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# Orchestrating a kindergarten block program : the teacher's role

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Orchestrating a Kindergarten Block Program: The Teacher's Role

By

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## Orchestrating a Kindergarten Block Program: The Teacher's Role

By Abbey Butcosk

### Abstract

This thesis analyzes the role of the teacher in kindergarten block building programs. The following questions are addressed: How can teachers foster a sense of curiosity and excitement among students in the block area? How can teachers motivate children's block work, helping to scaffold their experiences and knowledge? How can teachers help children extend and enrich their block building and their play? What materials do teachers in other kindergarten classrooms use in the block area? What is the spatial layout of the block area in classrooms? How much time do teachers devote to block building?

To answer these questions, the literature on block building was reviewed, and four interviews conducted: one with a leading expert in children's block building and the other three with classroom teachers, whose block building programs are significantly different from each other and are located in different geographical and kinds of areas. This thesis concludes with a statement of what the author would ideally like to offer children through her own kindergarten block program.

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## **Introduction**

My interest in block building began the first time I entered an early childhood classroom as an adult. The children in the classroom's block area were completely immersed in their work, building a variety of structures and becoming deeply engrossed in dramatic play. Throughout my student teaching and first full years teaching in classrooms, I continued to pay particular attention to children's block building and its role in the classroom as a whole. Last year, as an assistant teacher at an independent school, I was responsible for my kindergarten classroom's block program. While this opportunity excited me given my interest in blocks, I ended the year with more questions than answers about block building in early childhood classrooms.

Many of my questions related to the role of the teacher in block building. I wondered how the teacher could foster a sense of curiosity and excitement among students in the block area. I wanted to learn how to motivate children's block work, helping to scaffold their experiences and knowledge. I also wanted to help them extend and enrich their building and their play. I wondered what materials teachers in other classrooms used in the block area and about the spatial layout of their block area. How much time did teachers devote to block building? And how often? The focus of this paper emerged from these questions and my interest in learning about the scope of the teacher's role in block building. After learning more about the teacher's involvement in the block area, I would be better prepared to design a block program in my own classroom.

## **Methodology**

I knew the range of block usage in classrooms was vast, but I knew I could not fully explore the total range. I therefore focused my research on kindergarten classrooms, since my own experience with blocks had come from teaching kindergarten. I felt that limiting my research to a specific age range would provide a developmental constant for my research since the children in each classroom would be five and six years old. This developmental constant would make the comparisons between classrooms more meaningful, since many other factors in each setting would differ drastically from each other.

I chose the settings for my research deliberately, focusing on a kindergarten classroom in three different schools. I selected these classrooms for a variety of reasons. Each setting used blocks in a deliberate, conscious, yet very different way. The teacher in each of these classrooms was able to comment on her block program clearly and concisely, articulating why she thinks blocks are important as well as her thoughts behind the decisions she makes in her block program. The schools in which each classroom was located also differed from each other, providing contrasts in the student populations, the geographic locations and the school philosophies. Overall, these classrooms and schools provided three very different views on the use of the material.

To conduct my research in each classroom, I visited each school, being aware of distinct geographical areas. I observed the students working with blocks, or, when that was not possible at one school, I watched a video of the children working in the block area. I also interviewed each classroom teacher about her block



building program, asking open-ended questions in order to learn about her views. I generally asked the teachers the same questions, including an overall description of their block program, what kind of procedures and schedules they follow for block building, what kinds of choices they make about the physical set-up of the block area and materials that are available for children to use in their block work. I also asked them to talk about how they guide and motivate students' block work in order to keep them interested in it.

In addition to my interviews with each classroom teacher, I interviewed Harriet Cuffaro—a leading expert on block building who has spent much of her career researching and writing about the use of unit blocks in early childhood classrooms. She has written many articles about the material, exploring its relationship to social studies, dramatic play and how gender affects children's interest in the material. During our interview, I drew on the information in her articles and her chapter in *The Block Book* (Hirsch, 1996), asking her to discuss her views about the teacher's job in the block building process. Through this interview, I hoped to learn about what influences the block building programs that teachers implement in their classrooms.

In addition to these interviews and observations, I conducted additional research by reading about block building with unit blocks. The most substantial resource I read proved to be *The Block Book* (Hirsch, 1996), which comprises a variety of articles that discuss the importance of the material. The articles in *The Block Book* demonstrate how through repeating building with unit blocks, children use concepts of math, science, literacy and social studies. *The Block Book* also

illustrates how blocks are a vehicle for dramatic play and provides practical considerations for teachers who would like to implement a block program in their classroom. I also read articles not included in *The Block Book*, which discussed the importance and value of block building in early childhood classrooms.

