

# Collective Imagining: The Early Genesis and Development of a sense of Collectiveness during Infancy

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On entering formal education, infants face the demand of participating in collective educational routines and learning experiences. However, in this age period, the sense of collectiveness is still in an embryonic form. This study explored how infants enter into and experience the need for collectiveness and how teachers create the conditions for the development of a sense of collectiveness during infancy. Our educational experiment drew on a Conceptual PlayWorld, as a collective model of practice for the development of play and imagination. Thirteen infants (0,5–2 years old) participated in the study. Visual methods were used for digital data collection and analysis. It was found that, being in the imaginary situation as play partners, teachers introduced to the infants' environment the demand to align with the collective, consistently facilitated and sustained infants' motive orientation to the collective. The use of props, the embodiment of the experience and the shift from physical objects and concrete spaces to a shared intellectual and abstract space appeared to be critical. The findings inform everyday practice and policy opening up a new area of understanding about the concept of collective imagining, as an important concept for the development of a collective orientation for infants.

**Keywords:** infants, collectiveness, belonging, imagination, play, early years, pedagogical positioning.

**For citation:** Fragkiadaki G., Fleer M., Rai P. Collective Imagining: The Early Genesis and Development of a Sense of Collectiveness during Infancy. *Kul'turno-istoricheskaya psikhologiya = Cultural-Historical Psychology*, 2021. Vol. 17, no. 3, pp. 84–94. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17759/chp.2021170312>

## 1. Introduction

Collective routines and collective learning experiences have a central role in everyday educational reality in childcare centres and early childhood settings. As a common practice tradition, children along with early childhood teachers, share a collective reality that responds to collective needs, reflects on collective planning, and includes a wide range of collective activities such as joining each other during the lunchtime routine and outdoor free play or participating in team discussions and collaborative tasks. For most infants and toddlers, belonging to a group and to a class community constitutes a new social, emotional, and intellectual reality. This early experience of collective formal settings as part of the institutional practice tradition puts demands on infants and educators

as a form of continuous challenge for young children. Responding to the new reality requires new types of activity and new kinds of thinking from the child. However, in this age period, the sense of collectiveness is still in an embryonic form. The early genesis and development of a sense of collectiveness during infancy is a generally under-researched area. We do not know much about how children and early childhood teachers become oriented to collectiveness or how they develop this sense of collectiveness we see as an important practice tradition in preschools for infants. Understanding this would lead to new ways of thinking about planning and organising learning in group settings for infant and toddler development.

The purpose of this study was to explore how infants enter into, experience, and contribute to the need for collectiveness and how early childhood teachers create the con-

ditions for the development of a sense of togetherness and a motive orientation to collectiveness during infancy. The study examined the emergence and the qualities of togetherness as well as the dynamics of collectiveness for infants during a *Conceptual PlayWorld* (CPW). A CPW [12; 13] is a collective model of practice developed to support young children's conceptual learning and development through play and imagination. Through distinct pedagogical characteristics, the model introduces and steps the children along with the teachers through an imaginary situation based on a children's book. Within these imaginary situations, problem scenarios emerge that require the use of concepts to help solve the problem and mature the play. Being in role together, children and the teachers are trying to find a solution to the inquiries as part of their imaginary play. This is how the concepts come in service of children's play and children begin to form the concept through their imaginary play. It is argued that sharing the same imaginary situation will create the stimulating conditions for infants to come together and stepwise experience a range of early forms of collectiveness. Teachers' pedagogical positioning within the CPW as play partners is expected to introduce and support a sense of collectiveness in the infants' environment. But this kind of research has not yet been undertaken.

The paper begins with an overview of what is generally known about collective practices and experiences within early childhood settings. This is followed by the theoretical foundations guiding the study, the methodology, and the related study design. The paper concludes by discussing the findings and the theoretical insights relevant to what is the earliest developmental period – infancy in group settings.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Collective Practice Traditions in Early Childhood Settings

Collective practice traditions are reflected in many educational curriculums for early years worldwide and the development of a sense of collectiveness in group contexts is considered a fundamental principle of early childhood education in many contemporary societies [5]. Collectiveness is conceptualized and defined here as the essence of young children being aware of, joining in, participating in, and contributing to an activity setting in a way that reflects shared meanings and understandings, constantly negotiated and converging intentions and motives as well as commonly accepted rules and roles. Collectiveness in early childhood settings is mutually constituted by the participants (institutional demands, societal traditions, and participants' motive orientation) and is guided by meaningful and purposeful actions by them. The notion of collectiveness is also conceptualized and used here in relation to the notion of togetherness. Togetherness is understood as a requirement and an early and precursor of collectiveness for young children. Research in collective practices in the early years has tended to focus on preschoolers and kindergarten students [1; 9; 10; 14; 16; 17]. What we have learned from these studies is that collectiveness involves

