. Reclaiming freedom in play means challenging the hidden ideologies that restrict children's autonomy and redefining the purpose of early education itself. It calls for teacher empowerment through critical pedagogy, policy contextualization that honors local culture, and a reorientation of curriculum goals toward human development rather than academic compliance [21, 27]. By critically examining the discursive construction of Free Play, this study contributes to ongoing global conversations about the future of childhood, education, and social justice affirming that play, in its truest form, is a manifestation of freedom, identity, and human dignity.

2. Methods

This study employed a Critical Literature Review grounded in the principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as formulated by Teun A. van Dijk [28]. This methodological approach was selected to critically investigate how the concept of free play has been represented, constructed, and contested within the discourses of early childhood education between 2019 and 2025. CDA provides a framework for examining how language both reflects and reproduces power relations, ideologies, and social structures. Within the scope of this study, CDA was utilized to uncover the ideological assumptions embedded in the ways educators, policymakers, and researchers conceptualize and discuss free play and its pedagogical significance.

The research employed a qualitative and interpretive design, emphasizing textual and contextual analysis rather than quantification. A critical literature review was undertaken to synthesize insights from selected scholarly articles discussing Free Play, Play-Based Learning, and Child Agency within the context of early childhood education. Relevant literature was retrieved from major academic databases, including Scopus, Taylor & Francis, ERIC, and SINTA. A total of 25 peer-reviewed articles were selected based on specific inclusion criteria:

1. The articles must explicitly address play as a component of pedagogical discourse.
2. They must have been published between 2019 and 2025.
3. They must present either empirical findings or conceptual discussions related to play and education.
4. They must be written in English or Indonesian and have accessible full texts.

Studies focusing solely on play in non-educational contexts were excluded to ensure analytical coherence [5, 27]. To strengthen methodological rigor, this study also considered recent developments in play-based research design. [29] emphasizes the importance of integrating technological and contextual dimensions within play-based learning research, highlighting that literature reviews should reflect contemporary shifts in pedagogical practice. Similarly, a recent systematic review [30] identifies evolving patterns and representational forms of play that mirror sociocultural transformations in early childhood education. These studies informed the review strategy of this paper, ensuring that the data selection and synthesis processes align with global methodological standards and current theoretical discourse.

Data coding and theme extraction were conducted manually through iterative and reflexive reading of the selected articles. Key phrases and recurring linguistic markers related to agency, autonomy, freedom, policy, and power were identified, categorized, and clustered into major analytical themes. The coding process was guided by van Dijk's three-dimensional CDA framework, encompassing textual, cognitive, and social levels of analysis.

1. Textual dimension → Analysis of linguistic patterns, framing devices, and key terminologies representing Free Play
2. Social cognition dimension → Examination of teachers' and policymakers' beliefs, assumptions, and ideological orientations
3. Societal context dimension → Exploration of institutional, cultural, and policy discourses shaping understandings of play

The interpretation process involved iterative and reflective reading, ensuring that analytical conclusions were supported by recurring patterns and discursive consistencies across multiple sources. The researcher maintained reflexivity by cross-referencing ideas and ensuring theoretical coherence between global and local studies. Validation was achieved through theoretical triangulation, comparing insights from various cultural and policy contexts to minimize bias. This process aligns with the interpretive rigor recommended in critical discourse studies [31, 32, 33]. Ultimately, the method-

ological design of this study allowed the researcher to identify dominant ideologies, silenced voices, and the power structures that shape how Free Play is articulated in contemporary early childhood education literature.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

Following the application of the inclusion and exclusion criteria, a total of 25 peer-reviewed articles published between 2019 and 2025 were selected for comprehensive analysis. These studies encompass a range of global perspectives on Free Play, Play-Based Learning, and Child Agency within the field of early childhood education. The selected literature includes contributions from both the Global North and the Global South, thereby ensuring cultural and contextual representativeness.

Table 1 presents a detailed overview of the reviewed studies, specifying the authors, year of publication, geographical context, research focus, and key findings. This synthesis provides the empirical and conceptual foundation for the thematic analysis discussed in the subsequent Results section.

