

# The self that is also the other is fully human: Non-intervention and personhood in an Indonesian kindergarten classroom

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## Author's Note

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## Abstract

In this paper, I pose the question "what can children learn when teachers don't intervene?" It is a common occurrence in the United States in early learning environments for adults to direct or facilitate children's play. In the world of childhood, play is serious business. But when we play, it is not thought to be "serious" as we play for pleasure. Through play children explore serious topics and experiences with joy and pleasure. As they explore, they learn about our world, testing its limitations and affordances. It often appears that, outside of the playground, adults do not fully trust children to conduct this "business" without guidance. We know that young children learn through play, and we know that learning is often done in the presence of a "more knowledgeable other". Early childhood teachers are often that "more knowledgeable other." But knowledge and power are often entangled. In this paper I analyze video data to discuss learning through play and teaching through non-intervention in the kindergarten classroom. I spent one month filming a rural Indonesian kindergarten, after which I edited the film down to a length that could be reasonably viewed in one sitting. I spent the following three months traveling the island of Java, showing the video to Indonesian scholars, educators, teachers, children, and parents. Their responses to the video provided valuable cultural insights into behavioral expectations from a non-western developmental perspective. Additional emic perspectives are imbedded in the study through the prioritization of Indonesian scholarly work for analysis.

**Keywords:** Indonesian early childhood, ethnography, video ethnography, embodiment

## Introduction

Teaching and learning are grounded in cultural and social contexts. There is no "one size fits all" approach to teaching and learning. To do what is best for the children in our schools it is helpful to pay close attention to children and their interactions with teachers, communities, and peers. This was a lesson I learned many years ago. After completing my undergraduate training I spent several years working with and conducting research

alongside Indonesian educators in and out of the classroom. When I first started teaching in Indonesia, as a white American trained in American schools, I often found practices I understood as “best practices” were ineffective in Indonesian classrooms. Without having a rudimentary understanding of culturally responsive or abolitionist pedagogy or curriculum, there was often a disconnect between curriculum, instruction, and students’ understandings of implicit teaching and learning practices. My awareness of this disconnect was what encouraged me to begin my journey of studying prosocial behaviors and emotion in Indonesian schools. I began by conducting a pilot study in a rural Indonesian high school, and then continued to study Indonesian early childhood education.

Kindergartens and preschools are the first site of enculturation, the first time children are transitioning between home and an institutional setting (Tobin et al., 1989). When we as researchers work with and beside children and educators in the early childhood environment we are able to glean a deeper understanding of how culture, human development, teaching, and learning intersect. The cultural and linguistic diversity of Indonesia, the standardized national curriculum, and my own personal and professional contacts in Indonesia set the stage for the potential for rich engagement with concepts of prosocial behavior in the early childhood setting. My background and training in video ethnography and video cued ethnography (VCE) provided me with optimal opportunities to explore a tapestry of interpretations of children’s behaviors. I do this by exploring the concept of “*sungkan*,” an Indonesian concept related to respect. *Sungkan* is a Javanese word related to the concept of respect. It is performed through acts of self-regulation relative to one’s status in the community. Through a process of traditional ethnography and VCE I was able to glean a better understanding of the different ways children learn *sungkan* as it relates to selfhood through play without intervention from adults.

This exploration of *sungkan* and related pro-social concepts and selfhood were highlighted during a four month study I conducted on the island of Java, in Indonesia. While I was conducting field work I visited several kindergartens and preschools. The TK (*taman kanak-kanak* or “kindergarten”) in Tindak was the only rural school I visited. For one month I stayed in the village at the home of a local vegetable vendor and his family. This provided an opportunity for me to learn about the community and the day to day lives of my hosts and neighbors.

During the month of Ramadan the small village of Tindak began to stir around 3 a.m. The electric ignition of each household’s countertop stove clicked once to bring life to the blue flames on gas burners. The smell of coffee, galangal, and shrimp paste filled kitchens. The sound of fish frying broke the stillness of the early morning. Before 4 a.m. everyone was awake eating breakfasts of rice, tofu, tempeh, fried fish, and spicy curries. They sat together on mats on the floor and quickly devoured their *suhur* (pre-dawn meal during Ramadan) with their hands. They ate quickly to be ready to do their ablutions before *Fajr* (the first prayer of the day). Children sat bleary eyed, huddled close to family members. Mothers fed infants at their breasts. If the infant pulled away distractedly the mother might bounce him in her lap, held close with her left arm as she ate with her right hand. If an infant seemed disinterested in nursing the mother would forgo her eating to scoop a few grains of rice into the baby’s mouth or hold a piece of fruit for him to suckle.

This was the first meal of the day and the only meal until they broke their fast around 5:30 p.m. During the fast, people were expected not to eat, drink, or put anything with flavor in their mouths (no cigarettes, no gum, not even toothpaste). They were expected not to get angry, lie, participate in sexual activity, or sin in any way. Infants, the elderly, pregnant or breast-feeding mothers, and menstruating women did not fast during Ramadan. Preschool aged children and kindergartners sometimes fasted until 9 a.m., and once they began *sekolah dasar* (S.D., primary school) they were encouraged to fast for longer durations, but not for the entire period. By the time they reached adolescence they

were expected to fast from before *Fajr* until *Magrib* (sunset prayer). The practice of Ramadan fasting was slowly and deliberately scaffolded, expectations of comportment gradually ramped up at each stage of childhood.

