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## ARTICLE

**Children's Imaginative Communities - Microcosms of Democracy**

Susan Donnelly

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A few years ago I was invited to be part of a community focus group to discuss education in our local county. This conversation was part of a broader effort to develop a blueprint for future community development, and it involved other focus groups representing diverse perspectives. In our group there were several district superintendents, a school board member and a university representative. I was there as the head of a small independent school. Near the end of the conversation, we were asked what we would like the broader community to know about our field and what it contributes to the community. One of the superintendents talked about the important role that schools play in preparing young people for the workforce. Having recently read John Goodlad's book, *Education for Everyone* (2004), in which he writes about the public purpose of schools in a democratic society, I proposed to the group that schools not only prepare workers for the economy, but more importantly, they also should be preparing citizens for our democracy. This seemed to cause a brief hiccup in the conversation, as if someone had made a slightly rude noise, but then another member of the group picked up on the idea. However, she related it to getting her son's report card and reading the section on "citizenship" in which he was rated on items such as getting his work done on time, following directions and getting along with others. In other words, being a good citizen at that school was equated with being a compliant and responsible worker. I was perplexed. How had the noble and grand idea of being a literate, informed and involved citizen exercising one's First Amendment rights been reduced to this mundane level? But, no one else seemed to think it was odd; the conversation wrapped up and we all went our separate ways. This vignette continues to haunt me. This was a group of intelligent, educated, well-intentioned professionals, yet they all accepted her version of citizenship. I gained a better appreciation of Goodlad's urgent feeling that our democracy is in danger (2004). If schools are not preparing citizens who can engage in public discourse, who can negotiate across different perspectives for the common good, who is?

This experience made me think more deeply about children's experience of community in schools and how it can be better designed to develop a democratic citizenry. In this time of increasing standardization and high pressure accountability, pleas for democratizing schools or developing a new citizenship curriculum are not likely to find willing listeners. However, if we think globally but act locally, we can find ways to affect the everyday experiences of children in ways that promote democratic ideals. In schools, children live in microcosmic communities of considerable diversity. Classrooms are perfect laboratories for children to practice understanding other people and to experience the sense of community that results from collaborative, imaginative work together. This, after all, is the essence of democracy: We are all engaged in an ongoing effort to create a society in which each of us can pursue our life and faith in peace – it is collaborative; it requires great imagination; and it demands tolerance and understanding of differences. If children experience this type of community every day in their classrooms, won't they want to contribute to these kinds of communities in their adult lives? That is my premise. Therefore, we need to understand how children engage in imaginative, collaborative work together so that we can support and promote it. That is the topic of this paper.

I recently had the good fortune to be planning a trip to France and was delighted by the way I could use Googlemaps to zoom in and out on various regions of a country I have never seen, pondering where to visit. When I had the entire country in view, only the larger cities were identified by name. However, when I zoomed in to smaller and smaller regions, intriguing little communities started to show up with fascinating names such as Chauvigny and Benassay and Lavasseau. I could see if they were near small rivers and I could discern the network of roads leading to them and away from them. Then I could look up nearby accommodations and find out more about the countryside. As details were added to my picture of the area, it became more than just a bunch of dots on a map – it became a place where I could imagine real people living and working, a place I could imagine visiting.

This article will use the same *zooming in* technique to focus our attention on micro-cosmic communities of children playing together to see what the dynamics we find there can illuminate about the larger democratic society in which these microcosms exist. In fact, to start with, we will zoom in even further to focus on two individual children to learn about their unique ways of engaging with the world and how they interact and affect each other in imaginative play. After we have examined the minute details of these micro-communities, we will zoom back out to the macro-view again to consider what they help us understand about art, imagination and democracy. Through this technique, I intend to address the following ideas:

- Each child is an embodiment of a unique pattern of thought and a characteristic aesthetic.
- When children come together, they play imaginatively, creating a community space in which their patterns of thought and aesthetics affect each other and expand personal horizons.
- In this play, communities of practice develop and identities are formed and transformed.
- This experience of community, in which participants are co-imagining the reality they are creating, is a microcosm of democracy in action, a reality that is co-created by the participants, sustained by their collective imagination.

