Pedagogical strategies that support young children's civic action

An example from Aotearoa

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The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti, 2001) highlights our role as educators in the "preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples" (Article 29(1)(d)). *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) requires kaiako to view young children as both local kaitiaki and as global citizens. In a recent study we sought to understand how young children might enact such citizenship rights through the demonstration of civic action; that is, actions in support of those in the community of their early childhood care and education setting. Key findings were the wide range of such actions performed spontaneously by young children, and the significant role of the teachers in proactively modelling and fostering foundational dispositions of empathy, kindness, caring, and co-operation through adopting a team approach to deliberate, thoughtful pedagogical processes.

Civic action in early childhood care and education

Views of children, childhood, children's roles and responsibilities, and children's citizenship differ across different eras and cultures (Bath & Karlsson, 2016). In Western countries, developmentalist discourses have positioned the child as a "developing" individual with increasing capacities to contribute to family and community dependent on age and stage. These discourses have been "framed within an individualistic view of the young child (dominant in 'the majority world') that values separateness, self-sufficiency and self-confidence" (MacNaughton, Hughes, & Smith, 2007, p. 461). As Anne Smith has urged, "The dominant construction of children as vulnerable, problematic, or incomplete beings should be replaced by a view of children as competent and active participants in communities" (2010, p. 107).

From a te ao Māori perspective, children have been viewed as integral and participating members of the collective. For example, Whaea Rose Rangimarie Pere has described how, as a child, her elders included her in all their activities (Pere, 1982/1994). Whilst New Zealand is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and early childhood teachers follow *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996, 2017), a curriculum which has a fundamental focus on empowering/upholding the mana of children, there is little research that identifies how teachers notice and support young children's enactment in service of the collectives in which they participate; that is, their civic action. Civic action is a notion drawn from ideas of democracy and citizenship. It is underpinned by democratic values such as equal rights, freedom, solidarity, and social justice (Biesta, De Bie, & Wildemeersch, 2014). It also employs democratic dispositions such as "open mindedness, tolerance and understanding of different perspectives; and trust in others" (Flanagan, 2012, p. 4).

Carol Mutch (2013) explains that citizenship can be viewed and defined from a range of perspectives including one's status as a citizen; one's identity as such; democratic ideals of citizenship; public practice; and as participation. We argue that, since young children should be viewed

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as citizens and rights holders according to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, it is important for teachers to recognise and encourage children's civic action as the enactment of their citizenship. Furthermore, as teachers, we should also proactively identify ways in which we can foster this enactment in early childhood education settings through pedagogical approaches that support children's cultural identities and sense of community, embody democratic values, model and foster dispositions of empathy, trust, and caring, and encourage children's civic action.

The enactment of civic action is enhanced by shared understandings and cultural identities, collective attunement, empathy, and trust (Bath & Karlsson, 2016). Early childhood care and education settings are an important site of young children's early engagement in a public space; that is, in a wider social arena than their home and whānau settings, and where there is the potential that "democratic relationships can be established and enacted" (Biesta et al., 2014, p. xiv).

From an "adultist" perspective, adults consider that they have the right to make decisions on behalf of young children (Ceaser, 2014; Pensoneau-Conway, 2017), or at best may view young children as "citizens in the making" (Smith, 2010). However, adopting a focus on young children's civic action affirms even young children as already being "key contributors to and citizens of the democratic landscape" of the communities in which they participate, such as their early childhood care and education setting (Bath & Karlsson, 2016, p. 558). Through our project we aimed to contribute to a growing body of research that views children as active citizens, who are "weaving 'webs' of experiences interdependently with other social agents as they develop their social and cultural lives" whereby they contribute to the wellbeing of their collectives (MacNaughton et al., 2007, p. 461). For our study, which took place in three centres in three different nations, we utilised a framework of civic action that encompassed the following components:

- Civic identity (who am I in the community?) whereby identity is defined via community participation.
- Collective responsibility (in what ways do I care for others?), acts of care and concern for others, demonstrating a sense of responsibility to the community.
- Civic agency (what can I do to help?) which includes the possibilities and parameters of action of members in community participation.
- Civic deliberation (how can we share and understand different points of view?) involves awareness and consideration of varying values in diverse communities.
- Civic participation (what can we do together?), expressed as collective action for the good of all in the community (Phillips & Moroney, 2017).

