

Why We Banned Legos

Exploring power, ownership, and equity in an early childhood classroom

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Carl and Oliver,* both 8-year-olds in our after-school program, huddled over piles of Legos. They carefully assembled them to add to a sprawling collection of Lego houses, grocery stores, fish-and-chips stands, fire stations, and coffee shops. They were particularly keen to find and use “cool pieces,” the translucent bricks and specialty pieces that complement the standard-issue red, yellow, blue, and green Lego bricks.



“I’m making an airport and landing strip for my guy’s house. He has his own airplane,” said Oliver.

“That’s not fair!” said Carl. “That takes too many cool pieces and leaves not enough for me.”

“Well, I can let other people use the landing strip, if they have airplanes,” said Oliver. “Then it’s fair for me to use more cool pieces, because it’s for public use.”

Discussions like the one above led to children collaborating on a massive series of Lego structures we named Legotown. Children dug through hefty-sized bins of Legos, sought “cool pieces,” and bartered and exchanged until they established a collection of homes, shops, public facilities, and community meeting places. We carefully protected Legotown from errant balls and jump ropes, and watched it grow day by day.

After nearly two months of observing the children’s Legotown construction, we decided to ban the Legos.

The Investigation Begins

Our school-age childcare program — the “Big Kids” — involves 25 children and their families. The children, ages 5 through 9, come to Hilltop after their days in elementary school, arriving around 3:30 and staying until 5:30 or 6:00. Hilltop is located in an affluent Seattle neighborhood, and, with only a few exceptions, the staff and families are white; the families are upper-middle class and socially liberal. Kendra is the lead teacher for the Big Kid program; two additional teachers, Erik and Harmony, staff the program. Ann is the mentor teacher at Hilltop, working closely with teachers to study and plan curriculum from children’s play and interactions.

A group of about eight children conceived and launched Legotown. Other children were eager to join the project, but as the city grew — and space and raw materials became more precious — the builders began excluding other children.

Occasionally, Legotown leaders explicitly rebuffed children, telling them that they couldn't play. Typically the exclusion was more subtle, growing from a climate in which Legotown was seen as the turf of particular kids. The other children didn't complain much about this; when asked about Legos, they'd often comment vaguely that they just weren't interested in playing with Legos anymore. As they closed doors to other children, the Legotown builders turned their attention to complex negotiations among themselves about what sorts of structures to build, whether these ought to be primarily privately owned or collectively used, and how "cool pieces" would be distributed and protected. These negotiations gave rise to heated conflict and to insightful conversation. Into their coffee shops and houses, the children were building their assumptions about ownership and the social power it conveys — assumptions that mirrored those of a class-based, capitalist society — a society that we teachers believe to be unjust and oppressive. As we watched the children build, we became increasingly concerned.

Then, tragedy struck Legotown and we saw an opportunity to take strong action.

Hilltop is housed in a church, and over a long weekend, some children in the congregation who were playing in our space accidentally demolished Legotown.

When the children discovered the decimated Legotown, they reacted with shock and grief. Children moaned and fell to their knees to inspect the damage; many were near tears. The builders were devastated, and the other children were deeply sympathetic. We gathered as a full group to talk about what had happened; at one point in the conversation, Kendra suggested a big cleanup of the loose Legos on the floor. The Legotown builders were fierce in their opposition. They explained that particular children "owned" those pieces and it would be unfair to put them back in the bins where other children might use them. As we talked, the issues of ownership and power that had been hidden became explicit to the whole group.

We met as a teaching staff later that day. We saw the decimation of Legotown as an opportunity to launch a critical evaluation of Legotown and the inequities of private ownership and hierarchical authority on which it was founded. Our intention was to promote a contrasting set of values: collectivity, collaboration, resource-sharing, and full democratic participation. We knew that the examination would have the most impact if it was based in engaged exploration and reflection rather than in lots of talking. We didn't want simply to step in as teachers with a new set of rules about how the children could use Legos, exchanging one set of authoritarian rules with another. Ann suggested removing the Legos from the classroom. This bold decision would demonstrate our discomfort with the issues we saw at play in Legotown. And it posed a challenge to the children: How might we create a "community of fairness" about Legos?