both peers and teachers, requires supportive pedagogical strategies, and is the baseline for qualitative learning and development in early childhood educational settings. Not surprisingly, a limited number of researchers have considered and studied collectiveness as part of infants' learning and development. However, as Verba [30] argued, the beginning of the pipeline for peers' interactions reach back into infancy. Sumsion et., al [29] have highlighted the importance of understanding infants' perspective and the way they experience the collective reality they participate in. Research has shown that during infancy children start to form the ability to create and share an "intersubjective space" during their social interactions [27]. Several studies in the field [2–4] have also revealed that infants have a wide range of social capabilities as well as that the interactions and the relationships between infants, peers, and adults are complex. These insights are suggestive of infants' agency to be involved within group culture in childcare centres and early childhood settings [22; 28]. What is critical for the introduction and the emergence of a sense of belonging in group cultures during infancy is the mediating role of the adults such as parents, caregivers, educators, and teachers in supporting collective participation [24].

The overall play-based pedagogy for the early years aims to orient the child to the group and support the emergence of collectiveness [11; 26]. However, very little is known about the concrete pedagogical practices that are effective, efficient, and appropriate for infants to start building on their capacity to participate in collective experiences. The study reported in this paper seeks to address this gap by providing insight into how early childhood teachers can create the conditions for the early genesis and development of a sense of collectiveness during infancy.

### 2.2. Theoretical Concepts Framing the Study

#### 2.2.1. The interrelation between the inter and intra-psychological level

One of the ingenious achievements of Vygotsky was to bring together the individual and social plane of children's development. Considering learning as a fundamentally social activity means that all higher psychological functions appear first on the inter-psychological plane, where a person interacts with others and begins to recognise what is valued, and then on the intra-psychological plane, where the learner can perform the valued psychological functions independently [31]. How this happens for infants who embody their world through their physical interactions has not been fully theorised. However, Vygotsky [31] argued the process of development of psychological functions in an individual follows from its development in relation to other children or adults first on a social plane and this can be seen when infants move towards each other and gesture their intent. The argument is that the social and cultural environment presents the child with a variety of tasks and demands and engages children in their worlds. Thus, engagement in social activities is critical for children as it offers multiple opportunities and possibilities for learning and development. In this study, we trace and analyse how infants' participation in social activities

looks like in an early care centre and how its emergence through their actions and intentions, and how this is supported by early childhood teachers.

### 2.2.2. *Demands, motives, and motive orientations*

Building on the cultural-historical conceptualisation of learning and development [6;23;32], Hedegaard [20, p.11] has argued that a wholeness approach “focus(es) on children’s activities in activity settings located in institutional practices that have history embodied in traditions and framed by societal conditions”. Following this argument, observing children’s activities in an activity setting gives access to understanding their motives and intentions for engaging in the activity. The wholeness approach to understanding children’s learning and development considers the institutional practice and what people do in the activities within the institutional setting as the key. Emphasis is given on the broader cultural tradition, institutional practices, activity settings and children’s activities. Capturing the dialectical interrelations between these aspects of a child’s social and cultural reality offers a framework for studying children by focusing on their activities and the demands they meet in diverse institutional practices such as the home practice, the school practice or the day-care practice. The wholeness approach illustrates how the individual and the social plane are brought together in praxis as the child participates in and experiences diverse activity settings such as participating in class or doing homework that is formed by cultural traditions and values such as belonging to a school community or following a schedule and shaped by everyday institutional practices such as tasks assignments or family gathering. Following the above theorization, in this paper, we observed and analysed children within a *CPW* activity setting to get an insight into their motives and intentions for engaging in the activity setting as well as to better understand how the early childhood teachers’ pedagogical practice and the practice tradition of the center created the conditions for infants’ motive orientation towards a sense of collectiveness.

## 3. Methodological Framework

### 3.1. *A Conceptual PlayWorld as an educational experiment*

The study followed the method of educational experiment introduced by Hedegaard [19]. Within an educational experiment participants and researchers work together to create a condensed form of developmental conditions for the child. *CPW* was introduced to the teachers as a play-based model of practice for teaching concepts. The structure of the model is following five characteristics: a) selecting a story that introduces a problem situation regarding a concept or a set of concepts; the drama of the story creates empathy for the characters and engages children, b) designing a space to explore the concepts in different ways; this can be an indoor or outdoor space designed collectively by the teachers and the children, c) entering and exiting the space creating collective experiences; children along with the teacher are in role pretending to be characters of the story, d) planning several inquiries, based on the story’s

plot, to approach the concept or the concepts; the concepts come in the service of children’s play to lead to provide a solution on the problem that is introduced by the story, and e) planning the teacher’s role as he/she joins the imaginary space to interact with the children; being in role, teachers become play-partners to children. In the present educational experiment Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics concepts were explored implementing a *CPW* inspired by story of “Possum in the House” written by Kirsten Jensen and illustrated by Tony Oliver.