So, put your imaginary cursor on the page and we will zoom down past continents, countries and states, past cities and towns, past schools and classrooms and neighborhoods, down to two individual children, whom I happen to know very well. More than a decade ago I started writing observations of my two sons, Alan and Ian, one now a teenager in love with snowboarding and the other a fledging adult moving out on his own. We will focus on each in turn to learn about them as unique individuals; then we will see how their characteristic patterns of thought, engagement with the world and aesthetic styles interacted and affected each other in imaginative play.

### *Alan*

Alan weighed eight pounds six ounces at birth and was 21 inches long. He was solid and well-muscled. As an infant, he had a density to him that surprised people when they picked him up. At eight months we noted that he had a powerful reach, a lunge “from his toes.” He had an intense gaze, watching without blinking for a long time, looking everything over in new situations. He noticed patterns and designs in his surroundings and had very strong reactions to particular ones – a fabric wall hanging in a restaurant, the picture on my coffee cup, and the cover design on a book I was reading all delightedly excited him so much that he would try to devour them. However, a hanging mobile with black and white patterns, promoted as an intellectual stimulant for infants, was distressing to him. We had to replace it with a mobile of tropical fish, which became the only thing that would soothe him during teething pains. The strong vocabulary that we used to describe Alan at eight months – *intense gaze, powerful lunge, devouring things of interest* – continued to characterize him as he developed. These, and related words and phrases, recurred again and again in descriptions of Alan at different ages.

Alan had a passion for digging in the dirt as a young child. In our back yard, we had a strip of dirt next to one wall of the house where we had filled in a ditch; it drew him like a magnet. All he needed was an old spoon and he was happy for hours. Along with his interest in digging, he was passionately attracted to tools, especially the hammer. Before he could walk, he climbed up over a railing on the back steps, fell about five feet to the ground, and crawled over to a hammer in the grass, without a peep of complaint about hurting himself. His dad gave him a little hammer to use and made a pounding board for him. By the time he was two and a half years old he could independently and accurately pound a nail with a few swift strokes, without banging his fingers. He would engage in this activity for long periods of time, as he did with the digging. Both of these activities need a firm grip in the hand and use the same gesture of the arm – a powerful downward stroke. They also require little movement in the rest of the body. These activities were well suited to Alan’s solid, well-muscled frame and there was a meditative quality to these repetitive movements that so delighted him.

When Alan first saw a backhoe – a big object that combined his two main interests in life, a powerful tool with a hammer-like arm that dug huge holes in the dirt – it was love at first sight! When Alan was not yet two years old, before he could say many intelligible words, he was tremendously excited when he saw a backhoe digging a ditch. He would cry, brokenhearted, if we drove past a backhoe working and didn’t stop to watch. As Alan’s speech developed, some of his first, and favorite, words were *backhoe*, *bozer* (for bulldozer), and his own version of *excavator* that cannot be replicated in writing. For the next few years, backhoes were part of our daily lives – watching them working on construction sites, reading about them in books, and playing with toy replicas. By association, other construction machines were also of interest. We had a leaky plastic pool in the basement which we filled with sand so that Alan could play with his miniature construction machines during the winter. Alan’s interest in hammers gradually extended to other tools, including screwdrivers, wrenches and saws, so we built and equipped a little workbench for him in the basement as well.

The intensity with which Alan immersed himself in tools, digging and construction machines when he was two is the same intensity with which he later immersed himself in other activities. When Alan was around three years old, an interest in dragons and knights began to come to the fore. This grew into an interest in heroes more generally, and Robin Hood and King Arthur especially. Again, the gesture of using a sword with a firm grip and a powerful stroke was the initial magnetic draw. However, it led to deep immersion in stories and language.

When Alan was four years old, he would listen to stories, completely immersed for hours, even if the language was quite beyond him. We read him the complete Howard Pyle versions of both *King Arthur* (1988) and *Robin Hood* (1986), written in archaic English. Here is a sample of the archaic language in these texts:

Now when the Sheriff found that neither law nor guile could overcome Robin Hood, he was much perplexed, and said to himself, "Fool that I am! Had I not told our King of Robin Hood, I would not have gotten myself into such a coil; but now I must either take him captive or have wrath visited upon my head from his most gracious Majesty. I have tried law, and I have tried guile, and I have failed in both; so I will try what may be done with might." (p. 34)

One day, my reading was rather choppy as I was periodically reading ahead so I could paraphrase the archaic language, using more familiar words. Alan got impatient. When I explained what I was doing, he said, with some exasperation, "Mom, I don't want to understand, I want to learn *all* the language." He did actually want to get the gist of the story and would ask questions if he didn't understand what was happening, but the meaning for him was secondary to being immersed in the language, enjoying the rhythm and drama of it.