Respect, in the form of *sungkun*, was also deliberately scaffolded to children in the village. During Eid-ul-Fitri in Tindakit was customary to visit every house. Each visitor was offered food and drink and offers would be accepted or declined depending on the relationship between the guest and the host. If the host was considered family, it was polite to accept. If they were not, it was polite to refuse. This is a component of *sungkan*, an awareness of one's relative position in society and the appropriate forms of respect in relation to that position. Children were either verbally or physically directed by an accompanying adult as to whether they should accept offers of food and drink in each house. *Sungkan* is not just taught in the home and in the neighborhood, but also taught and reinforced in the school and in the national curriculum. In this paper, I examine the interplay between *sungkan* and concepts of self as children play in their kindergarten classroom with minimal teacher intervention.

I conducted this study in Java, the most populous island of Indonesia, which is why many of the terms you will read in this study are Javanese or Indonesian. When common words and phrases represent both complex concepts and practical meanings, translators often give complexity short shrift for the sake of convivence, choosing the quotidian definition (Hermans, 2003; House, 2006). These dictionary denotations are easy but can lead to conceptual confusion. Historically, emotion words have been awkwardly translated from Indonesian and other local languages into English (Geertz, 1974; Keeler, 1983), which has led to fundamental misunderstandings about the relationship between culture and ways of being and feeling in the Indonesian archipelago (Heryanto, 2007). Through the use of local terms, followed by reflections on how they might be translated into English, I will be able to more accurately communicate the complex, local concepts that I discuss in this paper.

Preschools and kindergartens are the first site of enculturation, where children are eased through the transition from the home into the institutional settings of the classroom. They learn different language, rituals, and routines than they would normally experience in their homelives. And yet in rural Indonesia the lines between the school and home are blurred. The women in families with young school aged children sit outside of classrooms ready to assist or criticize the teachers. This provides additional pressure to perform pro-social behaviors that are appropriate in and out of the classroom. Community members maintain a watchful eye on both children and teachers, and are ready to intervene when they feel it is appropriate.

The school in Tindak had relatively few materials. Many of the materials were standard in any kindergarten classroom I've visited (e.g. crayons, workbooks, blocks). However, there was one set of classroom materials that stood out to me as particularly Indonesian: two rocking horses. Rocking horses are common in the west, yet not very common in kindergartens. There were additional differences between the rocking horses in this classroom and their western counterparts: these two horses were simply fashioned and brightly painted in such a way that they resembled horses used in traditional Javanese dance.

I spent a month in Tindak filming Bu Uni's kindergarten classroom. The following is a description of one of the film segments that I recorded, edited, and then showed to parents of young children, early childhood practitioners, administrators, and education faculty in Indonesia. I recorded the adults' responses to the video to provide insights into the children's behavior.

The TK in Tindak was understaffed according to the staff. Bu Uni, the principal of both the preschool and the two kindergarten classes, was a kindergarten teacher as well. This meant she spent a lot of time out of the room tending to administrative duties. This did not lead to an unsafe environment for the children (as it may have been perceived in the west), as the children were accustomed to playing without adult supervision. Additional support was available in the form of the groups of seated caregivers (including the school children's mothers, grandmothers, and aunts) in the courtyard that could see into the classroom door and intervene in case of emergency.

Bu Uni's classroom had ample space for nine children and one or two adults to work and play. Each child in the class had their own cubby where they store workbooks and materials such as crayons. The other shelving unit held blocks and other toys that were shared with the preschool children and the other kindergarten class. There were three small tables along the righthand wall, two with small chairs. The teacher often sat at the center table, a large, low, red table meant for floor seating, a style of seating that is traditional in Indonesian homes and public spaces.

For this study I used components of traditional ethnography and VCE adapted from the works of Tobin et al. (1989), Adair and Kurban (2019), and Liu (2019). This method was ideal to provide insights into the different ways Indonesian children might perform emic concepts of selfhood in the kindergarten classroom.

For the VCE component of the study I recorded video in an Indonesian kindergarten over the month of Ramadan. As I recorded I mainly focused on children's prosocial behaviors and performances of emotion. I then edited the 25 hours of video I recorded down to a single 18-minute video. I showed this video to a total of 159 Indonesian scholars, parents, early childhood educators, and community members. I did not seek to understand children's interpretations of behavior, but focused on the way adults interpret children's behavior. This was intentional; as adults we provide instruction, write policy and curriculum, and design spaces for children. There is a relationship between how adults view children and how children are taught (Romijn et al., 2021). The use of VCE provided adult participants the opportunity to describe and discuss the children's engagement in a dialog, building on each other's foreknowledge and perspectives.

Through close analysis of video, field notes from my time in the village, and the transcripts from the focus groups and individual interviews material engagement was at the center of prosocial behaviors for the children of Tindak and those who observed the video. The children's engagement with the horses, without teacher intervention, helped the children explore different performances of *sungkan*.