### 3.2. *Study Design and Method of Analysis*

#### 3.2.1. *Participants and data generation*

Evidence from thirteen infants (8 girls and 5 boys), two teachers named Mei and Samantha, and one teacher assistant named Nitu from one classroom in the state of Victoria, Australia are presented in this paper. All participants are named with pseudonyms. The infants were aged between 0,5 (6 months) and 2 years with a mean age of 1,2 (1 year and 3 months). Parents and all participants provided written informed consent to be in the study. Ethics approval was gained from the university and the relevant Department.

Teachers’ participated in a professional development session during which they collaborated with the researchers’ on the designing and implementation of a *CPW*. Regular support in the field and a follow-up professional learning session to consolidate understandings and directions of the educational experiment were provided. Most of these sessions were digitally recorded. A total of 5,3 hours of the professional development sessions in the centre as a whole and an additional 3,9 hours of planning and interview sessions with the teachers were collected. This data source allowed us to get an insight into teachers’ needs for implementing the *CPW* and better support them as part of the educational experiment.

The data collection process of the actual teaching ran over three weeks. The digital recordings captured the implementation of the *CPW*. The time of the recording was decided by the teachers regarding the flow of the everyday educational routines in the center and children’s interests. A total of 17,8 hours of digital data were collected. Following the five characteristics, the teachers created a *CPW* based on the children’s book ‘*Possum in the House*’. The story is based on an engaging scenario; a naughty possum, an indigenous Australian mammal, has entered and runs all over the house hiding in different rooms and making mischiefs. A problem situation is introduced: how to get the possum out of the house?

#### 3.2.2. *Data analysis*

The analysis was based on Hedegaard’s [19] *wholeness approach* that introduces three different levels of data analysis. The first level of analysis is a common-sense interpretation. At this level, the analysis was based on the researchers’ comments on infants’ and educators’ experience. This meant viewing all the data set and extracting examples of moments where indicators of collectiveness were evident within infants’ imaginary play. Examples were noted and logged. The second level of analysis is situated practice interpretation. At this level, the emergence of conceptual

links and correlations between the results obtained from the analysis at the common-sense interpretation level was undertaken. This meant clustering all those moments of collectiveness to determine a pattern of data about particular practices of the teachers' and the orientation of infants to diverse types of collectiveness. The third level is the thematic interpretation. At this level, a theoretical analysis was carried out based on the theoretical concepts that frame the study (i.e. the interrelation between inter and intra-psychological level, motives, and motive orientation). This level of analysis aimed to find a conceptual pattern that explains how teachers created the condition for the emergence of infants' collectiveness – the research question that drove our study. A set of three vignettes is presented as examples of common actions. The criterion posed for the selection of the vignettes was the identification of qualitative turning points in the way infants experience collectiveness within the imaginary situation.

#### 4. Findings

The overall findings revealed the critical role of teachers in creating the conditions for infants' orientation to the collective. It was shown that being in the imaginary situation as play partners, teachers introduced to the infants' environment the demand to align with the collective, and they consistently facilitated and sustained infants' motive orientation to the collective as part of their imaginary play. The use of props, the embodiment of the experience as well as the focus on a shared intellectual and abstract space that goes beyond physical objects and concrete spaces appeared to create motivating conditions for the genesis and development of infants' sense of collectiveness within the CPW group settings. Indicative examples are presented as follows.

##### 4.1. Vignette 1: Joining a collective experience

In Vignette 1, Mei begins to read the book *'Possum in the House'* to Olin. At the moment, Olin is the only infant awake. As Mei reads the story, she enters the imaginary situation by pretending to be a possum. She changes the tone of her voice and uses a set of objects that are featured in the story, such as cornflakes packets, wooden toys, plastic

blocks, or a metal saucepan, to reproduce the sounds made by the possum running across the house and engaging with the objects (i.e. *"Crunch, crunch went the cornflakes"*). Mei encourages Olin to join her and imagine being a possum too and explore different sounds with her (e.g., *"What's the sound the hammer makes on the paper? What sound does it make on the block? Give it a try! What about the other side?"*) (Figure 1). Olin joins in the CPW. Olin and Mei appear to imagine together that they are both possums, as is suggested by their orientation to each other and the storyline. They both follow the commonly accepted roles of possums. A sense of collectiveness emerges. Olin embodies the idea of being a naughty possum by using different objects to produce diverse sounds. As the story continues, he explores the sound of *"crunchy cornflakes being eaten in the cupboard"*, *"clothes ripping in the laundry"* and *"pages rustling in the study"*. Mei and Olin share the same meaning of the objects they use in turns. Olin continues to embody the idea of being a possum by using the cornflakes packet as a transition object to invite Nitu into the CPW. He takes the packet and walks to Nitu to let her listen to the sound, thereby inviting her into the imaginary situation and expanding the sense of emerging collectiveness. Nitu responds to Olin sharing the same meaning of the object. As Mei is reading, Olin interacts with her by creating diverse sounds using a pot and imitates sounds (i.e. *"Screech, screech!"*). This is suggestive of Mei's and Olin converging intentions in using the objects as part of the imaginary situation. Olin contributes to the imaginary play by putting the baby possum to sleep next to Mei using a cot and a blanket.