Alan developed his sense of a story from the inside of the characters. He enacted the stories, taking on the role and gestures of the hero. When Alan was three, two of his favorite books were *The Kitchen Knight* (1990) and *Saint George and the Dragon* (1990) by Margaret Hodges, with rich and dramatic illustrations by Trina Schart Hyman. Alan enacted these stories incessantly.

One day we were playing knights and dragons and he spent a long time arranging his body just so, in a particular stance, with his sword held high over his head, straining, lifting one knee slightly in front of him, grimacing, ready to strike. I had that uncanny feeling of *déjà-vu*, until I realized that he was enacting an illustration from *Saint George and the Dragon*. As Alan readied himself for battle, he used the gesture and language from the book, declaring that he was going to "smote the dragon such a mighty blow that it will fall down dead." Alan used his body to get inside the character of the hero and inside the story. This was also a way for Alan to internalize the story, to take it into himself. He dwelt in the story, and the story in him.

Alan also used his body to enact events in the world. When Alan was almost three, he and I were walking down a street in the summertime. A sprightly, elderly gentleman passed us, going at quite a clip. As he passed, he smiled at Alan and asked, "Where you going young fella?" Alan answered, "To see some machines," and watched him move ahead of us with his hands in his pockets, enjoying his exercise. A moment later I felt Alan removing his hand from mine. When I looked down, he had one hand in a pocket and was struggling to get the other hand in a pocket. Once this was accomplished, he picked up the pace and strolled along very much like the friendly gentleman.

When Alan's passion for digging machines waned, it was closely followed by an intense interest in diving into the depths of the ocean and exploring life under water. As a four-year-old, he had an aversion to putting his face in the water, but once he saw pictures of divers wearing masks in the ocean, he spent many an evening in the bathtub, determinedly learning to put his face under water and blow bubbles so that he, too, could have a diving mask.

The physical activities of digging in sand and diving under water that so attracted Alan transformed into the metaphorical equivalents in the mental realm: *Digging* and *immersion* became characteristic ways in which Alan engaged with and learned about the world. This mode of learning requires time and repeated experiences with situations and phenomena. This has made entering new social situations a difficult challenge for Alan. The first day of karate lessons, or at a new-child care program, or in a new school has been like diving into unknown waters, often preceded by headaches and stomachaches. Alan eventually learned that the anxiety would pass after a few days as things became familiar, but breaking through the surface of a new situation continued to be uncomfortable for him for many years.

Related to immersion is a strong capacity for concentration. Sometimes Alan was so involved in an activity or a story going on in his head that he literally didn't hear or notice us right next to him. As a young teenager, he could read for hours at a time, once his interest was engaged in a book. In addition, his attachments to particular things, people and animals are deep and abiding. During his passion for digging machines, he had a working toy backhoe that was virtually an appendage for several months. Later, when he was fighting dragons, his sword and shield were part of getting dressed in the morning. It was torment for him to share these accoutrements with his friends or younger brother.

Throughout Alan's development, there has been a continuity of characteristics related to *intensity* and *immersion*. Initially, he possessed physical density and strong muscles, which gave him a powerful downward arm movement. He naturally resonated with digging, hammering and wielding swords – early and frequent activities for him. *Digging in* is a way to get *into* something, to become *immersed* in it, to go *below the surface*. Alan became totally *absorbed* in stories and language.

Through his physical enactments of stories, he *got into* the characters. His immersion gives him a strong capacity for *concentration*, to the point that he can be oblivious of his surroundings. He has a tendency towards *acquisition* in the way he becomes strongly attached to people and things. This cluster of words – *digging in, immersion, going below the surface, concentration, acquisition, absorption* – is characteristic of all aspects of Alan’s development and describes the outline of a pattern of thought and an aesthetic that is uniquely his. Our younger son, Ian, is entirely different.