We (teacher and academic co-researchers) were also informed by *Te Whāriki* 1996 (Ministry of Education, 1996) and a shared commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi and as such our work was underpinned by such core Māori values as whanaungatanga, kotahitanga, manaakitanga, and rangatiratanga.

In a previously published paper on the wider project[1] which compared young children's civic action in three different settings (one in Texas, one in Queensland, and one in Porirua), we suggested that play should be viewed not merely as the opportunity for the individual child's developmental exploration but as providing time, space, and opportunities for young children's civic action (Adair, Phillips, Ritchie, & Sachdeva, 2016). We noted that it was in settings where children were allowed the time and space to create their own extended play scenarios that these expressions of civic action were most prolific. We discussed examples from the New Zealand kindergarten of teina transitioning into tuakana through experiencing the modelling of leadership and care by older siblings and tamariki (Adair et al., 2016). In another paper from that project, which focuses on the Australian site of the study, a childcare centre in a rural Aboriginal community, there were numerous examples of children demonstrating care for others, in accord with the community value of "looking after your mob" (Phillips & Moroney, 2017). In such ways even very young children demonstrate political agency and empathy in exercising their capacity to initiate and respond to others through attuned interaction, observing, listening, waiting, and participating within their collectives according to the shared values of their community. In this article, we focus on the ways that pedagogical approaches implemented by the New Zealand teachers created a climate that was rich with examples of young children's civic action.

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Constructs from *Te Whāriki 2017* that relate to the project kaupapa

Although the study was conducted just prior to the release of the updated *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) (*Te Whāriki 2017*), in this section, which discusses notions of civic action in relation to the early childhood curriculum, we have chosen to focus on the revised document, since this will have more currency for teachers. We will outline some of the constructs from *Te Whāriki 2017* that relate to our understandings of civic action.

The principle *whakamana / empowerment* requires that "every child will experience an empowering curriculum that recognises and enhances their mana and supports them to enhance the mana of others" (p. 18). From a Māori perspective, these "others" include the more-than-human world of atua, of animals, birds, insects, fish, and other creatures. Under the strand of *Mana whenua / Belonging* is listed the learning outcome: "Taking part in caring for this place / te manaaki i te taiao" (p. 24)

along with "an ability to connect their learning in the ECE setting with experiences at home and in familiar cultural communities and a sense of themselves as global citizens" (p. 32). The principle of *ngā hononga / relationships* requires that "kaiako recognise that increasing ability to access, understand, and use cultural tools expands children's participation in and contribution to their world" (p. 21). The *Mana tangata / Contribution* strand includes the learning outcome of "Treating others fairly and including them in play / te ngākau makuru" (p. 24). Our planet and all dependent upon it are increasingly under threat from the impacts of global warming and other human impacts (Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2018). *Te Whāriki 2017* states that "As global citizens in a rapidly changing and increasingly connected world, children need to be adaptive, creative and resilient" (p. 7). These examples from *Te Whariki 2017* are very much aligned with the democratic values and dispositions that underpin the enactment of civic action.

Research methodology

In gathering data during this study, we adopted a qualitative narrative methodology that sought to uncover the many layers of meanings subsumed within teachers' pedagogical documentation and strategies, and within children's play, dialogue, and body language. Over a period of 18 months we gathered many examples of teachers' planning, reflective evaluations, and children's learning stories. Ethnographic field-notes and video-recording contributed other sets of data. We coded this data to identify the diverse manifestations of young children's civic action, which varied across the three sites. Interestingly, there were also many commonalities across the sites, such as demonstrations, often silent, of empathy and concern shown to other children, and also of children alerting teachers when a child had a bleeding nose, for example. As part of the comparative aspect of the study we studied curricula from each of the three countries, to explore how each reflected notions of children's citizenship, membership, and participation as well as the different emphases and allowances for potential civic action (Phillips, Ritchie, & Adair, in press). We also employed an adaptation of Joe Tobin's (2014) video-cued multivocal ethnography whereby we shared edited sections of videos with teachers from each of the three centres, so that they might compare and discuss the examples of young children's civic action along with their rationales for the various pedagogical approaches.