Out with the Legos

Taking the Legos out of the classroom was both a commitment and a risk. We expected that looking frankly at the issues of power and inequity that had shaped Legotown would hold

conflict and discomfort for us all. We teachers talked long and hard about the decision. We shared our own perspectives on issues of private ownership, wealth, and limited resources. One teacher described her childhood experience of growing up without much money and her instinctive critical judgments about people who have wealth and financial ease. Another teacher shared her allegiance to the children who had been on the fringes of Legotown, wanting more resources but not sure how to get them without upsetting the power structure. We knew that our personal experiences and beliefs would shape our decision-making and planning for the children, and we wanted to be as aware as we could about them.

We also discussed our beliefs about our role as teachers in raising political issues with young children. We recognized that children are political beings, actively shaping their social and political understandings of ownership and economic equity — whether we interceded or not. We agreed that we want to take part in shaping the children's understandings from a perspective of social justice. So we decided to take the Legos out of the classroom.

We had an initial conversation with the children about our decision. “We’re concerned about what was happening in Legotown, with some kids feeling left out and other kids feeling in charge,” Kendra explained. “We don’t want to rebuild Legotown and go back to how things were. Instead, we want to figure out with you a way to build a Legotown that’s fair to all the kids.”

Naturally the children had big feelings and strong opinions to share. During that first day’s discussion, they laid out the big issues that we would pursue over the months to come.

Several times in the discussion, children made reference to “giving” Lego pieces to other children. Kendra pointed out the understanding behind this language: “When you say that some kids ‘gave’ pieces to other kids, that sounds like there are some kids who have most of the power in Legotown — power to decide what pieces kids can use and where they can build.” Kendra’s comment sparked an outcry by Lukas and Carl, two central figures in Legotown:

Carl: “We didn’t ‘give’ the pieces, we found and shared them.”

Lukas: “It’s like giving to charity.”

Carl: “I don’t agree with using words like ‘gave.’ Because when someone wants to move in, we find them a platform and bricks and we build them a house and find them windows and a door.”

These children seemed to squirm at the implications of privilege, wealth, and power that “giving” holds. The children denied their power, framing it as benign and neutral, not something actively sought out and maintained. This early conversation helped us see more clearly the children’s contradictory thinking about power and authority, laying the groundwork for later exploration.

Issues of fairness and equity also bubbled to the surface during the animated discussion about the removal of the Legos:

Lukas: "I think every house should be average, and not over-average like Drew's, which is huge."

Aidan: "But Drew is special."

Drew: "I'm the fire station, so I have to have room for four people."

Lukas: "I think that houses should only be as big as 16 bumps one way, and 16 bumps the other way. That would be fair." ["Bumps" are the small circles on top of Lego bricks.]

This brief exchange raised issues that we would revisit often in the weeks ahead. What is a fair distribution of resources? Does fairness mean that everyone has the same number of pieces? What about special rights: Who might deserve extra resources, and how are those extra resources allotted?

After nearly an hour of passionate exchange, we brought the conversation to a close, reminding the children that we teachers didn't have an answer already figured out about Legotown. We assured them that we were right there with them in this process of getting clearer about what hadn't worked well in Legotown, and understanding how we could create a community of fairness about Legos.



We'd audiotaped the discussion so that we'd be able to revisit it during our weekly teaching team meeting to tease out important themes and threads. The children's thoughts, questions, and tensions would guide us as we planned our next steps. We weren't working from carefully sequenced lessons on ownership, resource sharing, and equity. Instead, we committed to growing an investigation into these issues, one step at a time. Our planning was guided by our goals for social justice learning, and by the pedagogy our school embraces, inspired by schools in Reggio Emilia, Italy. In this approach, teachers offer children a provocation and listen carefully to the children's responses. These responses help teachers plan the next provocation to challenge or expand the children's theories, questions, and cognitive challenges.

What Does Power Look Like?

A few days after we'd removed the Legos, we turned our attention to the meaning of power. During the boom days of Legotown, we'd suggested to the key Lego players that there was an unequal distribution of power giving rise to conflict and tension. Our suggestions were met with deep resistance. Children denied any explicit or unfair power, making comments like "Somebody's got to be in charge or there would be chaos," and "The little kids ask me because I'm good at Legos." They viewed their power as passive leadership, benignly granted, arising from mastery and long experience with Legos, as well as from their social status in the group.