In this paper, I will discuss findings from the literature on block building as well as my interview with Harriet Cuffaro. I will also discuss each classroom I visited, providing a description of each block program that I observed and conveying the views that each classroom teacher shared with me during our interview. I will also provide a description of the environment in which each block program exists, familiarizing the reader with the geographical location of the school, the school's philosophy and the student population. To conclude the paper, I will use my findings to outline my ideal block program, explaining my reasoning behind each choice.

## **Review of the Literature on Block Building**

While a significant amount has been written about block building, very few resources have been written about it in recent years. Cuffaro pointed out in 1996 that the play landscape was changing in classrooms, focusing on content areas such as literacy. The lack of recent resources about block building may be a further reflection of this trend, indicating a shift in priorities away from play-based learning and block building, towards content areas that are more concretely measurable by outsiders, such as literacy and math.

Originally published in 1974, *The Block Book* (Hirsch, 1996)—now in its third edition—remains the richest resource for information about block building. It provides a well-rounded look at block building, containing articles about the various benefits of block building, including in academic areas such as science, math, language arts, and social studies. *The Block Book* also examines the importance of dramatic play that stems out of block building as well as practical guidelines for teachers trying to implement a block program in their classroom. As such, this resource was a cornerstone for my research about the teacher's role in block building.

### **Child Development**

Unit blocks are well suited to children's development in multiple arenas, allowing them to completely immerse themselves in their block work. Piaget's phases of child development provide insight into typical characteristics of five- and six-year-olds. He described children of this age as being in the concrete operational phase (Casper and Theilheimer, 2010, p. 173). This means kindergarteners learn

best through sensory experiences, have to engage with the physical world, and rely on visuals for their understanding rather than abstract ideas.

In *The Learning Child*, Dorothy Cohen (1972) says:

the locus of a young child's confidence... [is] in his sense of himself as a physically active, feeling, coping being. Fives grow competent by using fingers and toes, eyes, ears, and nose to find out what they want to know and to act upon the knowledge they have. (p. 59)

The physical nature of block building provides an opportunity for kindergarteners to learn in a kinesthetic way, reflecting their developmental needs. Cohen also describes the "sensory style of learning" (p. 57) that is natural among five-year-olds, which matches the characteristics of Piaget's preoperational phase of development. Caroline Pratt (1970), the creator of unit blocks, also noted this this, describing a boy who learned about a train "by experiencing it with his own eyes and ears and muscles" (p. 29). The physical nature of block building provides children with this kind of sensory experience, allowing them to see and touch the blocks, feeling their smoothness and weight, while using their bodies to interact with them, making it an appealing activity for them.

Pratt (1970) also describes the learning process for children, saying, "Secondhand knowledge was of little or no use to these children. Words are too recent an acquisition to a five-year-old; his tools of learning, the ones with which he is most capable, are still his own senses" (p. 31). This means the role of first-hand experiences is vital to children's learning. This supports Dewey's (1938) assertion that "Every experience is a moving force" (p. 38). By this, he meant "every

experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after” (p. 35)—you bring your current knowledge and understandings to an experience, but the experience also adds to this knowledge, influencing your understandings going forward.

While five-year-olds are often egocentric—a characteristic of Piaget’s preoperational stage—they gradually become more social and aware of others as they enter the concrete operational phase. Marking this contrast, Cohen (1972) says that five-year olds “have not lived long enough for the outside world to have seriously impinged on their very personal, egocentric view of what is important” (p. 53). But at the same time, “Fives are hungry for friends” (p. 60). This shows the social shift that five-year-olds are undergoing, which also plays out in the block area. While children can be engaged when block building independently, there are also opportunities for social interaction as students become less egocentric, providing the chance for kindergarteners to naturally make this social shift.

Related to five-year-olds’ emerging social self, the block area provides many opportunities for interaction with others through dramatic play, which naturally stems out of kindergartener’s block building. Cohen (1972) explains that for five-year-olds, “the fantasy life is as real as reality itself” (p. 66). She goes on to describe the importance of dramatic play in the lives of young children, saying, “Fives are great imitators and use the information they gather about the world in their play. They set up pretend situations within which they play out roles, thereby pinning down what they understand” (p. 69). This means that in addition to the social

interaction that dramatic play provides, it is also a way that kindergarteners learn, helping them make better sense of their experiences and the world around them.

While blocks facilitate social interaction, they also offer opportunities for the students to be autonomous. Casper and Theilheimer (2010) explain that five-year-olds have a greater sense of independence than children of a younger age. As kindergarteners become more capable, they often try doing things on their own rather than with the help of an adult. When students build with blocks, they can function in a self-directed way, working through challenges and learning from their experiences and interactions with others. This was Caroline Pratt's (1970) intention when she created unit blocks. Pratt described, "What I sought was something so flexible, so adaptable, that children could use it without guidance or control" (p. 27). Casper and Theilheimer discuss the benefit of children being in control of their work explaining, "When children do not have opportunities to make decisions and solve problems, they do not develop those skills in the same way" (p. 353). Block building gives kindergarteners a chance to do both of these, supporting their developing sense of competency and confidence.