Children's engagement with materials has, from Froebel, to Montessori, to Reggio Emilia, been a topic of central interest in early child education (Cherniak et al., 2019; Fredriksen, 2011; Hill & Wood, 2019; Nilsson et al., 2018; Vygotsky, 1980). Children's engagement with materials can be approached from a variety of theoretical positions. In this paper I will be using a combination of western and Indonesian concepts to interpret the children's rocking horse play. For the purpose of this paper I define "western concepts or theories" as scholarship that has been developed outside of the context of the Indonesian post-colonial context. I will do this by describing three vignettes that I recorded and showed to Indonesian educators and parents of young children and presenting their interpretations of the videos, as well as my own. The children who were actants in the parts of the film I describe in this chapter are three boys: Bima, Wisnu, and Didi; as well as four girls: Rini, Lala, Aiye, and Nunu.

## **Self, status, and play**

### **Vignette 1 (the motorbike):**

In Bu Uni's class, the two rocking horses were very popular. On one of the days when I filmed, Wisnu was the first child to finish his daily tasks. Being the first to complete his tasks gave Wisnu the advantage of choosing a horse. As he rocked, other children mounted the vacant horse, but only for a moment before they went to play elsewhere. When Bima finished his work, he got on the blue horse. Bima rocked using enough force that the wooden rockers occasionally slid a few inches across the smooth ceramic tiled floor. His eyes were fixed on his classmates. When Didi ran up yelling "Let me try! Let me try!", Wisnu stopped rocking and watched Didi try to mount the yellow horse from the front. Bima forced his body forward to block Didi and smiled as Didi held the horse steady with his hands and his foot, positioning his body between Bima and the horse's head. Bima let out a shriek and slapped the sides of his horse's head with his hands, pulling his body toward the head of the horse so that there was no space up front for Didi. As Didi rested his right foot on the horse's rocker and began to mount it from behind his and Wisnu's eyes met. Wisnu began rocking again as Didi dashed toward him. There was enough space for Didi to sit at the front of the horse, so he grasped the handlebars to steady the toy as he lifted his foot to straddle the seat. Wisnu looked up at him, smiling, and scooped his body forward so there was no longer space for Didi in the front. Both boys laughed. Didi then put his feet back down on the floor and strode to the front of the horse. He took Wisnu's hand gently and removed it from the handle bar. Wisnu scooted back on the seat and Didi squeezed in front of him, Wisnu grabbed Didi's shoulders, turning him to face forward. The three boys rocked on the two horses. (Personal Communication and Observation)

### **Analysis**

The children did not vocalize much during this exchange. The majority of their communication was done by the placement of their bodies in relation to each other and the horses. Didi's command "Let me try!" was a signal to Bima and Wisnu that he would be joining one of them in their play. Although all of the boys seemed to be happy to play together, all three wanted the front seat of the horse, the "driver's seat." Bima aggressively protected that space by shrieking and slapping the horse, and when Didi realized he would not be able to get the coveted seat, he looked to Wisnu. Wisnu did not give any noticeable visual or vocal cue of an invitation beyond meeting Didi's eyes, but that was enough for Didi to join him on the horse. When Didi was about to take a seat at the front of the horse, Wisnu responded with laughter. The two boys, using body placement and touch, expressed their desire to sit in the front. Didi's laughter and initial refusal to give Wisnu the front space could be interpreted as a sign of discomfort -- people often laugh when anxious. His laughter could also be a response to his move to the front of the horse, when he blocked Wisnu. The act of refusal to give up his space could be *bercanda*. *Bercanda* is a type of joke. To non-Indonesians it can appear as bullying, because it is meant to take someone down a notch. But in Indonesia it is seen as a friendly insult. Didi's refusal to acknowledge Wisnu's status by giving him a seat at the front of the horse can be read as a joke, and his laughter was him laughing at his own joke.

The children used touch and sound to negotiate status during this interaction. One parent in the village mentioned the children's play was similar to playing "motorbike." Unlike horses, motorbikes are ubiquitous on the streets of Indonesia and have become a necessary form of transportation over the past several decades. They are relatively expensive -- for Indonesians living in rural areas used motorbikes can cost a year's salary. And yet they are accessible to anyone in a position to secure a loan. Owning a motorbike is a sign of financial security. If more than one person is on the motorbike, it is likely the

owner will drive. Women very rarely drive men on motorbikes, and although it's not uncommon for children to drive motorbikes, it would be unusual to see a child driving an adult. Other than the custom for small children to stand between the driver and the handlebars, the highest status person is usually the one closest to the handlebars.

In their rocking horse play, the children were employing bodily techniques necessary for riding a motorbike. The child sitting in the front is active as the driver. Motorbike passengers are not necessarily passive. The passenger is constantly adjusting their body to balance the bike as the driver negotiates the many turns made on steep and winding mountain roads. However, it is possible for an experienced driver to carry a sleeping passenger if the passenger's body is somehow draped on the driver's body. These techniques of the body are similar on a rocking horse. The two children on the rocking horse worked together to shift their weight forward and back in unison. As with a sleeping motorbike passenger, the child in the front can easily control the horse if the child on the back is relaxed and resting against the body of the child in the front. The closeness of their bodies allows for the weight to be more evenly distributed making it easier to rock. On the motorbike this physical closeness provides the driver with the ability to control weight distribution to effectively balance the bike.