The other infants wake up. Mei uses the possum puppet to say hello to the infants, Anna and Rachel, and invite them within the imaginary situation. Olin stands up and walks to Rachel. He continues to embody the idea of being a possum by again using the cornflakes packet as a transition object to invite Rachel into the CPW. Olin tries to make Rachel and Anna aware of the imaginary situation. He runs back to the cot, points to the baby, and takes the possum out of the cot. Anna joins the CPW and begins to touch the possum puppet. Rachel enters the CPW by using the book as a transition object. She shows the book around to her peers and the teachers and then sits down. Anna and Rachel are now both motivated towards the imaginary situation. Mei reads the book again. The whole



Fig. 1. Being in the role and exploring different sounds as play partners

group comes together to listen to the story. Everyone now appear to be motivated by the activity, as is suggested by their orientation to each other and by their orientation to the book and the related props such as the puppet, the blanket, the saucepan, and the cornflakes. Megan, another infant, join the reading group (Figure 2).

Mei, Anna, and Megan are using the props to explore together the sound with the log, hammer, and pot as if being the naughty possums themselves. All the infants are now oriented to the story. Mei shows children other materials such as paper, expanding their imaginary play and keeping them inside the imaginary situation. The children and the teacher continue to be oriented to each other, to participate in and share the imaginary situation, and to stay engaged with the group activity exploring different sounds together. The whole activity setting lasted around forty minutes.

Vignette 1 showcases how Mei's pedagogical positioning within the CPW oriented the infants to each other, developed a sense of togetherness, and stimulated infants' motive orientation to the group and the collective. Mei introduced the demand to align with the collective by introducing infants to the shared imaginary situation. Infants' intention to join in and participate in the imaginary play motivated them to converge their intentions and motives, accept rules and roles within the play, and develop a sense of togetherness to respond to the demand of collectiveness. Being in the role, Mei had awareness of the infants' imaginary play throughout the activity setting. That is, she was able to detect, acknowledge, and respond to the infants' activity and orient their activity towards the collective. That could be seen in the example when Mei, while she kept storytelling, noticed that Rachel was playing with the doll and the blanket and responded to her action. That led to Rachel's response to Mei's action by putting another blanket in the cot. Mei was part of the infants' imaginary play physically, emotionally, and intellectually. Thus, Mei was able to facilitate and sustain infants' motive orientation to the collective efficiently through the activity setting being inside the imaginary play as a play partner and an active member of the group. Mei oriented infants to start noticing, reflecting, and reacting to each

other's actions during the imaginary play. Gradually, infants started paying attention to each other when experiencing the same situation, realizing each member of the group had a different role as well as a different perspective to the collective experience while rules were also commonly accepted. Mutual interactions and exchanges were noticed. Mei's pedagogical positioning created the conditions for the infants to experience the same imaginary situation. Sharing the same imaginary situation appeared to orient the infants to realize the collective aspect of the activity setting, come together, be inspired, stay engaged throughout the whole activity setting, and contribute to the common experience. This suggests that the imaginary situation became meaningful for them at a personal level but at the same time a common meaning was shared and developed at an interpersonal level. A sense of togetherness and an early form of collective imagining appeared to emerge during the activity setting.

#### **4.2. Vignette 2: Exploring in pairs**

Two days afterward, Olin plays alone with a piece of paper on the floor. He appears to explore the texture and the sounds coming from the material by touching, tearing, ripping, and scratching the paper. Mei introduces a new prop to Olin that is related to the story seen earlier in Vignette 1. She brings Olin a blanket to continue exploring the texture and the sounds of diverse materials. Olin is stimulated by the new prop and starts handling the blanket, jumping on the blanket, tiling the blanket on the floor, and crawling on the blanket. Nitu, interacts with Olin, helping him to lay the blanket on the floor. Gilly, a younger child (1 year and 3.5 months old), watches Olin's play. Olin points three times at the blanket saying "Night-night!". Nitu responds to Olin by asking him who is sleeping, Olin or the possum, (i.e. "Olin night-night or possum night-night?") and prompting him to find the possum. This is suggestive of the way Nitu is introducing collective imagining into the infants' environment. Olin responds to Nitu's invitation. He looks around and then points to the direction where the basket with the possum puppets is. Nitu names the different possum puppets (i.e. "Mummy possum, baby possum!").



