

Building blocks to literacy

A three-year-old playing with pine cones can construct a story easily, using just imagination and spoken language, but can wooden blocks, removed from the construction area, really develop creative writing?

DURING A visit to a nursery, to explore developing language through outdoor play, I was sharing out a collection of pine cones. Three-year-old Elizabeth was very keen to have as many different sizes of cone in her bucket as possible. She was very quiet, so I gave her a very big cone and said: 'That's the daddy,' then toward a slightly smaller cone I said: 'That's the mummy. Would you like the baby next, or the big sister?' This was enough to get Elizabeth talking, and soon we had selected a whole 'family' of pine cones – apart from granddad and a baby sister, 'cos I haven't got one of them.'

I was struck by the sophistication of Elizabeth's thinking, and then I forgot about it in the hubbub of dealing with 10 children with shovels, sticks, sand and a lot of stones.

I was reminded of this little incident a few weeks later, when I visited Community Playthings in Robertsbridge, East Sussex, with a group of colleagues. Community Playthings has been developing wooden furniture and play equipment to supply schools and early years settings for over 50 years. We had been invited by Martin Huleatt and his wife Helen, to explore their ideas about the role of block play within the new *Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS). Martin and Helen work together to develop Community Playthings' training materials.

Once we had finished marvelling at the vast array of resources, and had a tour of the

workshop, we settled down to a detailed discussion about the role of unit blocks in the EYFS. A unit block is a small wooden brick whose length is twice its width, which is twice its thickness. These are standard equipment in most early years settings. Helen's PowerPoint presentation showed very clearly how children playing with unit blocks are able to cover all aspects of the EYFS, including literacy and, later on, creative writing.

Creative writing? I could see that children involved in construction with blocks would use many spoken language skills, including negotiation and planning, but how does it impact on writing specifically?

Block play and creative writing

Martin involved us in a practical demonstration that opened my eyes to a new possibility for developing children's narrative skills; and particularly their ability to construct and re-tell a story. He asked us to sit in a circle on the floor, took a cylindrical block and said: 'This is Goldilocks, and she's going for a walk. On the way...' Martin stopped and asked us each in turn to choose a block and to carry on with the story. After we had gone round several times we had created our version of 'The Three Bears', which ended with

Goldilocks planning a fitted kitchen with the bears, and an extension featuring a jacuzzi and a sauna!

We were very proud of our ability to take a humble wooden block and to turn it into anything



Michael Jones

provides training on language development in the early years. Visit www.talk4meaning.co.uk for more details



At three-years-old, she used exactly the same thought processes and level of abstraction to invent the beginnings of the story

we liked, so we could create a sophisticated story. And, Helen suggested, that is exactly what children can do if we give them the opportunity. If they can construct a narrative with 'just blocks', then this is the foundation for doing the same with 'just words', which later leads to 'just writing'.

That is when I remembered Elizabeth and her pine cone family. She, at three-years-old, had used exactly

the same thought processes and level of abstraction to invent the beginnings of the story. I just wished I had had the time to find out if she took her family on any adventures.

Armed with blocks

So, armed with a set of Community Playthings mini-unit blocks, and a small basket containing a selection of pebbles and other natural materials, I set off for the Foundation Unit at Gateway Primary School in Westminster. The children there are predominantly from families where English is not their first language, so children learn most of their English in school. My plan was to re-create Martin's activity and see how children might respond.

Nursery leader Jackie Unwin explained that, like most early years settings, they have a 'construction area' where children are encouraged to create structures with wooden blocks, and to role-play building with toy tools. The area has photos of building sites, and a display of children involved in role play.

Jackie described the area as a 'typically boy dominated space', though some girls do take part in play activities. Our first thought was to set up our activity away from the construction area, because we wanted to involve girls and boys, and possibly children who would not usually visit the construction area. And this is our story:

We began with a group of 12 children and two adults, sitting on the floor around a colourful rug. I took a tall cylindrical block from my bag, and told everyone that it was Daddy Bear, then passed a block to each of the adults and asked them to tell me what theirs was. Each child was given a block in turn, and asked to think about what their block might be. Ideas included a car, a plane, a road, a piece of cheese, a Gingerbread Man, a phone and 'just a rectangle'.

Then, just as Martin did, I placed my block in the middle of the rug and said: 'This is Daddy Bear, and he's going for a walk.' And with support and encouragement we all managed to make a story together! Granted, the story did not exactly flow naturally, with a beginning, middle or end, but the children were all quite fascinated by this new activity and keen to join in.

Story creation

After this brief session, I stayed on the rug with six children and helped them to make up their own 'stories'. This was their first experience of using blocks away from the construction area, and playing with them in a new way.

Quite naturally, the children did what they normally do with blocks - they built towers and houses, roads, runways and train stations. So I introduced the items from the basket of natural materials, including small pieces of sheep's wool, pine cones, shells, twigs and stones.

Crucially, I decided to ask each child a question: 'Can you make a story?' This proved to be the main



Blocks can ignite thought processes in places other than the construction area

stimulus the children needed for them to shift from merely building structures, and moving towards creating a narrative. When each child had finished, instead of asking, 'what have you made?', my question was: 'Can you show us your story?'

These simple changes in my own language seemed to create a significant change in the children's behaviour and thinking.

Collaborative storytelling

I asked Jackie and her team, including teachers Eva Fernandez-Rahman and Christine Perera, to continue using this new method and to report back on their findings. They provided me with a very detailed report, and their main findings were:

'The children responded well to this collaborative story making. The shape and size of the blocks were very important in suggesting what they could represent; for example, the arch was used as a rainbow/phone/moon/banana/seesaw/smile; while the triangular block was a hat/pizza/sandwich/cake/shark/bird/woodpecker.

'The children's stories were based on their own experiences, including their families, animals, going to the park and the seaside, and on traditional stories, such as the three bears, the billy goats gruff and adventures involving princesses.

'Children's construction has developed, using more natural materials to add detail.

'It was surprising to see that some of the children with the least spoken English could really access this story making in a way they have not shown when using puppets or other story props.

'Some quiet children got very involved in the adult-led sessions and began to use the construction area more; for example, two girls at an early stage of learning English made a construction, and then began to talk about it being cold. They pretended that they were shivering and found pieces of material and paper to make a 'fire'.

'The children enjoyed re-telling their stories at the end of the session, often without the blocks.

'This type of narrative development, and the abstract thinking needed, will help towards using the symbols of writing, as well as supporting emerging creative writing.

'This is an instant activity and it will become part of everyday life in our nursery!

Conclusion

So, a little girl with just three pine cones has reminded us that a plastic car can only be a car, and so has limited value in its use for children's imaginative storytelling, but a rectangular block can be absolutely anything! eye

Useful resources

- *Play and the revised EYFS* by Community Playthings. Available from www.communityplaythings.co.uk



The building blocks of a story, creating narrative using abstraction and imagination

- A wide variety of wooden blocks are available to order direct from Community Playthings – www.communityplaythings.co.uk/products/blocks/index.html
- *Block Play: The Complete Guide to Learning and Playing with Blocks* by Sharon MacDonald and Kathryn Davis. Published by Gryphon House (ISBN: 9780876592533).

Key points

- Wooden blocks can obviously be used in construction, which would lead to many spoken language skills, including negotiation and planning, but they can also help to develop creative writing skills
- Block play can develop children's narrative skills; and particularly their ability to construct and re-tell a story
- If they can construct a narrative with 'just blocks', then this is the foundation for doing the same with 'just words', which later leads to 'just writing'