Maus (1973) describes children's physical acts as imitative of adult habitus. The children's play therefore can be viewed as a performance of motorbike riding. However, the three boys, Bima, Wisnu, and Didi were not practicing riding a motorbike in the mechanical sense. They were not trying to learn how to ride a motorbike. It was not important for them to know how to use a clutch or know whether to use the brakes. These mechanical components were not available on the simple wooden horse. This play provided the children with the opportunity to meaningfully engage with each other and the materials. It provided them with ways to explore the boundaries of self and other in relation to the horses.

The children's ways of engaging with the horses and each other locates them within the Javanese social structure. Bima's shouting, Didi's grabbing of Wisnu's hand and pushing him back on the horse showed little of the restraint expected of a Javanese adult. In the Javanese context, they could be described as "*durung jawa*." This translates to "not yet Javanese," meaning they have not yet internalized the values of the community (Geertz, 1989). Adhit, a father of a young child who lives in Ndhuwur, told me, "'*durung jawa*' can mean you are not mature enough. Parents have certain expectations of their children, how they behave, act and think based on the local values. And these children still cannot meet these expectations." Bima, Wisnu, and Didi were not yet ready to be adults. But they will eventually be required to meet their community's behavioral expectations. Until then, they are not yet, or less than Javanese. A child who knows *sungkan* understands that is important to show restraint, sacrificing one's own desires out of respect for the other (Geertz, 1989). Their play could be described as a negotiation of power within the lower tiers of Javanese hierarchy.

The Indonesian educators who watched this clip were interested in the children's temperaments. Pak Imam at Universitas Islam noted: "When we look at the kids playing rocking-horse, children's *keakuan* characters arose. The *keakuan* is high. The 'me' needs to be turned into 'togetherness.'" The translation of "*keakuan*" is often "ego," and yet the term "ego" exists within a Cartesian binary that is incommensurable with Indonesian philosophies of self. The self is considered entangled with all things, organic and inorganic and karma is what creates social hierarchies within these entanglements (Anderson, 1990). *Keakuan* is an enthymeme for the concept that the individual cannot exist outside of a community and a descriptor for an individual who must exist within a community but puts their desires before the greater good of the community.

This ties into a traditional Javanese saying, “*mangan ra mangan sing penting kumpul.*” The words mean, “it’s not important to eat, it is important to be together.” According to Ferdiawan and Putra (2013) this saying emphasizes togetherness as a way to teach and reinforce cultural values by modeling behavioral expectations. Children watch and learn from others, therefore the most valuable life lessons will be gained by being part of a community. Bima was not separate from the community, but he was more focused on “eating” (a corporal desire, a desire to be placed first) than being with his “family” (the classroom). As a result, he was modeling undesirable behaviors.

A more accurate Indonesian to English translation of *keakuan* might be, “me-ness” or the essence of self that puts itself before the community. A high level of *keakuan* indicates a lack of restraint. Bima desired to have his own horse, and he actively worked to fulfil that desire without acknowledging the importance of sharing. He did not restrain his sense of *keakuan*. Multiple scholars have reported that the Javanese believe consistent and prolonged practices of emotional and behavioral self-control are necessary for achieving spiritual potency. Personal desire is an obstacle to meeting the needs of the community (Anderson, 1990; Brenner, 1995; Spiller, 2010). The three children in this scene were putting their own desires (to ride alone or sit in the front seat) ahead of the desires of their friends. This submission to *keakuan* would be an indicator of *durung jawa*. Wisnu’s behavior is possibly the exception to this; *bercanda* is an acceptable form of expressing one’s desires, because joking is a performance of wit and alacrity associated with having achieved Javanese-ness (Berman, 1998).

The concept of *keakuan* could be simplified as “selfishness.” Tari, one of the kindergarten teachers at the international school, said Bima was “quite selfish. He always wants to play by himself all the time, without sharing with his friends.” Tari’s criticism is in line with the PAUD (early childhood education) standard for all ages that focuses on *kejujuran* (Kementerian Pendidikan Dan Kebudayaan Republic Indonesia, 2013, p. 37), which is related to a desire to do the right thing. The concept of *kejujuran* includes honesty, integrity, and fairness. One of the indicators for *kejujuran* is: *Tidak menumpuk mainan atau makan untuk diri sendiri* (do not hoard food and toys for oneself). If Tari were formally assessing Bima’s *kejujuran*, he would not have met the standard indicators.