*Fig. 2. Being in the role and exploring different sounds as a collective*

Olin enters the imaginary situation by taking the baby possum puppet out of the basket. Gilly points to Olin and the possum expressing her interest in Olin's play. This is suggestive of the way the two infants' intentions and motives begin to converge within the activity setting. Olin crawls on the carpet with the possum laughing and pretending that he is putting the possum into sleep saying "Night-night". Olin closes his eyes, acting as though he is asleep. His sleeping actions are consistent with the pretend play he initiated by saying "Night-night". Joint play here appears to show the early forms of child-initiated collective experiencing the story. Nitu enhances Olin's imaginary play (i.e. "You are sleeping with possum!", "Now Olin and Mommy possum and baby possum are sleeping together!"). Gilly continues paying attention to Olin's play and when the teacher again lays the blanket on the floor, she holds the other possum puppet and climbs onto the blanket joining Olin (Figure 3).

Nitu and Mei orient Gilly towards joining the activity (i.e. "Go, go, Gilly! Go play with the possum puppet!", "Possum is going to Olin, the possum is going to Gilly!") at the same time as encouraging the infants' orientation to each other. This is suggestive of the way the two teachers put the demand on the infants to align with the collective and motivate infants to develop a sense of togetherness. The two teachers are both in the imaginary situation now. Olin and Gilly are now oriented to each other. They crawl together up to the blanket sharing the same meaning and understanding of the situation; that is, pretending to be possums. This is suggestive of the commonly accepted rules and roles in infants' imaginary play. Gilly tries to touch the possum. She imitates Olin as he moves and sleeps as a possum. Nitu sustains infants' motive orientation to the shared imaginary situation by showing Olin and Gilly the possum's tail. The two infants move around and across the blanket together pretending to be possums and contributing to the activity setting.

What is important here is that the activity Olin initiated evolved into a collective activity for both Olin, Gilly, and Nitu. Nitu's mediating role and the way she interrelated Olin's initiative with the imaginary situation was critical. The whole process was transformed by Nitu through

the way she responded to Olin's play and she oriented Olin to again enter the imaginary situation by creating a short narrative around his play ("Olin night-night or possum night-night?"). Another turning point in the activity setting has been the way Nitu, along with Mei, verbally acknowledged and reinforced Gilly's entering and involvement in the imaginary situation. Olin's imaginary play appeared to orient Gilly to the activity setting. Gilly was receptive to this too. As such, Vignette 2 showcases how it is not just the teachers who are orienting the infants to a sense of collectiveness, but it is also the infants themselves. In the same activity setting, we follow how both infants entered into the CPW, but also how they were receptive to being together. The object play was a stimulus that gave rise to the infants' interaction in the CPW. However, the sense of togetherness appeared to be the moving force for the infants' rich engagement within the activity setting. The way Olin and Gilly came together and interacted as a pair of individuals held together as a system by dynamic interpersonal exchanges is suggestive of the genesis of a sense of togetherness and the orientation to collectiveness between infants through imaginary play in group settings.

#### 4.3. Vignette 3: exploring as a group

Five days afterward, Nitu reads the book and asks the children questions (i.e. "Where is the possum?"). Infants are engaged and the story finishes by prompting the children to look for the possum in the room. Samantha shows Clara, Anna, and Rachel the possum footprints on the wall (see Figure 3). Samantha guides the infants to search for the possum following the paper footprints. Infants enter the CPW and join the group activity. Samantha follows the footprints pretending to be mummy possum by changing her voice and handling the puppet. Samantha orients the infants towards being in the same role and going on adventures together. This is suggestive of the way she introduces the demand to align with the collective. Infants appear to participate in the activity setting and become oriented to the collective. They are all following the puppet listening to Samantha in the role of mummy possum. She poses the problem that she has lost her daughter. Samantha points to the possum footprint and prompts the



Fig. 3. Pretending sleepy possums in pair

children to find the next one together motivating infants towards the collective. The infants are oriented to the collective. They walk together to look for the possums. They find the daddy possum under the desk. Samantha immediately changes the role and acts as a daddy possum (i.e. “Where is my daughter?”). Olin screams with delight when he finds a possum hiding in the highchair. Samantha, Anna, Amy, and Megan are oriented to each other and the collective and go to investigate too. Samantha goes into a dual role acting ‘as if’ she is mummy and daddy possum in search of their daughter. Megan wants to carry one of the possums, Rachel and Olin make screaming noises. All the infants appear to share the same meanings and have the converged intention and motive to find the possum. Physical proximity, eye contact, joint attention are suggestive of this sense of togetherness between the infants (Figure 4). The infants stayed engaged in the activity as a collective pretending to put the baby possum to sleep.