Table 1. Summary of Review Articles

Author(s) & Year	Focus of Study	Key Findings / Contribution
Wood (2019) [1]	Conceptualizing play as pedagogy	Critiques academic pressure in ECE, arguing for play as a form of social negotiation.
Insiyah (2019) [24]	Cultural obedience in early education	Highlights how cultural norms shape limited child autonomy.
Geletu et al. (2020) [17]	Emotional development through play	Play enhances emotional regulation and socio-emotional skills.
Pyle et al. (2020) [2]	Case for play in early education	Teachers' perceptions shape how play is balanced with learning goals.
Lin et al. (2021) [23]	Teacher beliefs about autonomy	Reveals conflict between curriculum accountability and child agency.
Iskandar (2021) [22]	Guided play paradox	Identifies institutional pressures reducing spontaneous play.
Bondi & Bondi (2021) [13]	Discourse of teacher-child relations	Highlights implicit power asymmetry in play contexts.
Colliver et al. (2022) [6]	Conceptualizing play in pedagogy	Calls for redefinition of play within holistic learning.
Jerome & Starkey (2022) [3]	Children's agency in education	Emphasizes democratic participation and the child's voice.
Rüdisüli et al. (2023) [16]	Free play and executive function	Links free play with improved executive and self-regulation skills.
Baker et al. (2023) [4]	Neoliberalism in ECE	Analyzes accountability discourse shaping early learning.
Tekyi-Arhin (2023) [8]	Importance of play-based learning	Reinforces global recognition of play's developmental role.
Fitria & Djoehaeni (2023) [18]	Merdeka Bermain policy	Examines the gap between freedom rhetoric and classroom practice.
Stavholm (2023) [34]	Teacher agency and identity	Discusses "enabled agency" for reflective educators.
Cankaya (2023) [35]	Loose parts play	Connects creativity with cultural expectations and materials.
Haile & Ghirmai (2024) [36]	Play-based learning conceptualization	Warns of academization reducing intrinsic play value.
Murcia (2024) [37]	Digital play & agency	Technology can both support and restrict children's freedom.

Paula & Agustin (2024) [21]	Policy rhetoric of Merdeka Belajar	Finds policy-practice contradiction in play-based pedagogy.
Khoirul Hidayat & Hasanah (2024) [25]	Cultural values in PAUD	Explores obedience and collectivism limiting autonomy.
Nhase et al. (2024) [38]	Play in mobile learning contexts	Play reflects community values, not only individual creativity.
Drani et al. (2024) [27]	Cultural moral discourse in ECE	Reveals moral framing shaping teacher control.
Henriksson et al. (2024) [5]	Agency in science-based play	Children's agency enhanced through co-construction with teachers.
Andiema (2024) [29]	Tech-integrated play-based learning	Emphasizes methodological rigor in literature review of play.
Buldu (2025) [39]	Promoting playful learning	Argues play as transformative and innovation-driven.
Samuelsson (2025) [40]	Play-responsive teaching	Suggests responsive pedagogy over instrumental models.

As demonstrated in Table 1, the reviewed articles reflect a dynamic and evolving discourse on play, freedom, and pedagogy within early childhood education. The distribution of studies from 2019 to 2025 highlights contemporary shifts in educational ideology, including the growing tension between academicization and child agency, as well as the influence of cultural and policy contexts. Collectively, these studies constitute the analytical corpus from which the discursive themes were derived. The thematic analysis identified four overarching and interrelated dimensions: (1) the academicization and instrumentalization of play, (2) the negotiation between teacher authority and child agency, (3) the cultural contextualization of play-based practices, and (4) the ideological reconstruction of freedom within early childhood education. The subsequent section provides a comprehensive elaboration of each theme, situating them within the broader theoretical and pedagogical discourse.

Through the lens of van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), these themes were identified not merely as descriptive categories but as manifestations of the interaction between text, cognition, and social context. The textual patterns, such as the recurring use of policy terms like "guided play" or "productive learning," reveal how language naturalizes particular power relations. Meanwhile, at the cognitive level, teachers' beliefs and policy framings illustrate shared mental models that shape pedagogical practices. Ultimately, social contextualization reveals broader institutional and cultural ideologies that govern what constitutes legitimate play in early education.

In this regard, the findings directly address the research gap outlined in the Introduction—namely, the need to transcend surface-level definitions of play and advance a critical understanding of Free Play as a site of ideological negotiation. Across the global body of literature, Free Play is seldom portrayed as a neutral or universal construct; rather, it emerges as a discursive arena in which diverse ideologies of childhood, learning, and governance converge and contend.

The analysis identified four interrelated thematic dimensions:

1. The academicization and instrumentalization of play,
2. The negotiation between teacher authority and child agency,
3. The cultural contextualization of play-based practices, and
4. The ideological reconstruction of childhood and freedom within educational policy discourse.

Collectively, these themes underscore the persistent tensions between freedom and control, as well as between the rhetoric of child-centered pedagogy and the realities of institutionalized education [28, 31, 32].