The open-ended nature of unit blocks further enhances children's development, since work with blocks does not have a set outcome—the child determines this. Pratt (1970) explained that this was her original intent in developing unit blocks, saying, "I wanted to see them build a world; I wanted to see them re-create on their own level the life about them, in which they were too little to be participants, in which they were always spectators" (p. 27). Block building allows children to reconstruct the world around them as they see and understand it,

but in a capacity in which the child remains in control. Cohen (1972) explains, “Unstructured materials...take on the form a child wishes to impose upon them... The child is the determiner of the sequence, form, and content as he uses them. They change as he changes” (p. 91). This attribute gives block building the potential to be indefinitely appealing to kindergarteners, since there are limitless possibilities for what they can create. This is particularly true because unit blocks can meet children where they are in their understandings and development.

When these elements are put into the social context of the block area, students can easily enter the zone of proximal development—psychologist Lev Vygotsky’s theory of the learning process. Casper and Theilheimer (2010) explain that the zone of proximal development “*goes beyond* helping a child to accomplish a specific task to actually push development forward” (p. 176). As part of this theory, Vygotsky “emphasized the role of an experienced other in moving a child’s thinking forward through the zone of proximal development” (Casper and Theilheimer, 2010, p. 176). Combining both of these elements, the block area creates an optimal environment for the child to enter the zone of proximal development: the open-ended nature of unit blocks makes the material adaptable to the needs of the child, while other students in the block area help to expand and add onto the child’s experiences, deepening and extending the learning process and moving the child forward to new, more complex understandings.

### **Benefits of Block Building**

Kindergarteners benefit from block building in a variety of ways: physically, socially, emotionally, as well as academically in areas such as math, science,

language arts and social studies. The physical nature of block building “develops both large and small motor coordination and sensitive eye-hand integration” (Cartwright, 1988, p. 44). It also helps children develop their visual perception of objects and hand manipulation, meaning they are better able to move and reposition objects with their hands (Hirsch, 1996). While the block building supports kindergarteners’ development in these areas, the process of block pickup does as well since students are often encouraged to deconstruct their buildings without the structure falling, supporting their development of physical and manual dexterity. During block pickup, they also must determine where each block belongs on the shelves based on their shape, developing their visual perception.

Block building supports the social and emotional development of kindergarteners. Brody and Hirsch (1996) refer to Piaget’s description of the “decentering” process that children undergo as they develop, becoming less egocentric and more social beings. During this time, they begin socializing with others and taking notice of another person’s thoughts or ideas (p. 63). A child’s social experiences in the block area promote this process because students are constantly interacting with their peers. As children “decenter” and become less egocentric, they begin socializing with each other, which involves sharing ideas, collaborating, disagreeing and learning from each other (Brody and Hirsch).

The block area provides children with opportunities to cooperate and collaborate with each other during the construction of their building as well as their play. Working together also gives kindergarteners the chance to work through problems and disagreements that arise with each other (Hirsch, 1996). These



experiences support the development of children's social skills. Sharing the space with each other promotes respect for the work of others and fosters an ability to empathize with others. The decision-making and risk-taking experiences that students have in the block area promote feelings of competence, independence, and self-confidence.

Block building promotes the development of social studies concepts for kindergarteners. Cuffaro (1995) points out that "it is in the block area that many and varied opportunities exist for *moral* thinking. Negotiation, compromise, cooperation, caring and consideration, and the balance of individual and group rights are not abstract concepts but concrete, lived experiences" (p. 38). This means that, in addition to developing their communication and social skills, kindergarteners are also learning about communities when they work in the block area. Since social groups and interactions are the basis for social studies, the block area provides a variety of experiences that students can use to learn about their classroom community as well as the world around them.

Cuffaro (1995) explains, "In the hands of children, the materials we offer become tools with which they give form to and express their understanding of the complex world in which they live" (p. 36). This means that through students' block work, teachers can better understand each child's perception and understandings of the world around them. Opportunities to recreate the world around them are particularly important for young children. Lucy Sprague Mitchell (2001) described the ideal learning process for children, saying, "There is not only an 'intake' but an active 'outgo.'" The chief program for geographic intake in these early years lies in

trips—explorations of the environment. Provision for outgo, equally important, is made within the classroom through ‘adaptable materials,’” (p. 13). Mitchell went on to explain that adaptable materials “serve the children in reliving their first-hand experiences, in working out the relationships” (p. 13). Additionally, kindergarteners develop a better understanding of their surrounding community by examining it through block building and having experiences that can enhance their block building, such as trips related to students’ block work and the pooling of the group’s knowledge about a topic (Brody and Hirsch, 1996). Block building helps children learn about the complexities of geographic and social issues through their replication of these elements in the block area.