Tari singled out Bima’s behavior in this clip. Tari was a teacher in a modern international school with access to resources and professional development from Western/Northern (including the United States) institutions of higher education. This introduces the possibility Tari’s interpretation of Bima’s behavior as “selfish” was a bricolage of western concepts of self, teaching and learning, and Indonesian values. Western theories on learning and classroom communities are founded on the idea that individuals comprise a community and individuals are accountable for their own work within the community (Wenger, 1999). If a child is disrupting the community or not acting in accordance to community values, that child will receive an intervention. However, “*kejujuran*” is an Indonesian concept that reflects Indonesian values that differ from “selfishness.”

The emphasis on *keakuan* and *kejujuran* in the kindergarten classroom can be viewed as reflecting larger discussions of nationalism and identity. In a highly populous, culturally and linguistically diverse nation with an exceptional amount of natural resources, selfishness and “hoarding” resources could lead to a fractured state. Schooling is seen as a highly effective way to reproduce and reaffirm concepts of national identity. One possible interpretation of the educators’ responses to this scene would be to view them as grounded in national unification initiatives.

A high sense of *keakuan* or “me-ness” in combination with the idea that these children are “*durung jawa*” (not yet Javanese) indicates that they are still learning *malu*. *Malu* as an emotional performance blurs the line between the self and the other, and the self and

the community (Keeler, 1983). This sense of “*during jawa*” positions an individual as unrefined, course, base, almost animal-like (Anderson, 1990). It would not be possible for one to have a high level of *keakuan*, a state that creates a binary between the self and the other, if *malu* is being appropriately performed. One who does not appropriately perform *malu* is not yet Javanese.

### **Vignette 2: Enak rek. Disurung rek!**

When Rini finished her tasks she cleaned up her crayons and walked over to Bima, who was sitting on a rocking horse. She grabbed onto the low backrest with both hands, biting her lips, and began to vigorously push Bima. Bima exclaimed “Wes Rini rek. Enak rek. Disurung rek!” (Hey, look at Rini! It’s nice to be pushed by her!). Rini began playing so furiously that her arms were straining as she pushed and pulled with her whole body. Bima watched Didi and Wisnu, then turned to look back at Rini. The moment Bima’s head turned away from the other boys, their horse tipped forward onto the edge of the rockers. Didi and Wisnu stayed there, suspended in air for a split second. It looked like they would both fall forward and expressions of concern and fear came over their faces as Didi moved his toes to touch the floor for balance. Didi, Wisnu, and Rini erupted in laughter once the horse rocked back as rocking horses are wont to do. Bima, saw none of this because his back was turned to Didi and Wisnu. However he began laughing when he heard the others laugh. He clapped his hands against the handlebars of the rocking horse and clutched its head. Rini’s gaze dropped as she stepped on the back of the rockers of Bima’s now still horse, her smile fading in and out. A summary of this scene could be: three children occupied two rocking horses. A fourth child began pushing the child seated alone on his horse. The lone child called out to the others to express the enjoyment of being pushed. When the two children nearly tipped their horse, everyone laughed. The children’s play was unstructured, and the teacher did not intervene. (Personal Communication and Observation)

### **Analysis**

As an American early childhood educator, I was struck by Bima’s words: “Hey, look at Rini! It’s nice to be pushed by her!” An American child might shout, “Hey look at me! This is fun!” focusing attention on himself and his enjoyment. But it is not likely Bima would say that; he was speaking Javanese which almost exclusively uses passive sentence construction. He could have said “Look here, it’s nice to be pushed!” Instead Bima made a point to call Rini by name, thereby acknowledging Rini’s role in his play. Why would he do that?

One of the village parents, Akam, responded to this moment in the video: “I think Bima just wanted to grab his friends’ attention, that he is lucky to be pushed by Rini without doing any effort to the horse like his other friends did.” Akam suggests that Bima’s call for attention was a cue for others to observe his play with Rini, with the intent to engage them to in the act of pushing. First observe, then participate. There is fun in being pushed, but also fun in being the pusher. The pusher has control of how fast or slow the horse goes.

Another interpretation is that this was not a call for others to join in the play. As Akam pointed out, Bima may have said Rini’s name to brag about being pushed by her, a brag akin to announcing, “Hey look, no hands” when riding a bike. “Look, no hands!” is a boast about physical dexterity. Here, Bima was showing off his social dexterity, as evidenced by Rini pushing him without him having to ask. According to Anderson (1990), “the (Javanese) man of power should have to exert himself as little as possible in any action. The slightest lifting of his finger should be able to set a chain of actions in motion. The man of real Power does not have to raise his voice nor give overt orders” (p.54). Bima did not have to ask or demand to be pushed. Rini just came to him and

pushed him. However, bragging is not socially acceptable on Java. *Andhap asor* is a Javanese concept that discourages bragging. Although this concept is mainly used to discuss the dangers of bragging about the advantages of an individual's religion or ethnicity, at its core it focuses on the development of humility in young children (Ferdiawan & Putra, 2013). Parents are expected to keep quiet about their personal and professional achievements as a way to model *andhap asor* for children.

