The Challenge of a Community Park:
Engaging Young Children In Powerful Lessons In Democracy

By Bronwyn Cole and Margit McGuire

Plans for a neighborhood park

Getting Young Citizens Off to a Good Start

Starting kindergarten is a major milestone in the lives of young children; it is often described as a "big step," a "challenge" or "transition" for them, and their families. While parents worry about whether their children will miss them and how they will adjust to school, children are typically concerned with the rules they will need to know to succeed in "big school;" how they will make friends; how they will find their way around the school (especially knowing where the toilets are); when and how to queue at the school store or lunchroom to purchase items; who can use the play equipment and when; where the out-of-bounds areas are; and what happens if your soccer ball rolls into one of these areas.[1] These are the key issues that children worry about. They know that infringing on school or playground rules has potential to land them "in trouble" with (as yet) unknown consequences. Without friends, school can be lonely, and the playground can be a place of torment or bullying, leading to anxiety that may linger and affect "the tone and direction of a child's school career."[2]

Feeling Safe

For young children to engage and learn in school, they need to feel safe in the classroom and on the playground right from the first day. They also need learning experiences that are active and meaningful—that engage them cognitively, affectively, and operatively.[3] Feeling safe requires knowledge about places, rules, codes of behavior, and the skills and confidence to ask questions, seek advice, and negotiate and work with others—especially when unsure or feeling that someone or something is wrong. These are important competencies for achieving in school and living in a democracy.

This article describes how kindergarten children developed and demonstrated such competencies by working together to construct a mural of a playground, make decisions about rules and codes of behavior, and resolve problems that arise (as introduced by the teacher) such as graffiti and bullying in their imagined playground. In this social studies learning unit, the teachers' pedagogical approach employed real world experiences (high cognitive), role-playing (high operative), and engaged children

emotionally as they imagined real-world possibilities (high affective). The two key problems that arise in the playground, graffiti and bullying, challenge the children's social and civic understandings as they explore ways to resolve these problems. Finally, we discuss why active citizenship learning of this type is essential for young children and a healthy democracy.

The Learning Experience

The observations recorded here are from several classrooms in culturally diverse, low socio-economic areas in southwestern Sydney, Australia. We observed these classrooms over several years as part of a long-term, action-research project focusing on student engagement. (Additionally, schools in Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania and Seattle, Washington, were involved in piloting the curriculum and then serving as further examples for our observation.) We collected extensive data from observations, as well as pre- and post-unit interviews with students and teachers.

The classes described here were all involved in the same integrated social studies unit of work, "Solving Problems in the Park." A class was typically involved in this project two hours a day over three to six weeks, depending on how teachers integrated their lessons over the days. In this unit, teachers introduced their students to an imaginary scenario about "a gift of vacant land, near their schools." Students were invited to become "park planners and developers," working to create a park to suit the needs of their local community.[4] In all of the classrooms we observed, the children saw this to be an exciting challenge.

After viewing a real vacant lot (selected by the teacher), the children constructed a classroom frieze, or mural, that depicted an undeveloped plot of land. They painted a section of the classroom bulletin board to include trees, bushes, grassy areas, streams, lakes, or other natural features. This frieze formed the "work space" for the young planners—just like the drafting paper that real architects or planners might use, only larger.

Then the teacher asked: What would we like to build in our new park? What would be best for different sorts of people who might use this community park? In order to answer such questions, students carefully observed facilities and equipment in their school playground; parks in the local area; and, in some cases, regional and national parks.

Specializing

The teacher organized students into teams of builders, painters, and gardeners—three roles familiar to kindergarten children and ones they can readily explore in more depth. As the children constructed eleven-inch paper models depicting themselves in one of these roles, they thought about questions such as: What clothing do we wear to perform our work and keep us safe? What tools and equipment will we use? Who can we ask to help us with our job? The school's ground staff can become experts for the children to consult. Parents or community members can be invited to give advice about skills, specialized equipment, and qualifications needed for specific jobs, as well as how to work together as a team. Groups of children can use their imaginations and engage in role playing to demonstrate some of the work they would perform daily—exploring behaviors, "using" tools (with care), and developing skills and language associated with the work.

The teacher then encouraged students to discuss their ideas for the park and recorded various proposals. To construct a sustainable park, gardeners must choose some appropriate plants, knowing what each plant needs to survive. Builders must locate walkways that will steer pedestrians around vulnerable plantings. They might choose to build a bridge where the water drains. Painters need to select tough, outdoor paint (for structures like picnic sheds and park benches) and durable wood or metal for park signs.