Brody and Hirsch (1996) point out that “Social knowledge is constructed by people” (p. 69), meaning that people learn about their culture through social interactions. The pooling of ideas through social interaction helps children reconcile a variety of ideas they may have heard from different sources, allowing them to make sense of these different accounts of information and draw new conclusions based on their current experiences. In this way, the child is connecting himself and his experiences with knowledge, expanding his overall thinking style (Cuffaro, 1996). These interactions also develop students’ understandings about the interdependence of people in a group or community, as well as the kinds work that people do, and how it relates to the community as a whole (Hirsch, 1996).

Block building promotes concepts of representation associated with social studies such as mapping, grids, and patterns (Hirsch, 1996). The creation of block communities gives kindergarteners experience with seeing a town or city from a

different perspective (for example, a birds-eye view) than when they walk around in their neighborhood. This new viewpoint helps them to better comprehend the concept of a map and the perspective it shows. The concept of mapping is directly related to children's development of symbolic representation, which block building also helps them develop. Cohen (1972) explains:

Unstructured materials allow for some imitation... But more important is the part they play in assisting children to make the transition from dependency on concrete experience (touching, tasting, smelling as a way of getting to know reality) to the use of symbolic representation as a way of further clarifying it. (p. 91)

This is particularly important because without an understanding of symbolic representation, children cannot move into more abstract disciplines and means of learning such as reading and writing, which rely on the symbols systems of numbers and letters.

The dramatic play that occurs in the block area also fosters the development of social studies concepts. For example, Cuffaro (1996) explains that "Gradually and over an extended period of time and experiences, the child moves in dramatic play to a more objective directing of objects and props which support the play" (p. 80). She goes on to say that "increasing attention [is] given to the details of reality and the question of scale" (p. 81). This means that children are building on their previous knowledge and observing the real world in greater detail, allowing them to better replicate it in the block area and therefore understand it more deeply.

The social aspect of dramatic play in the block area also promotes kindergarteners learning from each other. Cuffaro (1996) states, “What ultimately would be missing if building were to continue as solitary play would be the impact and enrichment, the testing of one’s knowledge and feelings, that may occur in interaction with the reality and feelings of others” (p. 82). This shows the significant impact that social interaction through play has on kindergarteners—particularly in scaffolding a child’s thinking to reach a new understanding. Cuffaro explains that as children develop socially in the block area, “the child has moved outward from the personal base of her block home to interact with all the possibilities offered by the other children” (p. 83). This means that even through other students’ ideas and the roles and relationships they express through their dramatic play, kindergarteners learn more about their own experiences and understandings of the world around them.

Biber (1984) illustrates the result of interacting with the possibilities offered by one’s peers through an example of children playing in the block area. She describes a child playing with a block, whose impression of a train is “Choo,” which he incorporates into his play. However, when he plays with his peers, he learns about their own, possibly differing impressions of trains. Biber says,

Soon, a composite train emerges: it goes, it says “Choo,” it whistles intermittently, people sit in it one behind the other. Children at all levels pool their ideas in free dramatic play, expose one another to new impressions, stimulate one another to new wondering and questioning. (p. 189)

This idea of a composite understanding applies to all topics that arise in children's play; through exposure to the experiences and ideas of others, students come away with a deeper and more complex grasp on the world around them.

Block building offers kindergarteners experiences with a variety of mathematical concepts and skills. The experiential nature of children's interactions with blocks is particularly important because Piaget believed they could not be "taught" mathematics (Leeb-Lundberg, 1996)—instead, they glean general mathematical understandings through their own sensory experiences in the world. Leeb-Lundberg asserts that unit blocks introduce children to a variety of Euclidean geometry concepts, including size, shape, measurement, and the various features of a geometric figure such as its corners, edges and faces. Kindergarteners also gain experience with topology, including concepts of proximity, ordering, dimensionality, and the idea of surrounding versus enclosing an object (Leeb-Lundberg). Block building gives children experiences with projective geometry, meaning they view things from different sides, angles, and distances, seeing from different perspectives. Hirsch (1996) maintains that they also develop other concepts such as shape, patterns, symmetry, size and comparative relationships (for example, more than, less than, equivalency), classification, fractions, part/whole relationship and numbers.

Children also gain experience in a variety of scientific disciplines through block building—many of which relate to the mathematical concepts mentioned previously. Moffitt (1996) explains that blocks promote experiences with "scientific concepts of space, distance, direction, grids, patterns and mapping" (p. 27).