But was it bragging? Akam told me that he believed Bima had multiple motivations for saying, "*Wes Rini rek. Enak rek. Disurung rek!*" He saw Bima's statement as an attempt to encourage Rini to keep pushing him without making a direct request. He used social intelligence in encouraged Rini by giving her a compliment. Bima told his friends that Rini was doing something generous, something that made him feel good. Alternatively, he could have told Rini directly that she was making him feel good without calling out "Hey, look at Rini!" However, to do so, however, could be considered to act in a way that is less Indonesian, as addressing her directly in this way could be construed as an instance of *malu*, an emotional construct that often works to discourage direct interaction and is often visibly indicated through acts of self-restraint or submission.

Almost immediately after Bima shouted "*Wes Rini rek. Enak rek. Disurung rek!*" The room erupted with laughter. Bima joined in immediately when he heard his classmates laugh. He appeared overwhelmed as he laughed with his whole body, slapping the rocking horse as if he couldn't contain his joy. The children's laughter was contagious.

At the Islamic university in Central Java, Pak Yadi, a study participant and a moral education scholar, expressed concern about the lack of structure and restraint in the children's play during this scene. He said, "I saw no scaffolding, rules, or ideas given to the children. The same is true throughout." Another colleague echoed, "There is no way of knowing what kind of competence the teachers want to see in the children. It's just play without reason." Pak Yadi's background is in Islamic education which emphasizes teacher directed instruction. Islamic education is not limited to theology; the Qu'ran provides guidance on areas such as the physical sciences, philosophy, education, and law, therefore it is important to study these fields (and others) from the perspectives outlined in the Qu'ran. The Ta'līm al-Muta'allim, the Islamic pedagogical text that is foundational for Islamic education, emphasizes and outlines a very strict, highly structured educational setting where the teacher is "revered" above all others. Students are expected to do the bidding of their teachers at all times, and not to make a single move or decision without either their teacher's explicit permission or consideration of the teacher's perspective (al-Zarnuji, 12th/13th cent./1947/2003). This is not to say that Pak Yadi subscribes to 12<sup>th</sup> century pedagogy, but that these traditions are continually taught, defined and redefined in contemporary Islamic education (Hafidzah, 2014; Huda et al., 2016). The teacher-centered emphasis of the The Ta'līm al-Muta'allim may have influenced his interpretation, without acknowledgment of the possibility of "play for play's sake" as learning.

Bu Eri, a professor at a teaching university and a feminist scholar, and her colleagues suggested that this was a way for Rini to play while navigating gender roles that position her as needing to be deferential to the boys. Throughout this section of the video as well as subsequent rocking horse scenes, Bu Eri and her colleagues were interested in the way Rini and the other girls engaged with the rocking horses while the boys rode them. According to Bu Eri, this was Rini's opportunity to "be a part of (the play), but at the same time, taking control" of the play. "If they want to do it faster, they go faster." Bu Eri also noted Rini's "positivity," saying that Rini never verbally demanded to get on the horse, and instead found her own, gender appropriate way to engage.

As a teacher educator in the United States I often see early childhood teachers encourage children to "use their words" to express desires. But like Bima, Rini is in a system where

a person of power does not request or command, and it is not good to express personal desires. However, unlike Bima, Rini had to exert herself to join in the fun, and it is possible to interpret her play as an embodied expression of her desire to play. She was praised both by Bima who singled her out as the one who made him feel nice, and by Bu Eri who commended her “positivity,” for finding a way to engage in the rocking horse play which gave them each pleasure.

The scene I just presented is very short -- less than 30 seconds of a 15 minute film. And yet it holds much meaning. We can't know why Bima shouted “*Wes Rini rek. Enak rek. Disurung rek!*” I did not ask him, and if I had, he might not have known, and if he did know, he might not have told me. Not everything is thinkable or speakable. However, Akam, Imam and his colleagues, and Eri and her colleagues provided insights into his behavior. Akam believed Bima singled out Rini for two reasons: to show off his “luck” and to motivate Rini to continue pushing. Imam and his colleagues did not focus on Bima, but on the overall “absence” of classroom structure. Bu Eri and her colleagues did not focus on Bima either, but on Rini, and her positive attitude and ability to negotiate gender norms in her play.

The discourses presented in participants’ responses to this scene reflect a variety of views that are prevalent in but not necessarily unique to Indonesia. Although children are encouraged to “use their words” in the United States, the words children use and how often (and how loudly) they use them will vary depending on gender and social position. Critiques of “unstructured classrooms” are common in western Early Childhood Education discourses. Children in the United States are encouraged to praise their friends and be good helpers. However, the social, cultural, and historical contexts of these interpretations are uniquely Indonesian.