## **Ian**

Ian, as a baby, was slender and willowy with long, graceful fingers that he enjoyed waving about in the air and watching their movements. The objects in the environment that first caught his attention were strings, shoelaces, and ribbons. When he could first sit up and grasp things on his own, he would spend an amazing amount of time with something of this sort, running it through his fingers one way and then the other, tangling and untangling it, finding and losing the end, trying to tie it together. At one- and-a-half years, Ian continued to be drawn toward strings, laces, belts, ties, cords, ropes, ribbons – anything that could tie or connect. He spent a long time trying to buckle a belt and he was an expert *untier*. He loved to help me take off my shoes, always pulling the end of the lace correctly, never the bow; not once did he create an annoying knot.

As Ian became mobile and discovered electrical cords and extension cords, he was very interested in how they connected things and made them work. One day he discovered a 100-foot extension cord in the basement, and it was like Alan discovering backhoes – total infatuation! He was fascinated with it for several months. He spent hours almost every day, starting with one end in the kitchen, and then dragging the rest of it all over the house so that all the rooms were connected with it like a giant maze. We tripped over that cord daily for months. If we tried to hide it in the basement again, he would find it. Appliances with power cords were naturally attractive to Ian, especially the vacuum cleaner. He always watched the entire vacuuming procedure (from a distance because he didn’t like the noise). Later, when the vacuum was turned off, he would go over all the same territory himself with it, even moving the furniture if he could. In the summer, Ian did a similar thing when his dad was mowing the lawn. Ian had a toy lawnmower and he would follow in his dad’s footsteps, around and around the yard until all the grass was cut.

As with Alan, whose interest in *digging in* showed up in his immersion in stories and language, Ian’s *tying and connecting* showed up in his involvement in story and language. At three years old, Ian loved to “read” to us. He would open a book and flip through the pages as he talked, sometimes using phrases from the book at hand, sometimes pulling in phrases and themes from other stories, or pieces of conversation happening in another room, or items from recent events in his life. These “readings” were like his play with cords and ribbons: phrases and themes from many different sources were tied together in completely novel ways. During that summer, we camped a lot, and he would do these improvisations without the prop of a book, sitting by the campfire, talking about whatever came into his mind at the time. These improvisations would often go on for fifteen or twenty minutes and we timed one of them at a half hour.

Here is an example I recorded when Ian was about 3 ½, “reading” the Dr. Seuss book, *One Fish Two Fish Red Fish Blue Fish* (1960).

The nine is what I would have. The end of micker micker memock. There would be a picker pock. Fish and more fish... more fish and more fish. Blue fish. Red fish. Two yellow fish and one yellow fish. What does that count? One yellow fish twice two yellow fish: that makes four. That makes five. Two. One blue fish and one red fish. How much would that make if there was one more blue fish? That would be four. How much would a yik yak yank mean as a tail of top would be on a bop?

When he was a little older he was retelling the story of “The Three Billy Goats Gruff,” initially sticking quite closely to the actual language of the story. However, in the middle some unexpected characters made surprise appearances:

“I want to go up to the hillside to make myself fat,” said the littlest billy goat Gruff. “Me too,” said the mellium (sic) sized Gruff. “Me too,” said the big Gruff. “Me too,” said the next sister. “Me too,” said the troll. “I’m not gonna go,” said Captain Hook. (Ian laughs) And in the meanwhile, trip-trop, trip-trop went the witch. “I’m not gonna tell you who I am and what I am doing on your bridge. I will poke your eyeballs out to bitty and bones if you come along.” And that’s what the billy goat said and that’s what he did and then he went up to make himself fat...And there they got so fat, why if the fat hasn’t fallen off of them, why they’re still fat. So, snip snap snout, this tale’s told out.

These “readings” were like jazz improvisations with language. They definitely had a rhythm and a general theme, but they would take unexpected turns and incorporate surprising details and characters. The words used to describe Ian’s early

interests – *tying, connecting, covering the territory and improvising* – continued to emerge throughout Ian's development. For quite a while, one of Ian's favorite activities was making mixtures, in the kitchen. He was less interested in following recipes and more interested in selecting various ingredients from the cupboards, mixing them together, cooking them and tasting and sharing the results. Later, he became interested in using maps to navigate on car trips. He was always very good at solving mazes, and drew complex ones of his own design incessantly. Throughout his life, Ian has had a consistent tendency to create his own version of games once he learned the basics of the original – Monopoly and Pokemon being two notable examples for which he created new rules, characters, and elaborate materials.