This vignette illustrates how through consistently stimulating and supporting infants’ engagement with the imaginary situation, teachers introduced the demand of collectiveness and created the motivating conditions for the development of a sense of togetherness between the infants. Being in the role herself, Samantha motivated the infants to be in the role themselves. By continually stimulating the infants to be in role, Samantha sustained the infants’ motive orientation to the imaginary situation and the collective. The narrative that she kept crafting during the whole activity setting (i.e. “Let’s keep following those footprints!”) and the overall embodiment of the experience through the puppets facilitated infants’ motivation. Entering and being together in the CPW, the infants realized the collective aspect of the activity setting. They participated in and contributed to the group activity, they stayed engaged as a collective around the theme of the story, they shared meanings and understandings of being in an imaginary adventure and brought in line their intentions and motives of finding the possum. What is also important here is that being inspired and motivated by the teachers positioning within the imaginary situation, the infants took imaginary play a step forward and continued to contribute to the ac-

tivity setting in their way even after the imaginary adventure was over. This could be seen in the way infants imagining together, putting the possum to sleep. This is suggestive that the motive orientation to the collective sustained as infants continued their imaginary play.

## 5. Discussion

In the above vignettes, it was shown that teachers’ pedagogical positioning within the imaginary situation led to the emergence of a sense of togetherness between the infants as well as between the infants and the teachers and created the motivating conditions for the infants to respond to the demand of collectiveness introduced by the pedagogical practices. We identified four key ways for the genesis and development of infants’ sense of collectiveness in group settings throughout the study.

First, it was found that by supporting infants’ imaginary play as play partners, teachers facilitated and sustained infants’ motive orientation to the collective. Rather than following the typical practice tradition of being an observer of children’s imaginary play, teachers were inspired by the new practice tradition of the CPW and experienced the imaginary moments being in the imaginary situation themselves. Teachers’ positioning within the imaginary situation was evident through the tone of their voice (i.e. vibrant tone and changes in the sound of their voice), gestures (i.e. waving hands as if showing the possum’s nails), body language, and body positioning (i.e. walking slowly to avoid scaring the possum) as well as through their overall comments (i.e. “Now Olin and Mummy possum and baby possum are sleeping together!”). Narratives and directing talk to the infants while being in character engaged the infants with the activity and the concepts related to this. Responding to infants’ initiatives, teachers expanded and extended infants’ thinking about the imaginary play as well as initiated and deepened infants’ interactions as part of their shared experience. Being in the CPW together allowed the group members to spend critical time together, focus on a common goal and action (e.g., find the possum), do parallel, and at some points, common play (e.g., put the possum



Fig. 4. Following the possum’s footprints as a collective

to sleep), have eye contact, use babble and use words to describe their activity (e.g., “*Tail, furry tail!*”), share the space as they sit down together, share objects related to the activity and take turns to explore these objects (e.g., using the hammer to create sound), and imitate each other’s play (e.g., the sleeping possum). With the support of the teachers, the infants oriented themselves to each other, responded to a wide range of communication challenges such as informing the group that the baby possum was finally found, and importantly, responded to the demand of collectiveness as posed within the activity setting. Acting as play partners and being in the role, teachers strengthened infants’ orientation to the collective and expanded their capacity for collective participation. This was an important finding since in the playworlds literature there have been arguments about the teachers being in the centre of the activity settings, shaping children’s experiences, and disorienting them from peers’ interactions [12; 25].

Second, the use of props appeared to support the infants’ collective orientation. During the *CPW* teachers introduced various props to the infants including the children’s book, the set of puppets, the small hammer along with diverse material, the blanket, and printed footprints. Different props inspired the infants’ activity in diverse ways. Infants used the objects as transition objects to enter the *CPW* as well as to invite in their peers or the teachers. For example, Olin used different objects like the cornflakes package and the branches to invite Nitu and Rachel into the *CPW*. Props also acted as a resource to inspire infants’ joint actions to the imaginary *CPW*. This could be seen when handling and lying on a blanket inspired Olin and Gilly to act together as being baby possums. The action of the infants as a collective was also generated by the use of props. For example, Samantha used the puppet to bring together the infants and keep them oriented to finding the baby possum by following a pathway of footprints. At the same time, speaking through the puppets supported Samantha to be in the role. This is suggestive of the way props acted as a resource of inspiration for the teachers too. Props gave the teachers’ access to the infants’ imaginary play as well as kept them in the imaginary play with the infants.

Third, the embodiment of the story through role-playing seemed to orient the infants and the teachers to each other and the collective. Teachers stimulated infants to be in role with them and use their body, gestures, and their voice in the way that possums do. Embodying their experience, the infants manage to express themselves and communicate dimensions of the experience that they could not verbalize [15]. Being in the role, the infants attuned their bodily actions. That was shown, for example, when everyone acted together to imagine being possums and started running quickly in the house or when they all imagined being adventurers and carefully following footprints. Infants, along with the teachers, developed a bodily language with common characteristics such as gestures and body positioning that made sense for all the participants in the *CPW*. This could be seen when teachers and infants imitate the possum sound “*Screech, screech!*” making, at the same time, a gesture pretending they are possums. The interaction between Olin and Gilly is indicative of the development of

a common bodily language. Using their body, infants and teachers found a way to orient themselves to each other and the collective. The findings provided indicators of how embodiment, expressed through the use of props and role-playing, expanded infants’ experience, supported a sense of togetherness, and at the same time developed infants’ collective orientation in the group setting.

