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Play as political and citizenship learning

Following, an international study on young children's civic action and learning in early childhood settings in Australia, New Zealand and the USA, my colleagues (Jenny Ritchie & Jenn Adair) and I have recognized that the child-initiated scope of play enables children to explore what it means to co-exist with others, that is citizenship. Early childhood settings are, for many children, their first entry into a community of unknown others (MacNaughton, 2007), thereby offering space for children to do civic action, that is negotiate action for the collective. It was in the open-ended time, and space of play in early childhood settings that we saw children use their agency to initiate, work together and collectively pursue ideas that are important to the group.

Play and childhood are often seen as apolitical, from perceptions of children and childhood as innocent. Children are actors within structures, institutions and communities that shape and are shaped by politics. For example, an infant learning to express herself through language demonstrates her political agency, her assertiveness to connect with others, by communicating her feelings, desires, intentions and needs within the space she shares with others (Ranciere, 2010a). Children often advocate for themselves and others in contexts labeled as 'play'. We recognize children as political beings who actively seek to count "a part of those without part" (Rancière, 2010b), be it themselves and others who may be excluded through ruling demarcations (be they instated by educators and state or national policy, or by children who devise and assert their self-made rules), as political. For example, we see children welcoming

others into their play regardless of what human or animal form they entered as and adapting games for newcomer participation as enacting acts of collective concern.

Here is an example of children enacting collective action from the Aboriginal community where the Australian study took place.

Outside one afternoon, all the children from toddlers to four year olds and visiting older school age siblings/ cousins were gathered in the same yard. Ezra and Talia noticed bees buzzing around a flowering shrub close to the boundary fence with the aged care facility. Ezra found a small plastic container and lid at the craft trolley outside one of the classrooms. He brought it back to the shrub with intent to catch a bee. Talia stood beside him honoring interest in his initiative. Her younger sister Nelly and another two-year-old girl Mary (who had been crying for sometime) also moved toward the shrub. Nelly offered lip gloss to Mary and she stopped crying. As the more experienced older sister, Talia supported and guided the application. Suddenly, this was interrupted by Ezra's highly animated excited leaps and yelps of "I've got it" as he ran to tap Talia on the back to ensure she was part of the bee catching. The whole group followed around to the other side of the shrub. Ezra and Talia squabbled over who's bee it was. Ezra whacked Talia and she slightly cried. Jarrah (a visiting school aged cousin) lightly pushed Nelly from behind, and she whimpered. Jarrah tapped Ezra, who didn't flinch as he and Talia stealthily focused on following the bee as it moved around the shrub. Nelly started kicking the shrub and Mary started hitting the bush with a plastic wand. Talia stopped them by saying: "No it's a bumblebee flower". She returned to bee tracking.

Soon Ezra's eyes were fixed on a bee. He slowly leaned into the bush with the jar and the lid poised apart in opposing hands. Talia encouraged him with "catch it". At just the right moment he brought the jar and lid together and caught the bee. Talia exclaimed: "Ezra got it!" Ezra then proudly admired his catch from all angles. Nelly looked in and Aiden came over to look too. He showed the bee in the jar to the others then threaded his hand holding the jar through the fence so he could have a look without interruption. He told the others "Don't touch" putting his other hand up to them. Then Ezra walked off with the bee in the jar yelling "Hey I got a bee" as he found his younger brother. He sat down on the grass to admire and observe the bee in the jar. Andrew and Talia looked for other bees in the bush. After some time, Ezra took the lid off the jar emptying the bee onto the ground. Talia watched. They both looked around to follow the bee and eventually moved back to the bush to catch another bee.

Ezra initiated bee catching in the community of children. Talia supported his venture; she did not block Ezra's bee-catching action. Ezra welcomed Talia into the action. The supporting of each other's agency happened fluidly and frequently throughout the encounter. When Nelly applied lip-gloss on crying Mary, Talia assisted. And when Ezra caught the bee, others come to admire the catch.

Just as in broader society, children like adults don't always support each other's ideas, there is resistance, agitation and conflict. For example, Ezra tried to control how others responded to his initiated action (bee-catching) by whacking Talia when she claimed it was her bee and stopping others from touching the jar. And Jarrah tried to interrupt the group action by pushing Nelly and Ezra. Yet these moments of blocking another's civic agency were brief interruptions, and the children worked out how to move on. The collective pursuit of the bee

overrode squabbles over ownership and whacks to control or for attention. In the end Ezra even considered the agency of the bee and released it.

The cultural value of looking out for younger children and your kin (Maddison, 2009) shapes the enactment of who is counted in (the politics in play) in this community. From a very young age these children know to look after anyone younger and your kin. By learning from a very young age that you care for each other and you work together as a large extended family, community Elder, Sylvia, explained that "you go together with your people and you'll win or you'll finish it that day and sort it out, 'cos you're not being a proper black fella unless you go in together".

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