Now, with Legotown dismantled and the issues of equity and power squarely in front of us, we took up the idea of power and its multiple meanings. We began by inviting the children to draw pictures of power, knowing that when children represent an idea in a range of "languages" or art media, their understandings deepen and expand. "Think about power," said Kendra. "What do you think 'power' means? What does power look like? Take a few minutes to make a drawing that shows what power is."

As children finished their drawings, we gathered for a meeting to look at the drawings together. The drawings represented a range of understandings of power: a tornado, love spilling over as hearts, forceful and fierce individuals, exclusion, cartoon superheroes, political power.

During our meeting, children gave voice to the thinking behind their drawings.

Marlowe: "If your parents say you have to eat pasta, then that's power."

Lukas: "You can say no."

Carl: "Power is ownership of something."

Drew: "Sometimes I like power and sometimes I don't. I like to be in power because I feel free. Most people like to do it, you can tell people what to do and it feels good."

Drew's comment startled us with its raw truth. He was a member of the Legotown inner circle, and had been quite resistant to acknowledging the power he held in that role. During this discussion, though, he laid his cards on the table. Would Drew's insight break open new understandings among the other members of the inner circle?



Exploring Power

To build on Drew's breakthrough comment about the pleasure and unease that comes with wielding power, and to highlight the experience of those who are excluded from power, we designed a Lego trading game with built-in inequities. We developed a point system for Legos, then skewed the system so that it would be quite hard to get lots of points. And we established just one rule: Get as many points as possible. The person with the most points would create the rules for the rest of the game. Our intention was to create a situation in which a few children would receive unearned power from sheer good luck in choosing Lego bricks with high point values, and then would wield that power with their peers. We hoped that the game would be removed enough from the particulars and personalities of Legotown that we could look at the central Legotown issues from a fresh perspective.

This was a simple game about complicated issues.

We introduced the Lego trading game to the children by passing a bin of Legos around the circle, asking each child to choose 10 Legos; we didn't say anything about point values or how we'd use the bricks. Most children chose a mix of colored Lego bricks, though a few chose 10 of one color. Liam took all eight green Legos, explaining that green is his favorite color; this seemingly straightforward choice altered the outcome of the game.

When everyone had their Legos, the teachers announced that each color had a point value: The more common the brick color, the fewer the points it was worth, while the scarcest brick color, green, was worth a whopping five points.

Right away, there were big reactions.

Liam: "I have all the green! I have 40 points because I have all the green!"

Drew: "This isn't fair! Liam won't trade any green, I bet, so what's the point? What if you just want to quit?"

Carl: "I don't want to play this game. I'll just wait for Liam to give me a green. If he doesn't, it's hopeless."

We didn't linger with the children's reactions, but carried on with the game, explaining that the object of the game was to trade Lego pieces in an effort to get the most points. Kids immediately began to calculate how they'd trade their pieces, and dove into trading. Several children shadowed Liam, pleading with him to give them a green — but he refused.

After a few minutes of trading, we rang a bell and children added up their scores. Liam and Kyla had scores that far out-totaled those of the other children. Kendra asked them each to create a rule, explaining that we'd play another round of the game, following the new rules and aiming for the same goal: to get the most points possible.

We expected that the winners would make rules to ensure that they would win the next round — for instance, "All greens are worth 50 points," or, "You can only win if your name starts with a K." We were surprised at what happened.

Liam instituted this rule: "You have to trade at least one piece. That's a good rule because if you have a high score at the beginning, you wouldn't have to trade, and that's not fair."

Kyla added this rule to the game: "If you have more than one green, you have to trade one of them."

With these new rules on the books, we held a second short round of trading, then rang the bell and added up points. Liam, Kyla, and Lukas won this round. The three winners grinned at each other as we gathered in a circle to debrief the game. Before we could launch a conversation as teachers, the children's raw emotion carried us into a passionate exchange.

Drew: "Liam, you don't have to brag in people's faces."

Carl: "The winner would stomp his feet and go 'Yes' in the face of people. It felt kind of mean."

Liam: "I was happy! I wasn't trying to stomp in people's faces."

Carl: "I don't like that winners make new rules. People make rules that are only in their advantage. They could have written it simpler that said, 'Only I win.'"