Finally, through the implementation of the *CPW* teachers shift infants’ focus from physical objects and the concrete spaces and orient them to share an intellectual and abstract space. The analysis of the data provided important evidence that imaginary situations got infants’ attention (i.e. one after the other, the infants joined the group activity), stimulated infants to create shared meanings and understandings (i.e. “*night- night*” means that the possum has to go to sleep) over three weeks while the *CPW* was implemented, and enabled infants to transfer the content of an imaginary situation (i.e. imitating possum sounds) into diverse activity settings (i.e. reading the story, playing with a blanket, going on an adventure searching for footprints). The infants and the teachers participated in the group activity sharing their interest, excitement, and enjoyment of the story. Alongside the teachers, the infants appeared to consistently wonder and think together about the problematic situation of the naughty possum being in the house. Their actions suggest they imagined themselves, their peers, and the teachers as possums or as going on adventures. They appeared to conceptualized the diverse spaces of a house through their actions. They explored together various concepts such as the concept of sound or the concept of the biological characteristics of the possum. They used the same practice to search for the possum and finally contributed towards the common purpose of solving the problem. Teachers consistently supported the transition of infants’ thinking from physical objects and the concrete space towards intellectual and abstract spaces. Describing, talking, and wondering about the imaginary story themselves, teachers stimulated infants to follow them in conceptualising the story. This could be seen for example when Nitu asked Olin, “Olin night- night or possum night-night?” making him think about and share the idea of what an imaginary possum could be doing. Encouraging infants’ communication about the story, teachers provided the infants with a common space for abstract interactions and exchanges. For example, Samantha initiated a “putting possum to sleep” game, and infants started an imaginary bedtime routine for the possum. The above findings are indicators of how sharing the intellectual and abstract space created within the *CPW* oriented the infants to a sense of collectiveness that was sustained throughout the diverse activity settings.

The overall findings gave an insight into how togetherness in group settings looks like for infants and how an orientation to the collective is developed through the implementation of a *CPW*. What is important for a deeper interpretation of the findings is to understand the way the institutional practices and demands, the infant’s dominant motives, and the motivating conditions created by the teachers [18;20;21] are dialectically interrelated through the infants’ participation in the *CPW*.



Infants' dominating motives to interact, explore, and play with the surrounding world [24] led their activity and oriented infants in the activity settings. The new practice of participating collectively in the experiences was introduced to the infants by the teachers. This practice comes in line with the societal demands for early participation in formal educational settings and at the same time follows the institutional practices of collective participation in activity settings. The new practice puts new demands upon the infants on two levels. On the one hand, the infants were required to develop a new kind of togetherness. On the other hand, the infants were also required to develop a motive orientation to the group activity and align with the collective. Implementing a *CPW*, the teachers created the motivating conditions that offered infants the opportunity and the support to respond to the above demands. Sharing the same imaginary situations challenged the infants to gradually deepen their interactions with the teachers as well as with their peers and experience a sense of togetherness. Being in role, the infants started thinking together around the same abstract concept, making connections with the concrete environment [9]. Through the three vignettes, it was shown that the infants' thinking moved from an actual level of engagement with the teachers and the peers to a more advanced level of shared engagement and higher forms of participating in a collective experience. Collective imagination in and across the imaginary situation created the motivating conditions for the infants' early development of togetherness and orientation to the collectiveness.

At the same time, the infant's activity created new demands between them [21]. Infants not only joined the group activity settings but also contributed to the activities through their active participation as well as shaped the activities in a way that was meaningful to them and the other members of the group. For example, Olin put a new demand on Gilly, stimulating her to participate in imaginary play as a play partner. This new demand initiated by Olin was verbally and physically supported by the teachers who encouraged Gilly to join in the experience. By sharing a common imaginary scenario such as a sleepy possum as well as by sharing the same objects such as puppets and a blanket, the two infants collectively explored the way that the possum sleeps. The interactions between the two infants stimulated Gilly to join in the activity and begin her engagement with the concept. Social bonds between the infants emerged and developed. This indicative example highlighted the way the social situation of the activity setting oriented the child within the activity setting [21]. The example also suggests that it is not just the teachers who oriented the infants to a sense of collectiveness, but it was also the infants themselves.