To create a successful park that will meet the needs of many users, the planners have to integrate knowledge from all of the disciplines in the humanities, sciences, and arts. Also, each specialist needs to know the laws that apply to his or her work. For example, painters must carefully dispose of their paint to avoid contaminating the water supply. Builders must construct safe shelters and walkways. Gardeners must choose plants that will not cause problems, such as vines that might look pretty, but would overrun structures and trees.

Cooperating

These specialists must also cooperate with each other as they plan a park. Will a small tree grow up to be big and crowd the picnic shed? Then we'd better separate the two with some more space. Will pedestrians want to walk from the playground directly to the picnic shelter? Then we'd better place the flowerbed along side that straight-line pathway, not in the middle of it. Are signs needed to inform people where the restrooms are located? Then we'd better talk about what signs are needed and where to place them. Would a person in a wheelchair have access to each area of the park? Let's be sure that we have the ramps and signs to make it possible. Addressing these issues requires that builders, planters, and painters work together.

This unit of study complements other aspects of the curriculum. As a science activity, children set up seed germination tubs, observe what happens, and keep diaries of plant growth over a couple of weeks. They investigate how plants depend on and use water, soil, and sunlight. These activities are reflected in the classroom discussions about park planning. For example, where will we place the trees? Will there be adequate water, root space, and sunlight for each one?

Constructing

At this point, the children were ready for the important job of "building the park," or filling out the mural with the built features of the environment. Across the classrooms we have observed, children typically construct swings, slides, sports

Table 1: Storypath Summary

Storypath Component and Episode	Educational Purpose	Teacher's Role
Creating the Setting Students create the setting by completing a frieze (mural) or other visual representation of the place. *Episode 1: The Park. Children create the setting for the park.*	• Introduces the narrative as an organizational schema for learning • Establishes a common context for learning • Fosters student ownership for the learning connecting what students know to new information. • Develops and reinforces common vocabulary through discussion • Contextualizes writing • Develops cooperation and negotiation skills	• Introduces Storypath • Reads description of place • Leads discussion about place connecting to what is known to new information • Introduces and reinforces new vocabulary • Organizes students to create the setting and facilitates cooperative group work • Facilitates a sustained discussion about the setting • Facilitates the creation of the word bank and related writing activity
Creating the Characters Each student creates a character for the story whose roles he/she will play during subsequent episodes. *Episode 2: The Park Planners. Children create park planners and builders.*	• Personalizes the learning by creating believable characters • Engages students in narrative and develops the need to know to move the story forward • Develops speaking and listening skills through character introduction	• Engages students in sustained discussions of characters and creates the sense of suspense for the story • Manages students' visual and written construction of characters • Reinforces and expands vocabulary • Guides character introductions to connect the story to students' lives and topic of study
Building Context Students are involved in activities that stimulate them to think more deeply about the people and place they have created. *Episode 3: Investigating Plants for the Park. Children carry out investigations to help them decide on what plants need to grow.* *Episode 4: A Place to Play. Children decide on the play equipment and sports fields for the park.*	• Provides a meaningful and purposeful context for investigations about the topic of study • Builds knowledge base for the topic • Develops skills in context	• Provides instruction to ensure students have skills to complete investigations • Scaffolds learning
Critical Incidents Characters confront problems typical of those faced by people of that time and place. *Episode 5: Graffiti in the Park. Children discover graffiti in the park and must decide how to respond.* *Episode 6: Bullying in the Park. Older children are bullying the younger children and won't share the play equipment. so park planners take action to respond to the problem.*	• Fosters critical thinking and problem tackling • Promotes collaboration and negotiation • Develops analysis and evaluation of information and promotes new or more research to address the problem	• Guides students to ask their own questions, rethink understanding of their world, make sense of new ideas • Promotes examination of alternative viewpoints and predictions of problem resolution
Concluding Event Students plan and participate in an activity that brings closure. *Episode 7: Dedicating the Park. Children name and dedicate the park to conclude the Storypath.*	• Provides closure and reflection on learning • Applies learning to the "real world"	• Guides students through the closure and reflection process

fields and seating areas, using collage materials such as tissue and construction paper, fabric, popsicle sticks, and pipe cleaners. Colorful flowerbeds and ponds or lakes are common. There is great pride amongst the children when they look at their final product. They propose names for the park and then democratically vote for their preference.

A grand opening and dedication ceremony is planned. Parent invitations are underway, when…a problem arises…the park is "vandalized with graffiti" (as described below). How could this happen to such a carefully designed and constructed park? Why did the graffiti occur? What can the planners do to solve this problem before the dedication ceremony and, most importantly, how can they prevent further vandalism?