Teachers' processes, intentional pedagogies that fostered young children's civic action

One of the key findings of our study was that young children's civic action, whilst often spontaneous, is fostered when teachers proactively foster and model foundational dispositions such as co-operation, caring, kindness, and empathy. When considering how to empower a teaching team to enact civic action within the environment, it is essential to contemplate the pedagogical planning and evaluative framework that is to be used. At Katoa Kindergarten there was a pre-established and embedded methodology for a "community of learners approach" to group planning, that followed clear and directive systems. These provoked regular reflection, and evaluation on the ways in which we plan our intentional teaching with regard to learning as a collective.

This community of learners approach to group planning was established in accordance with He Whanau Manaaki o Tararua's criteria, "Te Manawa" (Wellington Kindergartens / Ngā Māra Tamariki, 2011). Te Manawa provides a set of criteria "for curriculum development" developed by our association outlining quality practice in relation to the systems and processes that make up: intentional teaching, individual learning portfolios, and a community of learners approach to group planning. Te Manawa identifies the requirements for each section and provides indicators of what quality practice looks like. In this sense, these criteria are used as a provocation for teaching teams to develop their own systems and processes for implementation.

The pre-established processes and systems that empowered the teaching team's community of learners approach to group planning at Katoa Kindergarten can be broken down to four main phases. These include an observational phase, research phase, implementation phase, and evaluation phase. This style of planning is grounded in civic action, in that it is child-focused and supports teachers to uncover, unpack, and channel learning that is occurring and significant to the kindergarten as a collective.

The process begins with observations of our community of learners over a set period of time.

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We documented this by displaying an emerging learning template on our planning wall; each teacher contributed group learning that they had observed and identified as significant. For example, I (Jared) recall documenting Kaitiakitanga (guardianship) on our emerging learning template when new children began at Katoa Kindergarten. I did this after observing a group of children welcome the new tamariki into the learning environment and teaching them about our kaupapa. Emerging learning sheets captured dispositions, as well as learning

experiences such as children revisiting their learning in their individual portfolios, or groups of children constructing buildings together.

After the observational phase, the teaching team then came together to unpack trends by sharing what dispositions we had identified as being significant, along with examples of what they looked like in children's play. Unpacking these and identifying what learning is most predominant is where the enactment of civic action is made visible. As a focus is constructed from the interests and voices of all children, by tapping into what's current for children, we foster citizenship. In this way we demonstrate that children's words and actions influence their world. Once the focus is set, the team proceeds by establishing strategies and resources that empower tamariki to learn as a group, as one whānau.

Moving forward into the next phase of the group-planning cycle, individual teachers take on and conduct their own areas of research related to the focus that has been identified. These areas included the following: theories, research, display, whānau voice, child voice, links to curricular documents, and links to culture. Theories and research consisted of reading articles and theories and illustrating how a specific theory and article links to our focus. Display entailed designing and displaying our planning focus on a wall to demonstrate progression visibly to our community of learners. Links to curricular documents focused on demonstrating how our focus was represented within our national curriculum, along with other Ministry of Education publications, such as *Tātaiako* (Ministry of Education & New Zealand Teachers Council, 2011). Child's and whānau voice involved creating questions to capture our community of learners' thinking about our focus.

One key element of the research phase is cultural links. This included researching what our focus looked like in the many diverse cultures that made up the demographics of our kindergarten. When considering citizenship within an educational setting it is paramount to view the whānau and community as active citizens. Representation of the varying values within our diverse community empowers whānau to engage, role model, and enact civic action within the setting.

To conclude the research phase, the teaching team would come together to share our findings and further develop a shared understanding of what our focus is. This strengthens how we plan to facilitate a learning environment that not only provokes collective learning relative to the focus but, more importantly, empowers children to learn with their peers.