3.1.1 Academicization and Instrumentalization of Play

One of the strongest findings concerns the growing academicization of play in early learning contexts. A number of studies [2, 6, 19] indicate that play is often reframed as a structured pedagogical strategy aligned with academic goals. Teachers are encouraged to justify play in terms of literacy, numeracy, or social emotional learning outcomes [3]. This reframing corresponds with neoliberal educational discourses that prioritize measurement, accountability, and efficiency over the intrinsic value of learning [4, 5]. Within such institutional frameworks, Free Play assumes a paradoxical status—an activity ostensibly designed to promote autonomy and self-expression, yet concurrently regulated and constrained by curricular mandates, assessment mechanisms, and institutional routines [12].

Similar concerns were raised by [36] who argued that the conceptualization of play as a vehicle for academic skills risks undermining its intrinsic value. Likewise, [40] proposed play-responsive teaching as an alternative to over-instrumentalized models, suggesting that teachers should respond to children's intentions during play rather than impose predetermined outcomes. This approach repositions play as a dialogical space between guidance and autonomy, challenging the reduction of learning to measurable results.

This trend was particularly visible in research from the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, where "guided play" and "intentional teaching" dominate early childhood policy frameworks [1, 6]. Teachers reported feeling pressure to demonstrate that play contributes to measurable developmental gains, often leading to time-limited or goal-oriented play sessions. In Indonesia and several Southeast Asian countries, similar expectations exist through accountability systems that require evidence of learning progress, even in preschool settings [18, 21]. Such practices blur the boundary between free and structured play, transforming what should be a spontaneous act of exploration into a programmed task embedded in lesson plans.

3.1.2 Negotiating Teacher Authority and Child Agency

The second major theme concerns the tension between teacher authority and child agency, a dilemma repeatedly observed in both Western and Asian settings. Teachers often express positive attitudes toward play-based learning yet find it difficult to fully trust children's autonomy [13, 23]. CDA revealed that the vocabulary teachers use, such as "allowing play," "directing play," or "monitoring playtime," implicitly reproduces adult control and authority [28, 32]. Even when educators describe play as "child-initiated," their practices often involve covert surveillance and intervention to ensure classroom discipline and goal attainment [16, 17].

Recent studies extend this discussion into digital contexts. [37] found that teachers' mediation in digital play simultaneously enhances and restricts children's agency, depending on how technology is framed in classroom discourse. Similarly, [34] emphasized the potential for enabled agency among teachers who critically reflect on their professional identity, suggesting that autonomy for children is linked to the empowerment of educators themselves. These findings illustrate that both teachers and children negotiate freedom within overlapping structures of control.

This ideological tension reflects what [28] refers to as social cognition, shared mental models and institutional norms that define what constitutes good teaching. In many cases, teachers' understanding of professionalism is tied to maintaining order and productivity. Therefore, while teachers may intellectually endorse play as a democratic practice, their everyday discourse continues to privilege adult authority. In Indonesia, this pattern is reinforced by cultural norms that emphasize obedience, collectivism, and respect for elders [24, 26]. Teachers often frame play as a "reward" after academic tasks rather than as a central component of learning [22]. These findings suggest that discourses of play not only reflect pedagogical beliefs but also sustain hierarchical power relations between adults

and children.

However, counter-discourses also emerged in some studies advocating for more participatory and reflective pedagogies. [5] and [12] describe innovative approaches where teachers act as co-players or collaborators rather than supervisors, creating dialogical spaces that respect children's ideas. This form of critical co-play transforms the teacher's role from controller to cultural mediator, fostering mutual learning and shared creativity [3].

3.1.3 Cultural Contextualization of Play

A third recurring theme involves cultural contextualization, emphasizing that the meaning and value of Free Play differ across societies. Studies from Nordic, Western, and Eastern contexts highlight that play is shaped by deep-rooted cultural values and moral systems [5, 21, 25]. For instance, in Scandinavian early education, play is seen as a right and an expression of democratic citizenship [12]. In contrast, in Indonesian and other collectivist cultures, play often serves moral and social functions such as promoting cooperation, empathy, and politeness [18, 24].

Studies reveal that teachers in African early childhood education programs often interpret play as a collective activity that reinforces community-oriented values rather than promoting individual expression [38]. Similarly, [35] associates loose parts play with culturally mediated forms of creativity, demonstrating that the materials selected by teachers frequently reflect societal expectations concerning order, safety, and gender norms. Collectively, these studies highlight how cultural frameworks shape not only the nature of children's play activities but also the ways in which adults construct and legitimize play as an educational practice.