Whereas Alan has a tendency towards *acquisition*, Ian has a tendency towards *distribution*. When Alan and Ian played in the sandbox together, quite often Alan would dig holes or play with construction machines while Ian filled up containers with sand and carried them to different parts of the yard to dump them.

Just as Alan has characteristics that have been continuous throughout his development, so does Ian. *Connections* and *improvisation* seem to be at the core for Ian. He developed an early passion for cords, ribbons, and shoelaces which are all used for various kinds of *tying* and *connecting*. He *created and traced paths* with vacuums, lawnmowers, maps and mazes. He made *mixtures* with cooking ingredients and, in another way, with stories when he *improvised* with language. As with Alan, there is a cluster of words – *tying, creating and tracing paths, improvising, mixing, distributing* – that are related to each other and that describe a pattern of thought and aesthetic that is characteristic of all aspects of Ian's development.

### ***Creating Communities – Expanding Horizons***

To this point I have described two children's unique patterns of activity, thought, and development. But, children do not live, work, or play in isolation. In their interactions with other children they come into contact with other ways of engagement, other perspectives on the world, that may complement their own or challenge or stretch them. One of the things I have found fascinating, and sometimes exasperating, as a parent, is the interaction between Alan's and Ian's very different ways of being, how their characteristic patterns overlap, connect, and sometimes clash.

Without other siblings, Alan and Ian had just each other to play with much of the time. This was sometimes very difficult for them, and for their parents. When they were young, they both liked to do dramatic play, enacting exciting adventures of heroes battling evil forces in some form or other – monsters, dragons, the Sheriff of Nottingham, or generic bad guys. However, Alan's tendency was to adopt one character, such as Zorro, and play out the story from inside that persona. He became infuriated with Ian's flightiness: One minute he was Robin Hood, the next minute he roared like a dragon, and then he might morph into Batman. In Alan's terms, Ian kept "ruining the story" – Zorro, after all, did not fight dragons! Ian, on the other hand, was just doing what he naturally did with his improvised reading – tying and connecting story elements from various sources into a new mixture. He couldn't understand why Alan was always being so bossy and not letting him turn into different characters.

When Ian and Alan were four and seven years old, respectively, their dramatic play didn't last more than about twenty minutes before Ian would come to me lamenting, "Alan won't let me be a ...," or Alan would complain, "Ian keeps changing the story!" I learned to call them for a snack or another activity about 18 minutes after they started a drama – before things fell apart. We had several conversations in which I tried to help them understand their different patterns of engagement as I was coming to understand them myself. This seemed to help some, and over time, Alan became more tolerant of Ian's sudden changes of character or plot, often carrying on with his own sense of the story, but sometimes even participating in Ian's improvising. Ian became more inclined to at least stick to the chosen genre of the game, not introducing space men into a fencing match, for example. They learned to compromise enough to keep their play going for extended periods of time, and in the process, their characteristic patterns of engagement expanded. They each incorporated into their own set of possibilities a little of the other's perspective.

Although children develop at an early age the outline of a pattern that remains unique and characteristic throughout their lives, these patterns can and do transform over time through interactions with the physical environment and with other people. Whenever children come together in groups – at family gatherings, in day care-centers and schools, on playgrounds and street corners – play happens. In play, the intrinsic patterns of children overlap, mesh, and complement each other, or they can also challenge, stretch, and sometimes clash with each other. In the negotiations between the unique stories of individual children that must occur in order to develop a story line in which they can all participate lies the secret of true community. Identities are not surrendered in this process, but they are bound to be stretched and transformed.

This formation of community, and the inherent transformation of identities, has been described by Wenger in the context

of studying how adults learn in work places. In his book, *Communities of Practice* (1998), he says that the formation of community and the transformation of identities are part and parcel of the same process, two sides of the same coin, a process of “mutual constitution” (p. 193). If we take play to be what Wenger calls a “community of practice” for children, then wherever there is a group of children, this is an important location for the formation and transformation of identities.

This process of the transformation of identities through the formation of community has been noticed by a few teachers who have studied and written about children in classrooms, although this was not the main focus of their studies. At this point, we are going to zoom out a little from children in a family setting to look at children interacting in two classroom settings: In the first example, Anne Dyson describes Jake and Manuel and the transformation of their approaches to writing; the second example focuses on how Nancy and Janice expanded each other’s capacities in David Carroll’s preschool classroom.