Students also learn about prediction, the properties of matter, and cause and effect through work with unit blocks. Children also apply elements of scientific inquiry to their work in the block area by exploring the material and what they can do with it. Part of this exploration involves developing hypotheses and trying them out, experimenting with the material through trial and error. Through repeated use, children revisit the material, applying their current knowledge and understandings to their work. Block building also encourages the development of logical thinking among children. For example, Moffitt describes the process of a child figuring out how to reverse the construction process during pickup. Block building also displays the interaction of forces such as gravity. Moffitt asserts that through experiences in the block area, “children develop ways of thinking about physical phenomena that they encounter in their construction” (p. 33) such as stability, weight, and balance.

Language arts and the development of language play a significant role in block building. Children learn vocabulary related to mathematical concepts such as shape recognition and differentiation, as well as size relations. Kindergarteners apply reading and writing skills in the signs and labels they create for their block structures. Students also develop and practice their communicative language skills through the exchange of ideas, planning of buildings, negotiating through problems, and developing story lines about the structures they create (Hirsch, 1996).

### **Role of the Teacher**

Much of the literature about the teacher’s involvement in block building discusses the logistical concerns she should consider. Hirsch (1996) and Cartwright (1988) examine some of these concerns, saying the teacher should carefully

consider what kind of physical space they designate for the block area, including the size, shape, location within the classroom, shelving available, the arrangement of blocks on the shelves, and the flooring upon which children will do their building.

The teacher determines the schedule for building, deciding how often students will work in the block area and how many children will work at once. She decides the specific procedures and standards for pickup in her classroom as well as the expectations for the noise level in the block area (Hirsch, 1996). Dreier (1996) describes some of the specific procedures and standards that teachers might implement, such as the kinds of buildings the students can build (for example, whether they must be realistic) and whether there will be a topical focus for the work in the block area. She also determines how the rules will be structured (for example, whether they will all be decided by the children or if some are determined by the teacher ahead of time) and what kinds of assignments or challenges she might want to give students to scaffold their learning while building.

The teacher determines which materials will be available in the block area, including the blocks themselves. The teacher must decide which sizes and shapes of blocks she will include in the block area, as well as how many of each. Stanton, Weisberg, and Apelman (1996) discuss this topic, providing a detailed list that teachers can use, including the number of blocks suggested in the block area per child at various ages, as well as the block shapes to include. The teacher also determines what additional materials are available for children to use in the block area, such as the kinds of accessories that are included and how many are available (Hirsch, 1996). Stanton, Weisberg and Apelman (1996) also provide ideas in this

area, including a list of possible accessories the teacher can provide for students. They mention materials such as rubber, plastic or wooden figures in the shape of people and animals; vehicles; colored cubes; objects from nature such as shells, pebbles and sticks; rubber tubing; and magazine pictures. In addition to listing materials, the authors describe possibilities for how the materials could be used. For example, they suggest the teacher provides a variety of small containers, which they say “are useful for all sorts of things, such as keeping money in a store or providing water for animals in a farm or zoo” (p. 151).

Apelman and Johnson (1996) outline the stages of development in block building, providing an additional resource for teachers. They explain that for very young children, block building consists mostly of them carrying blocks around rather than constructing with them. After this phase, children often make horizontal rows and begin stacking blocks vertically, eventually beginning to bridge blocks and create enclosures. Apelman and Johnson describe how children’s block building becomes more complex as they gain experience with unit blocks. Mapping out these characteristics in stages helps teachers to better understand how to support builders in their classrooms and identify the developmental arc of students’ block building. In this way, it serves to help the teacher scaffold and extend the kindergarteners’ block work, while giving them greater insight into the previous experience children may have had with block building.

*The Block Book* contributors also highlight different ways teachers can interact with students to support their learning through block building. Hirsch (1996) points out that the teacher sets the tone for block building in her classroom,



modeling respect for the material, including how the blocks are cared for as well as the standards of quality and detail children should strive for in their structures. Part of the tone a teacher sets for block building stems from the logistical decisions she makes. For example, the amount of space and time the teacher provides for block work demonstrates its importance to the students (see Appendix A, Cuffaro interview). Johnson (1996) also comments on the tone the teacher sets in the classroom, saying that she must create favorable conditions for block building in order for the children to enjoy it. Cuffaro (1996) adds on to this, saying that the teacher's job is to create "the social atmosphere in which learning and interaction occur, and... [act as a] guide or catalyst in the learning situations that arise or are provided" (p. 89). Therefore, the teacher plays an important part fostering a social environment where kindergarteners can collaborate and work through problems together, as well as adequately supporting the child's learning through block building.