CDA uncovered that language plays a key role in this process. Terms such as "anak baik" ("good child") or "permainan mendidik" ("educational play") reproduce dominant moral ideologies that guide teachers' judgments about appropriate play [1, 27]. These labels reinforce notions of normative behavior, subtly policing children's expressions of imagination or resistance. Conversely, studies from Finland and Canada encourage "risky play" and "imaginative freedom," where children negotiate boundaries and learn through exploration [2, 6]. The contrast between these discourses highlights how cultural ideology shapes not only what children do but also how teachers interpret those actions.

3.1.4 Ideological Reconstruction of Freedom and Childhood

Finally, the analysis revealed a pervasive ideological reconstruction of freedom in educational discourse. Policies such as Merdeka Belajar ("Freedom to Learn") in Indonesia and the global child rights agenda [10] have adopted the language of freedom and creativity. Yet, CDA shows that such rhetoric often masks underlying control mechanisms [11, 21]. Freedom is redefined through measurable competencies, while children's autonomy is constrained by developmental checklists and performance indicators [4, 27].

In response, [39] advocates for "playful learning" as a transformative practice rooted in innovation, reflection, and socio-emotional growth, while [41] illustrate how science-oriented play can still nurture agency when educators co-construct meaning with children. These studies demonstrate that freedom in play must be continually reinterpreted within pedagogical, cultural, and policy frameworks to remain meaningful and emancipatory.

Nevertheless, several authors advocate reclaiming Free Play as a form of critical and emancipatory practice. [3] and [30] argue that genuine freedom in play cannot be externally granted—it must be experienced through trust, dialogue, and agency. In Indonesia, some educators have begun experimenting with hybrid approaches that combine free play and cultural traditions, such as storytelling, music, and outdoor exploration, to localize the meaning of freedom [18, 25]. Such contextual reinter-

pretations suggest that reclaiming freedom in play is not about rejecting structure but transforming it into a space of shared meaning.

Across these four themes, CDA exposes how Free Play serves as a mirror of educational ideology. It reflects broader debates about what it means to educate, nurture, and empower children. The tension between freedom and discipline, autonomy and conformity, persists across contexts. Yet, the growing presence of critical and culturally responsive perspectives offers hope that the discourse on play is shifting from one of control to one of co-agency and respect.

3.2 Discussion

The findings of this review highlight that Free Play operates not merely as a pedagogical activity but as a discursive field through which power, ideology, and policy are negotiated. The four themes identified—academicization, teacher authority, cultural contextualization, and ideological reconstruction—reflect the deep contradictions between the rhetoric of freedom and the reality of regulation in early childhood education (ECE).

Viewed through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), these contradictions can be understood as manifestations of how discourse constructs and maintains social power [28, 32]. This directly addresses the research gap outlined in the introduction, which emphasized that prior studies often conceptualize Free Play merely as an instructional technique rather than a discursive construct embedded in language, ideology, and institutional practice.

By applying van Dijk's CDA framework, this study extends the understanding of play from the level of classroom activity to that of discourse production, revealing how linguistic, cognitive, and social dimensions co-construct the meanings of freedom in early education.

3.2.1 Play and the Politics of Language

At the linguistic level, the way educators and policymakers discuss play influences how it is practiced and valued. Terms such as "guided play," "structured learning," or "intentional teaching" are not neutral descriptors—they embed assumptions about adult authority, accountability, and educational legitimacy [6, 19]. CDA reveals that such terminologies serve ideological functions by normalizing control within the guise of autonomy [31]. The transformation of Free Play into a form of "productive" activity mirrors a broader neoliberal logic that views children as future economic contributors rather than present citizens with agency [3, 4].

This linguistic framing is also evident in policy documents, teacher training materials, and curricula. For instance, the Indonesian Merdeka Belajar initiative, while promoting freedom in learning, implicitly measures that freedom through standardized competencies and performance-based assessments [18, 21]. As [32] notes, discourse has the capacity to naturalize social hierarchies by embedding them within everyday professional language. Thus, the normalization of "structured play" reflects not a balance but a subtle colonization of childhood, where play becomes another mechanism of discipline masked as choice.

3.2.2 Ideology, Policy, and Power

From a policy perspective, Free Play becomes a site where competing ideologies of education intersect. Liberal-democratic frameworks emphasize autonomy and creativity, while bureaucratic systems prioritize order and measurable success [5, 12]. CDA helps reveal how these macro-ideologies are translated into institutional discourse and everyday classroom practice. Teachers often find themselves mediating between conflicting expectations: promoting child agency while demonstrating academic progress. This double bind reflects the tension between humanistic and technocratic visions of education [1, 6].