### **Vignette 3: *Jatilan***

Shortly after Rini began pushing Bima, three girls, Lala, Aiye, and Nunu, completed their morning’s assignments and joined in the play. All three gathered around Wisnu and Bima, each finding a spot where they could grip the horse to push. Bima, still the lone rider on his rocking horse exclaimed, “*Ayo, kita main kuda*” (Let’s fight horses) as he pulled himself closer to the other horse. As he did this, Rini walked away to join a different activity. Lala then moved to Bima’s horse and placed one hand Bima’s hip and the other on the backrest of his horse. She lifted her foot and mounted the horse behind Bima. Lala quickly dismounted the horse and Wisnu kicked at the rockers of Bima’s. Throughout this, Aiye stood between the heads of two horses, one hand resting on the ear of each horse. Her eyes were fixed on the rockers and she carefully lifted one foot and then the other onto a rocker from each horse. Nunu tentatively placed a foot on the rocker of Bima’s horse, and then when Aiye had one foot on a rocker of each horse, Nunu moved to the back of Bima’s horse with Lala. Aiye watched her feet as the horses rocked back and forth, synchronized, lifting her as both horses rocked backward and dropping down as both horses rocked forward. Bima pulled his horse away, turning it away from the other horse. Aiye rocked on both horses’ rockers, standing and smiling as she watched her friends play on the other side of the room. Nunu ran off to play elsewhere. Wisnu and Didi continued to rock, and Lala pushed Bima. Bima stopped rocking, tilting his horse forward, watching Aiye’s foot and turning the horse away. Lala joined Nunu and the others, laughing as she ran. Bima shifted his horse further away. Once the horse’s head was out of Aiye’s reach she was forced to let go. She briefly tried to put her feet on the rockers of Wisnu and Didi’s horse. Wisnu and Didi switched positions, carefully keeping their bodies close together. Lala had returned to the horses, holding on to the back of Wisnu and Didi’s horse, grabbing ahold of the back rest. The two boys blocked Aiye who had moved to the back of the horse to take Didi’s place as he moved, and she touched Lala, guiding her out of her way. She then patted at Wisnu as he remounted the horse behind Didi. Lala held the horse’s head steady while Aiye rocked it with her foot on a

rocker and her hands on the backrest. The two girls then switched places as Bima moved further away and attempted to stand on the seat of the rocking horse. (Personal Communication and Observation)

### **Analysis**

This scene is extremely complicated, with many children moving in and out of view, interacting with each other and the horses using their hands, feet, and whole bodies. All of this action occurred in about 25 seconds. My initial reaction to this scene while filming was “Oh dear, someone is going to lose some toes.” My stomach clenched, but the teacher seemed unfazed. Earlier in the rocking horse play she had warned the children not to break the horses, but she gave no indication of unease during this scene.

Many focus group participants gasped and laughed as they watched Aiye climb on the rockers of the horses. Some discussed the creativity and the ingenuity and “problem solving” skills of the children. One way to interpret this scene would be to focus on the different ways the children engaged in onlooker, parallel, and cooperative play. Children stood watching, waiting for their turn or to find their role in the rocking horse play. Aiye was participating in an interesting hybrid of parallel and cooperative play, where 6 children were using the same two horses to sometimes play together, and sometimes play separately.

One participant said something particularly intriguing about this scene. Nandi, a Javanese performance scholar and father of a young child told me, “*Jatilan* as freeing and playtime as freeing.” *Jatilan*, is a complex, highly choreographed ritual and an interactive community performance that includes toy horses. The children in this class were familiar with *jatilan*. In scenes from video I recorded that is not included in this study, the children from this class dressed as *jatilan* dancers as part of their graduation ceremony. This is not to say the children were making a conscious connection between their play with the rocking horses and the dance. As Nandi pointed out during our discussion, although *jatilan* is part of the children’s lives and culture, it is not something they think of often. But this is not to say the children were not citing *jatilan* in their play. This is especially apparent in Bima’s move to position the horses to fight. *Jatilan* is often referred to as a “horse fighting dance” (Hughes-Freeland, 2008). The following is a description of *jatilan* in Java:

We watched a *kuda lumping* (toy-horse) dance from beginning to end. Two rows of four men in matching red costumes and make-up holding a hobbyhorse lined up, and then began stepping delicately in formation as the music built up in tempo and volume. The singing, which I was subsequently told is incidental compared with the deep rhythms of the gong, gradually shifted...Within minutes, some of the dancers’ eyes began to roll and soon after mayhem broke out. Not only did the dancers prance about with ecstatic expressions, oblivious (to the activities around them) but a couple of the dancing men hurled themselves out of the arena and ran away down the hill. With many in the audience shrieking and laughing, an even more startling turn occurred: a man from the audience dressed in standard old slacks and body shirt lurched into the arena and began snorting and galloping from end to end like a crazed stallion. Eventually, the shaman and a couple of assistants shepherded him to a corner where they removed a large machete from his possession and he began to calm down. (Richter, 2008, pp. 170, 171)

This description is missing some of the more sensational components of *jatilan*, which I am not including because they are not relevant to this discussion. *Jatilan* has several actors. The *pawang* is “in charge;” this person is ultimately in control but generally steps back, only intervening if there is a sign of danger to the performers or the audience. There

is one person who leads the horse fight, and several participants who join in the battle. Both performers and audience members are said to enter a trance like state, but also performers sometimes step outside of the dance and watch from the audience. Other than the costumes and the toy horses, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between performer and audience.

There is also a carnivalesque component of *jatilan*: Javanese culture values self-restraint and control. One of the distinguishing features of this dance is that participants are expected to be beyond self-control. The *pawang* is there to guide and assist as participants explore the precipice of their inhibitions and keep them from harm. This is not very different than the children's horse play scene, where the children were "free" as the *jatilan* performers are "free." The teacher did not intervene in this scene, despite just seconds before she telling the children to slow down, to be careful not to break the horses. Her role paralleled the role of the *pawang* in *jatilan*.

