

Diary – Monday, July 26

Mini story: Creators of Culture

In Reggio-inspired practice, we say children are not just receivers but also creators of knowledge and culture. What does it mean for preschoolers to create culture? How do we recognize when it happens and respect it?

Rainy days can be challenging for children and teachers. Dylan, Maya and Julia had been outside and explored the rain some, but even in July, getting wet eventually means getting cold, and now they were inside the classroom and outside their routine. To complicate matters, this was the first day we had had real outside observers, and it was Aunt Amy's first day as co-teacher. Dylan in particular was having a difficult time focusing on a task and calming his body. I brought out the marble tracks, hoping that further research into how objects move through space would catch and hold his interest. Julia and Ryan were also attracted to the marble tracks.

Julia and Dylan began to play together. However it wasn't the sort of play one expects with marble tracks. After a little while, I realized that they had created a cultural ritual, a child-created, child-played game that had bridged the age gap between them. Culture is a set of rules for doing something that brings unity and identity to a group, making them different from outsiders. Quite often children's cultural rituals partially create a statement that says, "We are our own people. We are not adults." They may even push adults away, as can be often seen in teenage cultural groups like emo or goth kids. In the case of Dylan and Julia, I was thrilled to have recognized the formation of a cultural ritual, but at the same time felt irritated by what the ritual entailed. I would love to not have been irritated, but in teaching, we must be honest to ourselves and admit when something rubs us the wrong way so that we can choose to respond with respect instead of with irritation.





The ritual went like this: either Dylan or Julia would pick up a piece of marble track from the bucket, hold it up, say “What is this for?” and then proceed to laugh in the most harsh and loud way possible for a predetermined length of

time before the other child took a turn. This type of children’s cultural game tends to be irritating for adults because a) the sound is particularly grating on the nerves, b) the children seem to have entirely abandoned the intended purpose of the toys and c) the children teeter dangerously on the brink of losing self-control.

Despite my irritation, I felt proud that I had recognized the creation of culture in the moment rather than in hindsight. I stayed close to their game to catch them if they were to fall over the edge, or possibly help them recognize when this was going to happen. Knowing one’s limits and how to recover from loss of self control are skills that I value as is the creation of culture.

Interestingly, Julia showed that she knew they were on the brink. “We’re getting all whooped up,” she announced several times. I let the statement stand. A little bit later as the game continued, she changed her statement to: “We’re getting too whooped up.”

“*Too* whooped up’ means that you need to calm yourself down. When you get *too* whooped up, someone could get hurt or toys could get broken,” I

contributed. She seemed to calm herself down. The cultural game stopped for a time and actual building of a marble track began, Julia and Dylan working on the same construction.



I did not time this play episode of constructing, testing, reconstructing and retesting, but it felt like a significant chunk of time. Eventually the cultural game returned and the children stepped back to the brink. Would Julia recognize again when they were getting too whooped up? She did announce that they were getting “all whooped up again,” but “too whooped up” didn’t come up. Then she kicked the marble track tower. Time for me to step in.

“Julia, you kicked the marble tracks. That tells me you are ‘too whooped up,’ and you need to calm your body down so that children won’t get hurt and toys won’t get broken. Do you think you can calm yourself down, or would you like some

help?” She said she wanted help. I was amazed when she let me hold her in my lap, as she had previously pushed away from me at these times. I talked softly and slowly, and we did deep breaths together...another thing I had been unsuccessful with her in the past. I talked about how I like to see her have fun, but my job is also to keep her safe and to keep the toys safe. I said that if you feel yourself getting “too whooped up,” sometimes it helps to find a different activity to do, something that helps you feel calm. “Some people like to read a book to feel calm. Some people like to draw a picture to feel calm. You could draw a picture with Maya. Some people like to hide until they feel calm. What would help you to feel calm?” “Draw a picture with Maya,” she said, and that’s what she did. She was much calmer after that. Although I felt we had all been successful and pursued valuable learning endeavors, this aspect of teaching or parenting is exhausting!