An Unexpected Problem

Many units for young learners are designed to develop sets of understandings through activities similar to what we have just described. But the introduction of real problems for the children to solve is often avoided with the belief that the children are too young to wrestle with such thinking. Teachers may not be confident that their children can manage an activity such as this, where children come to a community meeting to consider the advantages, disadvantages, and consequences of several proposed solutions, and then arrive at a consensus. We have discovered, however, that the kindergarteners have no problem with this scenario. One teacher told us, "The day before I introduced the [graffiti problem], a child mentioned that she

had seen graffiti on our school playground. In fact, this was true and led to a discussion about how that made us feel. I couldn't have asked for a better timing. …We had a class meeting…They took the problem very seriously."

Here is how the graffiti activity unfolds: When children are out of the classroom, the teacher covers the mural with some plastic wrap and places paint and graffiti on key features in the park, being careful not to actually damage the children's work. When the children enter the classroom they notice the graffiti and, as they are invested in the park they have created, they are greatly dismayed. This situation sets the stage for a problem-solving meeting, which the teacher quickly suggests.

Problem-Solving

Sitting in a circle, just as if they were in a conference meeting, the planners commence with a discussion of how meetings are conducted. They discuss important democratic principles: everyone has the opportunity to speak; must listen respectfully; and should raise a hand and wait to be called on. Allowing one of the children to conduct the meeting (with the teacher as the chief planner or coach on the side) confirms that the children have the capability of discussing the problem and working toward a solution.

The teacher guides the children to identify the problem—graffiti in the park—and brainstorm solutions, then assists in recording the proposals so that advantages and disadvantages of different possible resolutions can be considered in more depth. As the meeting progresses, learning opportunities abound. Children will frequently question why someone would want to deface their park. Linking their imagined park to actual parks where graffiti is evident helps children transfer this experience to their own community.

We have observed that children have many ideas about how to solve the problem, such as posting a guard in the park, having cameras installed to catch people, putting a fence around the park, and displaying a list of rules for the park. Each suggestion merits examination guided by the teacher to help children critically think about its feasibility. Voting or coming to consensus about the best solution(s) and then enacting the solution(s) through role plays and/or activities makes the problem-solving experience concrete. Most often, children will decide to make rules for the park and post them on signs on the mural. Rule-making is an important lesson in itself and helps children construct an understanding for why rules are important and need to be clear, as well as see the benefits of following the rules. The meeting discussions, role plays, and enumeration of rules provide powerful assessment opportunities.

A New Problem

The children's solution to the problem of graffiti works (and the teacher removes the offending plastic wrap). On the following day, with the park cleaned up and rules in place, the teacher introduces a second problem in the form of a news flash, "Bullying in the Park." This social problem is particularly meaningful for young learners who might experience bullying or be the perpetrators of bullying. The advantage of this simulation is that the children can examine the problem with some detachment, discussing it within the context of the story of their imagined park. We've noted that children's own experiences can come to the fore as they grapple with bullying as a group through a second problem-solving meeting.

Helping children to identify appropriate responses to "bullying in the park," is especially important for children who struggle with social skills. Guiding children through this meeting reinforces problem-solving skills introduced earlier and again affirms that they can figure out how to address these problems. Usually, children will not have knowledge of options for responding to bullying, or even the vocabulary to describe the possible responses. The teacher's questioning and affirmations can help children generate guidelines such as the following, adapted from Skillstreaming in Early Childhood:[5]

- Use "Brave Talk": Use a brave look—body posture and facial expression (neither an angry nor a friendly look, but assertive). Use a "brave voice"—slightly louder than a friendly voice, stating that you do not like what is happening.
- Deal with Teasing: Stop and think; try not to show you are angry. Say, "Please stop." Walk away.
- Know When to Tell: Decide if someone will get hurt. If no one will get hurt, use brave talk or deal with it as teasing. If someone will get hurt, tell an adult immediately.
- Solve a Problem: Define the problem. Think of choices. Make a plan. Do it.

Modeling appropriate responses and providing opportunities for role-plays develop these skills in context, affirming appropriate responses to particular situations. Finally, time to reflect on the experiences serves to reinforce these pro-social skills and behaviors.