The final two phases—implementation and evaluation—work in association. The implementation phase begins immediately after the research phase and is essentially putting into practice the plan, teaching strategies, and intentional pedagogy we have developed for our community of learners based on our focus. The evaluation phase consists of multiple reflection and evaluation templates developed to regularly review the effectiveness of our plan. The evaluation phase ensures that the focus stays relevant, continues to evolve, and is conducted throughout the implementation of the plan. During the period of the study, focuses that were actioned included "Ko wai ahau?", "Social Competence", "Exploration", "Kotahitanga", and "Rangatiratanga/Leadership".

Examples of civic action by tamariki

During the course of the data collection period for the study, many examples of young children's civic action were identified (see Figure 1 for an indicative list).

When reflecting on examples of civic action demonstrated in children's play, I (Jared) categorised them into two domains: child-led

FIGURE 1. SOME OF THE DIFFERENT KINDS OF CIVIC ACTIONS OBSERVED AT KATOA KINDERGARTEN

- Assist with shared problem
- Take food scraps out to compost
- Help a child up when they have fallen
- Walk over to help out (offer to help—can be nonverbal, making it a shared problem; solidarity)
- Notice someone is trying to reach out-of-reach object so walk over and help her
- Notice a friend has a bleeding nose and go and tell a teacher
- Make suggestions to someone who is struggling to reach something
- Overhear that a child fell down and got hurt and then walk over to help them
- Offer assistance to enable game to resume through relocation
- Assist with opening food packaging
- Remind of kindergarten eating practice
- Notice and return a piece of equipment that is in the incorrect space (to correct shelving)
- Work together to obtain a hard-to-reach resource for other children to use
- Pass the ukulele to younger child (nonverbal communication)
- Notice and offer to help when a resource (squab) is being taken away from a friend, that they were already using and offer to help
- Notice that someone to trying to open a food packet and ask teacher for help
- Notice a child crying and lean closer to see, mirror a distressed child's body
- Invent a game to distract a distressed child and to get them to stop crying
- Stand between someone on a bicycle and someone else coming at them with a stick and ask them to stop with their stick to ensure safety
- Step in, physically standing in the way to stop a possible incident
- Invent a collectively generated ball game nonverbally
- Communicate rules
- Remind a child to sit down and eat
- Stand alongside teacher who is calming a hurt child, silent communication of concern
- Notice messy playdough on floor and clean it up
- Assist others with serving meals and drinks
- Open food packets for others who are struggling and seeking help
- Replenish drinking glasses for others
- Demonstrate patience
- Wait your turn by standing patiently and waiting if there aren't enough seats at the kai table
- Ensure others get a fair turn
- Ask others not to harm the tree
- Defend younger sister
- Defend game from a perceived intruder
- Care for a hurt friend, such as assisting them to go inside and getting an ice pack to place on injury
- Ask someone if they feel okay
- Give up what you are doing to comfort a crying child
- Show a younger child how to do things
- Put out others' paintings to dry on rack
- Offer to share each other's food
- Show someone how to accomplish a task
- Enable friend to solve a problem

and intentional teaching. "Child-led" signifies that the practice of civic action emerged spontaneously and without the assistance or encouragement of teachers. The other domain is that of intentional teaching relating to civic action that was empowered through the assistance or encouragement of the teaching team.

Child-led civic action is powerful in the sense that children are developing their own understanding of citizenship and working as a collective without guidance and through their own play. One significant example of child-led civic action was the way in which our tamariki at Katoa Kindergarten responded to injured children. As my educational brothers and sisters know, in an early childhood setting, accidents happen. Children fall over, graze their knee, obtain a cut, etc. As teachers, we know that we need to respond by addressing the injury. At Katoa Kindergarten, when a child had an accident the child's peers would identify this and head to the child-height fridge to get an ice-pack which was then offered to the injured child with great care and attentiveness. They often shared what happened with a teacher but took great pride in being the children who helped their injured peer. Over time, this became an entrenched culture and a quality example of civic action.