The findings provided important evidence about the social genesis of imagination as a higher mental function [33]. It was shown that infants firstly began to imagine as part of their common experience in the *CPW* and then continued to imagine being possums as individuals. That is, imagination firstly emerged at an inter-psychological level. After that, the infants' imagination continued to develop on an intra-psychological level as part of the role each infant took in the imaginary play. The dialectical interrelation between collective imagining and individu-

al imagining in the early years has been underscored in previous studies [8; 10]. What is new here is the understanding of how this interrelation comes to life for infants and how teachers can support the development of infants' imagination as a higher psychological function through collective activities appropriate for this age period.

## 6. Conclusions

This study sought to explore the early genesis and development of collectiveness in infancy in group activity settings. The findings revealed how infants entered into collectives and how early childhood teachers created the conditions and supported infants to develop a sense of togetherness and respond to the demand of collectiveness. It was found that teachers used imaginary play to introduce to the infants' environment the demand to align with the collective. What was also shown is that teachers facilitated and sustained infants' motive orientation to the collective through supporting infants' imaginary play as play partners. The use of props, the embodiment of the experience as well as the shift from physical objects and concrete spaces to a shared intellectual and abstract space appeared to be critical for the genesis and development of infants' sense of collectiveness in the group settings of the *CPW*.

Implementing a *CPW*, teachers created new educational forms and pedagogical practices to support infants. The evidence showed that these practices were meaningful for infants, promoting their participation in group activities settings during everyday educational reality. The emergence of togetherness and the orientation to early forms of collective was realised through the way the infants joined, contributed, and shaped the activity settings. Imagining together within the *CPW*, appeared to be the moving force for infants' dynamic, rich, and consistent engagement throughout the group activity setting.

The above understandings gave an insight into how infants are introduced, realised, and addressed the nature of the demands of collectiveness in the everyday educational reality. New knowledge is created about how imagining through a *CPW* can build dynamic class communities for the youngest learners in early childhood settings. The new insights about the nature and the critical role of imagination as a learning and development interface between peers and teachers open up a new area of understanding about imagination as a starting point in teaching and learning with infants in formal settings. Imagination can pave the way to more advanced activity settings for infants, providing access to abstract and symbolic conceptualisations. This is a standpoint that changes the narrative around infants' low capability on complex and advanced tasks and activities by showcasing, recognizing, and valuing infants' strengths.

The overall findings of the study add to the limited literature about infants' educational experience in early childhood settings. Reinforcing collectively-oriented pedagogical practices is critical in everyday educational reality given that collectiveness is essential for a child's learning and social activity in the educational settings. An early and efficient introduction of a sense of collec-

tiveness in infants' environment lies the foundations for active participation in educational settings and smooth transitions through the child's overall school life. These new understandings inform everyday practice and early childhood policy with a model that creates dynamic interactional challenges, opportunities, and possibilities

tailored to the needs of the very young learners, giving infants a head start when they start their school life. This is particularly important with the rise of the demand to begin early childhood education earlier in a child's life. We require new and deeper understandings of how infants learn and develop in everyday educational reality.

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# Коллективное воображение: зарождение и развитие чувства коллективности в раннем возрасте

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Попадая в образовательные учреждения, маленькие дети сталкиваются с необходимостью участвовать в коллективных формах обучения. Однако в раннем возрасте чувство коллективности у детей еще очень слабо развито и находится в зачаточном состоянии. В данной работе мы исследуем, как у детей раннего возраста появляется потребность в коллективности, каким образом они эту потребность переживают и как воспитатели создают условия для формирования чувства коллективности в данном возрасте. Наш формирующий эксперимент опирался на модель «Мира понятийной игры» (Conceptual PlayWorld), групповую практику развития игры и воображения. В исследовании приняли участие тринадцать детей в возрасте от полугода до 2 лет. Для сбора и анализа цифровых данных мы использовали визуальные методы. Мы увидели, что воспитатели, находясь в роли игровых партнеров внутри воображаемой игровой ситуации, знакомят маленьких детей с необходимостью учитывать интересы группы, последовательно поддерживая и направляя мотивационную ориентацию малышей на коллектив. Самым важным в этом процессе было использование опор, практик эмбодимента и переход от физических предметов и конкретных пространств к совместному умственному, абстрактному пространству. Результаты исследования помогают по-новому взглянуть на понятие коллективного воображения и то, какую роль оно играет в развитии ориентации на коллектив в раннем возрасте, что может оказаться полезным и для переосмысления повседневных практик, и для принятия решений в сфере образования в целом.

**Ключевые слова:** дети раннего возраста, коллективность, чувство принадлежности, воображение, игра, ранний возраст, педагогическое позиционирование.

**Для цитаты:** Фрагиадаки Г., Флир М., Рай П. Коллективное воображение: зарождение и развитие чувства коллективности в раннем возрасте // Культурно-историческая психология. 2021. Том 17. № 3. С. 84–94. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17759/chp.2021170312>

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Получена 25.08.2021

Принята в печать 10.09.2021

Received 25.08.2021

Accepted 10.09.2021