The seeming chaos in the room as the children played was fettered, but only slightly. Bima took on the role of the "leader" of the dance, initiating the fight. Wisnu, Didi, and Aiye were performers, actively engaged with the horses and the fight throughout the scene. Nunu and Lala drifted in and out of the roles of audience and performer, sometimes watching, sometimes engaging directly with the horses and the other "performers."

Were the children learning anything in this play? Yes, they were learning to solve a problem. Mainly: how do six children play both independently and together on two rocking horses. They solved that successfully. But was there anything else? I suggest the children were practicing a very complex metaphorical dance, one that is more deeply rooted in their culture than *jatilan*, but is in fact the root from which *jatilan* grows. In a highly stratified society with cultural norms that discourage expressing desire, each person must find a balance between meeting their individual needs without inhibiting others from achieving their desires. They must learn to do this while supporting one another and using just enough self-control that they do not harm or take from other members of the community.

#### **Discussion: Nonintervention, unlearning *keakuan*, and materials**

Infants and young children on Java are sometimes completely dependent on adults and older siblings. They might be discouraged from crawling, instead their parents carry them and hold them on their laps (Geertz, 1989). I witnessed this practice on school grounds, in the village, and urban environments. Parents, neighbors, and family members would hold sometimes infants up by their hands, slowly walking them one foot in front of the other before infants' legs were strong enough to support their small bodies. On my morning walks through a rice field I regularly watched a man assist an infant walking the length of a wall, holding steady as the infant placed one foot in front of the other.

I see this as a metaphor for the emotional support provided for young children and infants on Java. In English, if someone were trying to do tasks out of sequence we might say of them "they were trying to walk before they crawled." This implies we must quite literally start at the bottom and work our way up. This is not the case in Indonesia. In the highly stratified society there is very little social mobility. Some people begin their lives at the lowest social tier, and yet with the support of their family, neighbors, and community they stand tall. But they are not expected to stand alone. If children have a strong sense of *keakuan* they are in danger of never developing the strength to "walk" on their own two feet, and they will not help others.

This is not to say Indonesian children are expected to completely rely on adult or peer intervention and support. The teacher intervened when she was concerned about the

children damaging the rocking horses, but otherwise they were left to freely work through potential conflicts. Neither of these interventions are related to *keakuan*. Sometimes providing support and thinking of the community could manifest in what Hayashi and Tobin (2015) observed in Japanese preschools, teachers enacting *mimamoru* (teaching by watching and waiting). This is a form of non-intervention that gives children the space to problem solve without intervention, while still under the carefully watchful eye of the teacher. In the long term this strategy has the potential to provide children with the space to find solutions to problems in ways that are meaningful and appropriate in children's worlds.

Although none of the interview or focus group participants commented on it, during this *jatilan* play the children appear to have a lowered sense of *keakuan*. For so many children to navigate the two horses as an assembled unit there must be a constant awareness of self in relation to other, to the extent where every action taken by the individual will have a direct effect on the entire unit. The possible lowering of *keakuan* does not necessarily indicate the children were performing childlike understandings of adult behavior their play, but it does indicate a hyper awareness of the self in relation to other, as well as an awareness of vulnerability in both self and other that are both integral to developmental progress. As the children learn to lower *keakuan* they begin to learn *sungkan*; according to Geertz (1959), "*sungkan* refers to... an attitude of constraint, a repression of one's own impulses and desires, so as not to disturb emotional equanimity" (p.258). By putting aside the "me" that is separate from "the other" the children are learning to create space for emotional equanimity throughout the community.

What can early childhood educators in the global north/west learn from this? The concept of *keakuan* as problematic is based on the idea that the individual is inseparable from the community. It does not place the community before the individual but implies an obligate symbiotic relationship between the community and the individual. The teacher, although higher in the social hierarchy than the children, is part of the classroom community. It is understood that what benefits the teacher benefits the children, and what benefits the children, benefits the teacher. From the US perspective, lower levels of *keakuan* could help teacher educators, policy writers, and administrators develop school environments where children and teachers are equally supported, the whole school community benefits.

The limited classroom materials in Bu Uni's classroom could cause potential concern in early childhood educators from the United States. Popular approaches to early childhood education such as the Montessori method and the Reggio Emilia approach rely heavily on material engagement. Research has indicated that multimodal approaches to education have been linked to student engagement (Brouillette et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2013) and yet cost for materials is a concern for many teachers (Yildirim, 2008) and yet, it is not the cost of or number of materials that matters but relevance to student need (Souto-Manning et al., 2019). In Bu Uni's classroom the two rocking horses shared between nine students became tools for engagement that provided students with the opportunity to explore embodied practices related to social status, working together as a community, and playing freely outside of the constraints of adult intervention and societal rules. Free engagement with the materials through relative non-intervention of the teacher provided the children with space to lower their *keakuan* independent of the teacher, with each other's support.

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