Another example of child-led civic action that, over time, developed into an entrenched culture was the kaupapa around te wā kotahitanga (group times), or mat-times. When I (Jared) first joined the teaching team at Katoa Kindergarten, I often noticed teachers would ask the children before starting their mat-time, "Would you like to do the karanga?" This meant calling "Haere mai ki te whāriki tamariki mā" (come to the mat children). The children stood at the door calling as loudly as they possibly could to gather our community together as one. Whilst, initially, this was presumably an example of intentional teaching, over time I noticed that this culture grew and evolved. It moved from being about one child calling the karanga, to groups of children working as a collective to bring everyone together. One morning I recall watching as nearly every child inside stood out the door and called "haere mai ki te whāriki tamariki mā" as one. This is a powerful example of child-led civic action, in that it demonstrates a group of children working as a collective. To go deeper, the collective was working together with the shared purpose, being to gather their community.

One significant example of intentional teaching provoking civic action was our methodology when capturing children's voice to inform our planning. This supported us as a teaching team to reflect on and implement learning experiences as a direct response to what children shared. But, more importantly, it demonstrated to children that they are active citizens and participants in our community of learners, that their voice is valuable and, as a collective, makes a difference to the construction and facilitation of their learning environment. Often the child voice would be obtained by teachers during a mat-time. We would prepare our questions on a whiteboard beforehand. One teacher would ask the questions, another would record responses, and the other teachers would be active participants in the discussion. We participated by unpacking concepts identified in the discourse. For example, at one mat-time, child "A" shared "Leadership means being a good friend", and one of the teachers replied, "Great answer, and very interesting. What does being a good friend look like?" This approach to participation enabled children to share their thoughts and ideas in a safe and supportive environment. This is only one of the many ways the teaching team at Katoa Kindergarten purposefully empowered children to practise civic action.

Engaging whānau

Empowering the whānau and community to be active participants and citizens is paramount as a key principle of *Te Whāriki*, and thus in the success of facilitating an authentic "community of learners" approach to group planning. Three main practices are significant in this regard. Firstly, it is important that as teachers we are intentional in this approach and that our strategies are purposefully designed by the teaching team to support whānau engagement. Several examples from the Katoa approach include obtaining whānau voice, and the facilitation of information evenings and whānau days.

During the research phase of our planning process, one of the key roles is researching the whānau voice. In a similar way to the focus on gathering examples of child's voice, it entails the construction of questions to illicit an understanding of our whānau's thinking around our focus. This information is then used to inform our plan and support our whānau to deepen their understanding of the focus as well as participate in its implementation. Again, it demonstrates to our whānau that they are citizens in our learning community and that their voice is important.

At Katoa Kindergarten, information evenings and whānau days were held each term and alternated. One term would be focused on providing information to our whānau and community about early childhood education. The other would be about bringing our community and whānau together to participate in our programme through morning teas, shared lunches, and much more.

One distinctive example of civic action that I (Jared) can recount was during a parent information evening. We had invited Jenny Ritchie to share some valuable information acquired and the methodology of the research project on civic action. As part of the information sharing, Jenny displayed a video that captured children working as a collective. Immediately, whānau began to share their thoughts with one another expressing thoughts such as "That's my child", "Oh that is so her", "He does that at home too", "He always helps his sister too" etc., as they watched their children practise civic action. This demonstrates the enactment of civic action in that our whānau community was empowered to learn about how their children navigate play at Katoa Kindergarten. Their thoughts and ideas were then strengthened through the encouragement of sharing them with other members of the learning community, such as other parents and teachers. In this example, whānau worked together with the shared purpose of learning about civic action in the context of early childhood education.

Final thoughts

In our study, we learned from carefully observing young children's ways of being, knowing, doing, and relating. This led us to identify ways in which we might shift away from "adultist" views of citizenship such as having the right to vote, to instead view young children's community building as *their* way of enacting civic concern and responsibility. Not all of the expressions of civic action were bold and visible; some were more subtle and embodied, such as the child positioning herself alongside a hurt friend, her physical presence resonating concern, solidarity, and empathy. We also recognised the importance of teachers' intentional, thoughtful, and collective processes to enacting their pedagogy, which was grounded in their careful noticing of children's expressions of feelings and needs,

and also deliberately included whānau through a range of daily, weekly, and annual means of engagement. The sociocultural approach of the teachers in their planning, teaching, and evaluation process enabled a shared philosophy to be enacted in consistent ways that reinforced young children's civic action, hopefully laying foundations for life-long caring and concern for their communities.

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