### ***Jake and Manuel***

In a study that followed children learning to write through grades 1 and 2, Anne Dyson (1989) noted that “over time, individual children began to incorporate into their own approach to the composing activity various stances first made visible by others” (p. 259). Dyson illustrates this in a summary of the progress of two strikingly different friends – Jake, an inveterate actor and participator in his own stories, and Manuel, a director who initially remained outside his stories.

In this study, Dyson observed a group of children over a two-year period during their class writing time. The children often developed their stories by first drawing images and talking, then transcribing their ideas into writing. There were frequent lively discussions among groups of children as they worked side by side. Initially, Dyson noticed and described the differences among the children in how they approached composing their stories. Each child demonstrated a characteristic mode of thinking and aesthetic sense about their stories. Later, she became aware of how their approaches to creating stories affected each other over time.

Early in the study, Jake typically accompanied his drawing and story-writing with lively talk that dramatized the action in his story with him as the main actor. However, he often included his friends in the action, particularly Manuel. Whereas Jake was an actor within his narratives, Manuel was more of a director. He primarily wrote third person narratives and took great care with his drawings, which were often quite detailed and beautiful. It was not uncommon for him to work silently, and when he did talk, it was usually to plan what he was going to do and to make “reasonable, sensible choices” (p. 177).

Jake and Manuel were friends and there are frequent references in Dyson’s account of them working side-by-side during writing time. They talked with each other, Manuel sometimes being drawn into Jake’s imaginative verbal dramas. They also overheard each other talking to themselves as they worked: Manuel’s musings about what color or what world to use and his reasoning about whether something was making sense was part of Jake’s world as he worked.

Over time, Dyson (p. 260) notes, Jake became more aware of boundaries between drawing, talking and writing, and more deliberate about his text. “At times he sounded like Manuel, a director wondering if his story would seem complete, logical.” Dyson also describes how Manuel, on the other hand, gradually enriched his text as he gained more of a feel for the dramatic world being created: “At times he sounded like Jake, orally conveying his characters’ feelings and actions.”

### ***Nancy and Janice***

In a longitudinal study that he conducted on six children in his preschool classroom, David Carroll (1982) describes how Nancy and another child, Janice, interacted in a complementary way, even though they seemed to be very different from each other. Physically, they present quite a contrast. Nancy is described (p. 34) as “short and fragile looking, but at the same time tough and rugged.” She has large, striking eyes that sparkle when she smiles, or “narrow slightly in determined concentration” when she is working on a project. Janice, of average height and slightly plump with rounded cheeks, has very bad vision and wears glasses at all times.

Their temperaments, ways of working, and interests are also studied in contrasts. Nancy’s characteristic way of exploring her environment and acquiring new skills is described as “self-directed investigation” (p. 34). She has a strong feeling for pattern and relationship, which is evident in drawing and crafts, such as sewing and weaving. She is very patient and competent in hand work and picks up new techniques easily. “She has an intense connection with materials; placing herself close to her work, she almost embraces it, surrounding it with her arm, cradling pieces in her hands, and often talking to them” (p. 36). Nancy is not anti-social, but there is an element of privacy in Carroll’s description of her. Janice, on the other hand, loves to be in the center of things. Enthusiasm and exuberance are mentioned frequently in his description of her. She loves dramatics and fantasy play with a group of children. When she becomes upset or angry, “her

feelings swallow her up” (p. 54) and she can erupt into tantrums or defiance with little provocation. She works with expressive materials such as color, water, and clay, and loves singing, conversation, and humor.

Though these two children are very different in many ways, there are a couple of points at which their characteristic patterns overlap. Nancy enjoys drawing “whole scenes which show the setting and relative positions of people and tell you something about their feelings” (p. 36). Her stories describe relationships and “reasons for things” but they also “address deep emotions and powerful images” (p. 37). Drama and feeling are expressed in her writing and art. Janice, although she “lives primarily in a world of powerful feeling,” is also able to “appreciate the world from the viewpoint of logic and form” (p. 42). She has a grasp of the alphabet and the concept of reading. Across their differences, these points of connection occasionally draw these two children together in an activity and expand the horizons of their identities, as Carroll notes:

When Janice and Nancy came together in the block corner or at the painting table, each was drawn across the space separating their viewpoints. Just as Janice continually stretched the dramatic side of Nancy’s thoughts and gave Nancy access to that side of herself, Nancy pulled Janice toward the relationships and patterns inherent in their activity. Both children got a glimpse of alternate sides of their own experience and thinking. (p. 67)

### ***Imagination, Community and Compromise***

In our minute examination of the micro-cosmic communities of Alan and Ian, Jake and Manuel, and Nancy and Janice, we have had an opportunity to see details about what it means to engage imaginatively with other people in a community that are not generally visible as we go about our daily lives. In negotiating dramatic play together, Alan and Ian had to expand their own possibilities to encompass a little of each other’s characteristic ways of engagement. Alan became a little more improvisational and Ian was sometimes able to limit his improvising to remain within the boundaries of a particular dramatic genre. Jake and Manuel gradually adopted strategies used by each other in composing texts. They became able to not only view their work from their preferred stance, Jake as an actor in the drama and Manuel as director, but also to view it from a new stance, Manuel discussing the thoughts and feelings of his characters and Jake considering the next element to add to his story. Nancy and Janice enlarged each other’s viewpoints, Janice drawing out Nancy’s dramatic side, and Nancy emphasizing elements of pattern and relationship in their joint activities.

These children influenced each other by being friends, working, playing, and talking together, engaging in Wenger’s “community of practice.” As a result, they expanded their horizons as makers and authors, as friends and as people. Involved as they were in the co-creation of their own communities, they were negotiating the meaning of their worlds, and they were also forming and transforming their own identities. The process of compromise that led to expanding each of their horizons as people did not require that they relinquish their identities; rather, it involved an intermeshing of their individual aesthetics that created spaces for new possibilities for each of the participants. This experience of community happens whenever play, or playful work, joins people together in imaginative negotiations. It naturally occurs in the dramatic play of children, but it can also happen during academic work, such as writing, math, reading, science and social studies, if children work together on projects that engage their imaginations in playing with serious ideas. A discussion about why the Pythagorean Theorem works, or whether Columbus actually *discovered* America, could offer similar opportunities for the development of community and transformation of identities. In the adult world, discussions about issues such as how to regulate commercial and residential expansion around an urban area involve citizens in imagining together what kind of a community they want to have in the long term. Do we want areas of concentrated housing in order to preserve agricultural land? What kind of businesses do we want to attract that will provide jobs for the unemployed? How do we preserve quality of life while contending with pressures for development?

The microcosmic children’s communities that I describe in this article are different in scope and sophistication, but not in nature, from the larger societal context in which they emerge. As we zoom back out now to ponder the importance of art and imagination in a democratic society, they may help us to see that the vitality of a democracy depends on the collective imagination of its populace, keeping it alive in a constant process of co-creating it. Democracy is only given reality in the ongoing negotiations of differing perspectives and individual aesthetics: It does not exist in a perfect, impersonal reality. However, in the constant negotiation of its imperfection, space is created for the formation and transformation of identities, as participants express ideas and debate issues.

What then, are the implications for schools and classrooms if we want to prepare our students to be citizens in a democratic society? Do they need to know about the government and how it works? Do they need opportunities to vote on school rules? Do they need to know about their First Amendment Rights? Certainly these are important underpinnings of our political democracy. However, I would propose that, at a more fundamental level, our children need opportunities to experience social democracy: using their imaginations to co-create communities of thought and action as they develop



play scenarios, write stories, and discuss mathematical, scientific and historical explanations for things. I believe that it is in these experiences that they come to understand that *every* participant in their community has something of value to offer them, and that it is in their *own* interest to compromise and learn from each other, so that they may *all* benefit from expanded possibilities for the transformation of their perspectives on the world and their own identities. Children do this on their own, even in very restrictive settings where their only playful opportunities occur during recess. However, in these situations, there is often little adult guidance, and the social dynamics are not necessarily the most educative in the sense that we have been discussing here. Adults, particularly those of us involved in educating our young people, need to understand that for children, play is the primary means of cultural development (Vygotsky, 1978), and to keep in mind that *play* includes all forms of negotiations involving the imagination, from the dramatic play of young children to the storytelling of beginning writers to the academic debates of adolescents and scholars. Understanding this, we can plan our schools and classrooms, our daily schedules and academic assignments, to allow some room, some of the time, for the playful interplay of individual perspectives and aesthetics that builds true community and supports the formation and transformation of identities.

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