Juliet: "Because they wanted to win and make other people feel bad."

Kyla: “I wasn’t trying to make other people feel bad. I felt bad when people felt bad, so I tried to make a rule that would make them feel better. It was fun to make up the rule — like a treat, to be one of only three people out of the whole group.”

When the teaching staff met to reflect on the Lego trading game, we were struck by the ways the children had come face-to-face with the frustration, anger, and hopelessness that come with being on the outside of power and privilege. During the trading game, a couple of children simply gave up, while others waited passively for someone to give them valuable pieces. Drew said, “I stopped trading because the same people were winning. I just gave up.” In the game, the children could experience what they’d not been able to acknowledge in Legotown: When people are shut out of participation in the power structure, they are disenfranchised — and angry, discouraged, and hurt.

To make sense of the sting of this disenfranchisement, most of the children cast Liam and Kyla as “mean,” trying to “make people feel bad.” They were unable or unwilling to see that the rules of the game — which mirrored the rules of our capitalist meritocracy — were a setup for winning and losing. Playing by the rules led to a few folks winning big and most folks falling further and further behind. The game created a classic case of cognitive disequilibrium: Either the system is skewed and unfair, or the winners played unfairly. To resolve this by deciding that the system is unfair would call everything into question; young children are committed to rules and rule-making as a way to organize a community, and it is wildly unsettling to acknowledge that rules can have built-in inequities. So most of the children resolved their disequilibrium by clinging to the belief that the winners were ruthless — despite clear evidence of Liam and Kyla’s compassionate generosity.

In Legotown, the children had constructed a social system of power where a few people made the important decisions and the rest of the participants did the grunt work — much like the system in the trading game. We wanted children to critique the system at work in Legotown, not to critique the children at the top of the Legotown hierarchy. At the same time, we wanted them to see that the Legotown system was created by people, and, as such, could be challenged and reformulated. The children’s reaction to the winners of the trading game was a big warning flag for us: We clearly had some repair work to do around relationships, as well as some overt teaching about systemic fallibility. The Lego trading game presented core issues that would be our focus for the months to come. Our analysis of the game, as teachers, guided our planning for the rest of the investigation into the issues of power, privilege, and authority that spanned the rest of the year.

Rules and Ownership

In the weeks after the trading game, we explored questions about how rules are made and enforced, and when they ought to be followed or broken. We aimed to help children see that all rules (including social structures and systems) are made by people with particular perspectives, interests, and experiences that shape their rule-making. And we wanted to encourage them to consider that there are times when rules ought to be questioned or even broken — sharing stories of people who refused to “play by the rules” when the rules were unjust, people like Rosa Parks and Cesar Chavez.

We added another thread to our investigation of power, as well, by turning our attention to issues related to ownership. In Legotown, the builders “owned” sections of Legotown and protected them fiercely from encroachment. We were curious to explore with the children their beliefs about how ownership happens: How does a person come to own something? How is ownership maintained or transferred? Are there situations in which ownership ought to be challenged or denied? What are the distinctions between private and public ownership?

We looked at ownership through several lenses. With the children, we created an “ownership museum,” where children displayed possessions they brought from home — a Gameboy, a special blanket, a bike helmet, a baseball card, jewelry, dolls — and described how they came to own them. And we visited Pike Place Market, the farmers and artisans market in downtown Seattle, and asked questions to provoke kids to think about ownership: Does a farmer own her produce? Or does the consumer own it?

In their reflections, the children articulated several shared theories about how ownership is conferred.

- If I buy it, I own it:

Sophia: “She owns the lavender balls because she makes them, but if I buy it, then it’s mine.”

- If I receive it as a gift, I own it:

Marlowe: “My mom bought this book for me because she thought it would be a good reading book for me. I know I own it because my mom bought it and she’s my mom and she gave it to me.”

- If I make it myself, I own it:

Sophie: “I sewed this pillow myself with things that my teacher gave me, like stuffing and fabric. I sewed it and it turned into my pillow because it’s something I made instead of something I got at the store.”

- If it has my name on it, I own it:

Alex: “My teacher made this pillow for me and it has my name on it.”

Kendra: “If I put my name on it, would I own it?”

Alex: “Well, Miss S. made it for me... but if your name was on it, then you would own it.”