The tone of the classroom can also affect who feels drawn to the block area in the classroom. Cuffaro (1975) points out that often boys are more drawn to the block area than girls are. However, when the teachers examined their own biases about whether they associated block building with one gender over another, they were able to shift the trend. By adjusting their expectations and through encouragement, girls and boys participated equally in block building. This means that in addition to a tone of respect for block building, teachers should also pay attention to issues of equity and gender attitudes that might affect kindergarteners' feelings about block play.

Since children learn best through first-hand experiences as discussed earlier, the teacher must consider which kinds of experiences will guide and support each child's growth needs. Johnson (1996) says the teacher should provide "firsthand experiences which make them more aware of the world and their place in it" (p. 25). Biber (1984) suggests the use of "stories, materials, trips, experiences [and] discussion" (p. 190) to extend children's knowledge and understandings. Weiss (1997) adds to this topic, explaining:

Block play can lead naturally to exploring the wider community—visiting a construction site, talking with workers at their jobs, or going to the grocery store to see what's for sale. Carefully selected trips, books, and songs can build on children's interests and extend their knowledge, raising new questions that lead to new problems to solve. (p. 32-33)

These authors point out that trips, stories and discussions play a vital role in providing children with these first-hand experiences.

While experiences are necessary for helping children to expand their understandings of the world, it is also important that the teacher consider the children's development in choosing opportunities for experiences. Biber (1984) points out that, "Sometimes the teacher needs to be ready to guide the play, especially among the fives, sixes... into channels beyond the needs of the nursery years. But she must guide only in terms of the children's growth needs" (p. 190). Windsor (1996) adds to this, saying, "One must... infer the active role of the adult in providing experience appropriate to age level needs" (p. 5). Considering the child's

development is important to ensure the student gains as much from an experience as possible.

The teacher must recognize what each experience can offer a student and what each child might take away from it. Dewey (1938) states,

A primary responsibility of educators is that they not only be aware of the general principle of the shaping of actual experience by environing conditions, but that they also recognize in the concrete what surroundings are conducive to having experiences that lead to growth. Above all, they should know how to utilize the surroundings, physical and social, that exist so as to extract from them all that they have to contribute to building up experiences that are worth while. (p. 40)

This means that teachers know the potential that the current environment provides for learning experiences and the possibilities that can arise from them.

The teacher must also recognize such possibilities in the block area, knowing what value can be gleaned from block building for children. Johnson (1996) says, "The details of the teaching techniques that help deliver profitable use of blocks cannot be discussed here, but the essentials are a recognition of the possibilities in block building, actual respect for and interest in the activity" (p. 25). Expressing a similar sentiment, Leeb-Lundberg (1996) explains,

The teacher's role regarding block building is not a difficult one if he or she knows what is inherent in the material. The teacher will then know how to extend the experiences of the children and ask the right questions or pose a new problem. (p. 58-59)

From the perspective of these two authors, the teacher will know how to support builders in her classroom if she knows what blocks have to offer, the many ways that blocks can be used, and how those elements will best serve the particular needs of her current students.

The teacher must pay attention to the understandings a child has as well as a child's misconceptions, as these will point toward areas of potential growth for the kindergartener. This means that when providing the opportunity for an experience, she must consider the needs and understandings of the child at the time of the experience. Dewey (1938) points out, "There must be a reason for thinking that they will function in generating an experience that has educative quality with particular individuals at a particular time" (p. 46). The teacher must determine what would be the most appropriate experience given the child's current understandings, since the experience will be a more valuable learning opportunity if it is within the child's zone of proximal development. This requires close observation of the students, recognizing their current understandings of the world and determining when an experience might extend this knowledge. The appropriateness and value of specific experiences also depend on the context of the block program, including the school's mission and culture, the values of the teacher and the students themselves (see Appendix A, Cuffaro interview).

The teacher can also support children's growth and development in the block area through questions she asks. For example, the teacher can ask children questions to extend activities and clarify their current work. Brody and Hirsch (1996) mentions some of these questions:

“Teachers...provide more subtle stimulation by questioning, when appropriate. Questions can extend lagging activities. ‘Does your house need a garden?’ ... Questions also can clarify confusions and further the integration of knowledge. ‘How will people get into the building?’ ... ‘How does the farmer let people know that he has a lot of apples to sell?’ ... The teacher’s responsibility to help children grow must extend to the growth that occurs through social interaction.” (p. 71-72)

Through questions such as these, the child will think more deeply about his work, calling upon the knowledge he has and revealing where additional experiences might help extend his knowledge. These kinds of questions accept where the child currently is with his understandings and then encourages him to extend them.

Teachers can also ask children questions that lead to outward explorations and their own pursuit of answers. For example, Cuffaro (1996) recounts a story of a boy who built a fish shop in the block area. Every time a girl came to shop there, he said it was closed. Cuffaro describes that when the children began to disagree about this, “The teacher approached the children and entered the conversation first by listening and then by asking, ‘Can you go shopping in a store any time you feel like it?’ ...Information was explored and shared.” (p. 89). This question resulted in the teacher and the children walking around the block to examine how stores show the hours they are open.