The Pedagogical Approach

The approach we are describing is called Storypath and it originated in Scotland many years ago as teachers searched for strategies to engage low-performing students in an integrated curriculum. The Storypath approach to unit design is grounded in a belief that children learn best when they are active participants in their own learning, and places children' own efforts to understand at the center of the educational enterprise. Essentially, Storypath engages children in a narrative—a setting (the park), characters (park planners-builders, painters and gardeners) and plot (problems to solve). They role play the events of the story, treading a path between imagination and reality to engage their minds and help them create meaning and relevance from their experiences.[6] Guided by the teacher, each student creates and role-plays a character for the Storypath, thereby establish-

ing a personal connection to the plot of the lessons. Planned "critical incidences," or problems, are strategically introduced into the story to challenge children's previous experiences and knowledge and to involve them in inquiry and problem solving. Incident resolutions enable children to construct new, deeper understandings and to make decisions about their social, cultural and environmental world.

Engaging Young Citizens

One of the important features in Storypath classrooms is the way in which they engage children cognitively, affectively, and operatively—with the affective and operative dimensions of engagement working to sustain children's cognitive involvement in learning.[7] (**TABLE 1**) In the unit we have described, the invitation and challenge of designing the new park, analyzing features, investigating plants and their needs, and presenting a completed park to suit the needs of the community require learning of high intellectual quality (high cognitive engagement), especially for such young learners. The taking on of roles, and construction of three-dimensional features for the park in the frieze, is a highly enjoyable learning experience (high affective engagement), clear from the whole-hearted way that all children embrace the project and the pride they express. The successful resolution of problems ensures that children develop skills and perceive themselves as successful learners (high operative engagement).

We continue to be surprised at the level of engagement and creativity in the problem solving meetings for this particular Storypath, as well as in others. In preparing children for active citizenship, it is essential that they have opportunities from the earliest years in school to practice citizenship competencies in a safe environment. As noted in Developing Citizenship Competencies from Kindergarten Through Grade 12, "Students will not necessarily connect knowledge and skills to their civic dispositions without experience or a reason to believe their participation is worthwhile." [8]

In this unit, the classroom and playground provide the safe environment for learning. Here, the young learners construct new understandings and develop social and civic competencies as they take on roles, engage in drama and role-play, plan cooperatively, rehearse real life events, tackle problems, and connect what they already know and understand with the new experiences.[9] That is why we believe that the Storypath approach has much to offer in this realm. Our observations showed that children felt ownership over their learning and could talk about how important it was for them to "do good work" in kindergarten (getting their school career off to a good start). One teacher remarked positively about parent involvement as well: "Twenty-two of my 23 students had at least one parent attend [the park dedication]; many had several. This really showed how interested the parents were in this experience." And, as another teacher said at the conclusion of the park dedication, "They [the students] were amazing!"

Notes

1. Sue Dockett and Bob Perry, "Starting School: What Do the Children Say?" *Early Childhood Development and Care* 159, no. 1, (1999): 107-119; Sue Dockett and Bob Perry, "Starting School: Effective Transitions," Early Childhood Research & Practice 3, no. 2, (2001): 1-19, ecrp.uiuc.edu/v3n2/dockett.html.

2. Robert C. Pianta and Marcia Kraft-Sayre, "Parents' Observations about Their Children's Transitions to Kindergarten," cited in Dockett and Perry, 2001.

3. Fair Go Project (FGP), *School Is for Me: Pathways to Student Engagement* (Sydney, Australia: NSW Department of Education and Training, 2007).

4. In one classroom, students decided to actually plant a garden on the school grounds, building on their understandings for a service-learning project.

5. Ellen McGinnis and Arnold P. Goldstein, *Skillstreaming in Early Childhood: New Strategies and Perspectives for Teaching Prosocial Skills* (Champaign, IL: Research Press, 2003).

6. Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1990). Kieran Egan, *Teaching as Storytelling* (London: Routledge, 1988), 2.

7. Fair Go Project, 2007.

8. Judith Torney-Purta and Susan Vermeer, *Developing Citizenship Competencies from Kindergarten through Grade 12* (Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States, April 2004), 16.

9. National Association for the Education of Young Children, "Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8," Position Statement (Washington, DC: NAEYC, 2009); Sue Dockett and Marilyn Fleer, *Play and Pedagogy in Early Childhood: Bending the Rules* (Southbank, Victoria: Thomson, 2002; Vivian Gussin-Paley, "One Scene at a Time: Imaginative Play as the Young Person's Frame of Reference" (Paper presented at the 5th International Conference on Imaginative Education, Vancouver, Canada, July 18-21, 2007).

Bronwyn Cole *is associate head of the School of Education and a founding member of the Fair Go Research Team at the University of Western Sydney, Australia.*

Margit McGuire *is the author of the Storypath Program and is department chair of Teaching and Learning in the College of Education at Seattle University in Seattle, Washington. She was president of NCSS 1991–1992.*