Sophie: “Kendra, don’t put your name on it, OK?”

- If I own it, I make the rules about it:

Alejandro: "I own this computer, because my grandpa gave it to me. I lend it to my friends so that they can play with it. But I make the rules about it."

The Return of the Legos

Throughout the investigation, the staff continued to meet weekly to study our notes about the activities we took up with the children, watching for moments when children identified contradictions in their own thinking, took on new perspectives, or questioned their own assumptions. In late spring, we decided it was time to challenge the children to wrestle their theoretical understandings into practical shape and apply their analysis of individual and collective ownership to a concrete project. After five months of naming and investigating the issues of power, rules, ownership, and authority, we were ready to reconstruct Legotown in a new way.

We invited the children to work in small, collaborative teams to build Pike Place Market with Legos. We set up this work to emphasize negotiated decision-making, collaboration, and collectivity. We wanted the children to practice the big ideas we'd been exploring. We wanted Lego Pike Place Market to be an experience of group effort and shared ownership: If Legotown was an embodiment of individualism, Lego Pike Place Market would be an experiment in collectivity and consensus.

We offered the children some guidelines to steer them into a new way of interacting with each other and with the Legos: "Create teams of two or three people, decide as a team on some element of Pike Place Market that you'll build, and then start constructing." The first day or two, children created signs warning the other teams "Do Not Touch" their collaboratively constructed vegetable, fruit, and crafts stands. As they settled into this construction project, though, the teams softened the rigid boundaries around their work and began to leave notes for each other describing their work and proposing next steps for Pike Place Market. We celebrated this shift, seeing it as a sign that the children were beginning to integrate the thinking of the last months into their interactions.

A New Ethics for Legotown

This "practice" round of Lego construction served as a foundation for a full-fledged return of Legos to their front-and-center place in the classroom, but with a new location in the consciousness of the group. In preparation for bringing Legos back, we held several meetings with the children to generate a set of key principles for Lego play. We met with small groups of children over snack or as we walked to and from the park, posing questions like "If you were going to play with Legos, what would be important to you?" "What would be different if we bring the Legos back to the classroom? How could we make it different?" "What could we do if we fall into old habits with the Legos?" From our conversations, several themes emerged.

- Collectivity is a good thing:

“You get to build and you have a lot of fun and people get to build onto your structure with you, and it doesn’t have to be the same way as when you left it.... A house is good because it is a community house.”

- Personal expression matters:

“It’s important that the little Lego plastic person has some identity. Lego houses might be all the same except for the people. A kid should have their own Lego character to live in the house so it makes the house different.”

- Shared power is a valued goal:

“It’s important to have the same amount of power as other people over your building. And it’s important to have the same priorities.”

“Before, it was the older kids who had the power because they used Legos most. Little kids have more rights now than they used to and older kids have half the rights.”

- Moderation and equal access to resources are things to strive for:

“We should have equal houses. They should be standard sizes.... We should all just have the same number of pieces, like 15 or 28 pieces.”

As teachers, we were excited by these comments. The children gave voice to the value that collectivity is a solid, energizing way to organize a community — and that it requires power-sharing, equal access to resources, and trust in the other participants. They expressed the need, within collectivity, for personal expression, for being acknowledged as an individual within the group. And finally, they named the deep satisfaction of shared engagement and investment, and the ways in which the participation of many people deepens the experience of membership in community for everyone.

From this framework, the children made a number of specific proposals for rules about Legos, engaged in some collegial debate about those proposals, and worked through their differing suggestions until they reached consensus about three core agreements:

- All structures are public structures. Everyone can use all the Lego structures. But only the builder or people who have her or his permission are allowed to change a structure.
- Lego people can be saved only by a “team” of kids, not by individuals.
- All structures will be standard sizes.

With these three agreements — which distilled months of social justice exploration into a few simple tenets of community use of resources — we returned the Legos to their place of honor in the classroom.

Children absorb political, social, and economic worldviews from an early age. Those worldviews show up in their play, which is the terrain that young children use to make meaning about their world and to test and solidify their understandings. We believe that educators have a responsibility to pay close attention to the themes, theories, and values that children use to anchor their play. Then we can interact with those worldviews, using play to instill the values of equality and democracy.

*All children's names have been changed.

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