Cuffaro (1996) points out that in this example, the teacher acts “as a guide leading the children toward resolution of their conflict—not by giving ready-made answers but by bringing to the children’s awareness factors that might be

considered and offering the opportunity for discovery through direct experience” (p. 90). It is an important distinction that the teacher asks the question without providing the answer. Caroline Pratt (1970) noted,

a young child’s question is not always meant to be answered. It may be a way to open a conversation; it may be a question to which he himself wants to supply the answer, to verify a recently acquired bit of knowledge... A better rule is to let the child find the answers himself. (p. 32)

Cuffaro (1996) further clarifies this for the teacher, stating, “the adult’s role as guide or catalyst in the learning situations that arise or are provided” (p. 89). This means that while the teacher can use questions to lead the children into experiences from which they will learn, she should not answer the questions for them. Instead, she should allow them to discover what the answers are through their own investigation.

Teachers can also ask themselves questions, encouraging them to reflect on what they are observing in the block area. Weiss (1997) lists a variety of questions for self-reflection, including: “Are the children engaged with the material? Do children prefer certain materials over others? Is children’s involvement with and use of the materials expanding or static? Are there any children who never use blocks?” (p. 38). This means that, in addition to the teacher asking kindergarteners questions to deepen their thinking, they should also ask themselves questions about what they are noticing in the block area. Observing students’ work in the block area will help teachers know what to focus on when trying to expand children’s experiences.

Johnson (1996) also points out that there are certain things that teachers should not do when trying to support children's learning in the block area. For example, she says,

Let no academic adult here raise the question: 'Do you call children's attention to the shapes they have made, the rectangle, the triangle, the pentagon, and give them their names?' ... At this stage, they are wrestling with the problem of making material ... take on the quality and plasticity and almost of malleability. It will yield to the child's desire ... Information is completely irrelevant here. (p. 16-17)

Johnson (1996) highlights the importance of the teacher making sure that her interactions respect the child's work, meaning they reflect what he is presently doing in the block area, rather than asking questions and making comments that are unrelated to his current work. To do this, the teacher must carefully observe the child, noting how he uses the blocks to appropriately gauge her interactions. Johnson is also underlining that the benefits of block building come through the child's engagement and interaction with blocks, not through a teacher's explicit instruction about them.

The teacher must observe the children and use what she knows about them to provide experiences from which they can learn. In this way, the teacher acts as a catalyst, in raising questions that were related to the children's activities, and a synthesizer, in that from her overall perspective of the block scheme, she could lead children to finding connections in their knowledge of reality and in their re-creation of it in dramatic play. (Cuffaro, 1996, p. 90)

While the teacher can observe the children and provide opportunities for experiences in which they can learn, Dewey (1938) points out that,

The immediate and direct concern of an educator is then with the situations in which interaction takes place. The individual, who enters as a factor into it, is what he is at a given time. It is the other factor, that of objective conditions, which lies to some extent within the possibility of regulation by the educator. (p. 45)

This means that while he can provide the opportunity for the learning to happen, the interaction that occurs between the child and the environment in which the experience occurs is influenced by the child's development and his current understandings, meaning that he cannot control precisely what the child gets out of it. In attending to these two things, Dewey (1938) says "It is then the business of the educator to see in what direction an experience is heading" (p. 38).

While these guidelines can help teachers know how to focus their interactions with children in the block area, Biber (1984) notes, "It is clearer now that there can be no fixed rules as to when to intervene" (p. 206). This means that, although it is clear that the teacher should ask questions, encourage discussions among children and provide additional experiences to extend their understandings, exactly what questions and which experiences can change depending on the context, the teacher's goals and the individual students.



## **The Downtown Westside Independent School:**

### **Blocks as the Center of the Curriculum**

#### **Description of School**

The first school I visited was a small independent school located on the downtown west side of Manhattan. The school has approximately 360 students, ranging from ages 2 through 13. It centers its philosophy on children learning through first-hand experiences and cultivating a community that reflects a democratic society. The kindergarten classroom I visited was one of two classes in that age group. It had 19 students and three adults on the days I visited—a head teacher, Sarah (name has been changed to disguise teacher’s identity); an assistant teacher; and a student teacher who was present three days a week.

The classroom is a large, cavernous space on the ground floor of the building. Windows line opposite ends of the room, on one end revealing the feet of passersby on the sidewalk outside, on the other end displaying the school’s play yard. One half of the room includes a meeting area, white board and four tables with chairs. The remaining area of the classroom is open, lined with shelves of blocks.