In developing contexts such as Indonesia, this tension is intensified by sociocultural norms and economic pressures. As several studies indicate [24, 26], collectivist cultures tend to value harmony and respect for authority, leading to implicit constraints on children's autonomy. Furthermore, parents' academic aspirations and limited institutional resources often push PAUD programs toward formalized instruction. In such settings, the discourse of Free Play becomes both aspirational and contested—a symbolic ideal rather than a lived practice [25, 27].

3.2.3 Reclaiming Freedom through Critical Pedagogy

Despite these structural constraints, the reviewed literature also indicates growing movements toward critical and reflective pedagogies that seek to reclaim freedom in play. Teachers in Finland, Canada, and Indonesia are experimenting with hybrid models that combine play-based learning with socio-cultural values, balancing individual agency and community cohesion [5, 18]. Such approaches embody what [28] calls "discursive resistance"—a conscious effort to challenge dominant ideologies through alternative practices and language use.

Critical pedagogy provides an opportunity for teachers to reframe play as a dialogical space where knowledge is co-constructed, rather than transmitted. As [3] and [12] argue, authentic freedom in play emerges when educators trust children's capacities to make meaning, rather than prescribing outcomes. This shift requires teachers to develop critical language awareness—the ability to recognize how words like "control," "guidance," or "evaluation" shape power dynamics. By reframing their discourse, teachers can reorient classroom practices toward collaboration, trust, and respect for children's voices [4, 16].

3.2.4 Cultural and Policy Implications

The intersection between global educational discourses and local traditions demands culturally grounded interpretations of freedom. In Indonesia, reclaiming freedom in play does not mean abandoning collective values; rather, it entails redefining freedom as relational autonomy—a balance between individual expression and social responsibility [18, 21]. This perspective aligns with indigenous pedagogical philosophies emphasizing harmony, empathy, and contextual learning.

At the policy level, governments and education stakeholders should reconsider how play is framed within curriculum standards. Rather than treating Free Play as an optional or supplementary component, it should be positioned as the foundation of early learning and holistic child development. Policies need to create structural spaces—time, environment, and professional trust—that enable genuine play to occur [5, 19]. Moreover, professional development for teachers must include critical reflection on language, ideology, and agency, preparing them to navigate the moral and political dimensions of teaching [31, 32].

By connecting these findings to the theoretical model of van Dijk's CDA, this review demonstrates how discourse—through text, cognition, and social context—constructs and sustains ideologies of freedom and control in ECE. It fills the identified research gap by positioning Free Play as a discursive and political phenomenon rather than a purely pedagogical tool. Ultimately, reclaiming freedom in play is both a pedagogical and political act. It challenges dominant hierarchies of knowledge and advocates for children's right to agency, imagination, and joy. Through critical awareness, educators can transform play from a controlled routine into a space of possibility where learning becomes a living expression of freedom, not a measurement of compliance.

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that Free Play in early childhood education should not be understood as a neutral pedagogical construct, but rather as a dynamic discursive arena in which ideologies of freedom,

control, and development intersect and contend. Through the analytical lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the review demonstrates that, although the rhetoric surrounding play frequently emphasizes autonomy and creativity, the institutional and policy frameworks governing early education often reproduce mechanisms of control and accountability under the guise of child-centred learning.

The findings delineate four major tensions that structure the discourse of play:

1. The academicization and instrumentalization of play.
2. The hierarchical negotiation between teacher authority and child agency.
3. The cultural and ideological influences shaping interpretations of play.
4. The political redefinition of freedom within educational policy discourses.

Collectively, these tensions illustrate how educational narratives mirror broader socio-political power relations and neoliberal rationalities, framing learning not as a lived, experiential process, but as a form of measurable productivity.

To reclaim the notion of freedom in play, educators and policymakers must critically interrogate the language, assumptions, and ideologies that structure pedagogical practice. Teachers should be empowered to implement reflective and dialogic pedagogies that affirm children's capacities for meaning-making, exploration, and co-construction of knowledge. Simultaneously, policymakers should move beyond symbolic invocations of freedom by establishing structural conditions—such as flexible curricula, reduced assessment pressures, and greater professional autonomy—that enable Free Play to function authentically as a space of inquiry and growth.

Ultimately, reclaiming freedom in play does not imply a return to unstructured spontaneity; rather, it entails a redefinition of education as a humanizing, culturally responsive, and emancipatory practice. When play is reimagined as a shared space of trust, creativity, and discovery, early childhood education can more fully realize its central purpose: to nurture children's holistic potential as free, creative, and socially connected human beings.

Future research and pedagogical innovation—particularly in the areas of curriculum design, teacher professional development, and policy implementation—are essential to sustain Free Play as both a pedagogical practice and a political expression of educational freedom.

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