I visited this classroom two times. My first visit occurred during school hours. During this visit, I observed the class’s block planning meeting, where the kindergarteners determined what they would build that week. I also observed the children build for about 40 minutes after their planning meeting. My second visit was later that week, during after school hours. During this visit, I interviewed Sarah.

## **The Block Program**

The block program at this school spans from three-year-olds to second grade. Block building is a core part of the school's curriculum at each of these grade levels, providing a vehicle through which the students explore the social studies curriculum. Sarah explained that the strong presence of blocks throughout the grade levels affects the school's community as a whole, providing a commonality for students on a social and academic level, as well as continuity for children as they go through the grades.

Sarah discussed a variety of benefits that block building offers students. For example, during my visit with her, Sarah mentioned many academic subjects that unit blocks incorporate, including social studies, math, language arts and science. She also talked about the communication that takes place among students during their block building and dramatic play in the classroom's block community each week, explaining that interaction is one of the primary goals in block building. In addition to the collaboration that takes place, she pointed out that the children gain experience in symbolic representation by recreating parts of the world around them, which helps them make better sense of it and expands their knowledge of it. For this reason, Sarah encourages students to use the buildings in the block area as an arena for dramatic play, using their structures as they would in the neighborhood around them, such as shopping at the grocery store and seeing movies at the movie theater.

### **Time, Space and Procedures**

In this classroom, half of the physical space is devoted to blocks. The building space is vast and wide open with shelves filled with blocks and accessories lining the opposing ends of the building area. The block area is separated from the rest of the classroom by two low bookshelves.

Students in this classroom build daily during the scheduled “Blocks” time, which lasts from 45 minutes to an hour. The kindergarteners’ block building is a weeklong process. On Mondays, block building begins with a full-group planning session where children suggest ideas for what they are interested in building. Sarah generates a list of their ideas on chart paper as they go. Next, the students choose what they will build. The teacher may provide some guidance during this process to ensure the building groups are of similar sizes and that the kindergarteners get the opportunity to work with a variety of children over time. Then, students begin building in groups of two to three children. The kindergarteners have the most time to build on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. However, Sarah mentioned that planning sessions occur throughout the week to discuss what is happening in the block area or to check in with each group about their work. During the students’ block building time, they are engaged in a variety of activities related to their block work, including building their block structures; creating accessories with art materials such as paper, crayons, scissors and tape; adding accessories to their structures such as carpet squares, fabric squares, people, animals and colored wooden cubes; or engaging in dramatic play with their peers.

Friday is block pick-up day. Describing this process, Sarah explained that all students help with pick-up, although not all of the children are usually present in the block area at the same time during the process. She pointed out that having a limited number of students in the block area during block pick-up gives the kindergarteners time and space to take apart any accessories they may have created for their buildings. Sarah also emphasized the attachment that children have to the accessories they create, often wanting to keep them beyond the block pick-up. By giving students the opportunity to go through this process, this teacher honors the effort that children put into their work, down to the accessories they create. Sarah discusses the pick-up process with the students before it takes place each week, deciding which accessories they will put away first and making sure the blocks are put away last. However, Sarah approaches this process with flexibility, meaning that as long as the students are mindful of what they are doing and are making safe choices, they can accomplish it in whatever way works best for them. Depending on the needs of the particular group, Sarah also has a chart available for students to look at and refer to as a reminder of the pick-up process.

Although this weekly building procedure reflects the block building process for much of the year in the kindergarten, Sarah explained that the kindergarteners actually phase into this routine. She begins the year with a procedure that the children are familiar with from previous years at the school: building daily and taking down the blocks after the day's block building time ends. As the year progresses and students settle into the school year, the kindergarteners gradually begin leaving buildings up overnight, eventually spanning to an entire week.

## Developing Rules

When I asked Sarah about any rules she has for block building in her classroom, she explained that she prefers the rules to be rooted in the students' experiences. Sarah explained that she wants the rules to have meaning for the kindergarteners, providing them with the experience of feeling when things are not working well in the block area. When children experience elements of block building that are not working for the group, the class has a group discussion. During these discussions, the students can offer ideas about what is happening in the block area and what they think needs to change. The teachers can support them by suggesting some ideas that might help the situation. In developing rules based on the kindergarteners' experiences, the rules become more meaningful to students.

Sarah also highlighted a "no throwing blocks" rule, which she said comes up quickly each year. She pointed out that because of the children's previous years of block building at the school, this rule is easy to establish since students quickly agree upon it. However, some rules pose more of a challenge for the kindergarteners to develop on their own, such as building a certain distance away from the block shelves. To establish this kind of rule, Sarah says she draws the students' attention to how building against the shelves affects builders, pointing out when the location of a building makes it challenging to access the blocks. In this way, Sarah helps the children observe what is happening and how it affects them in the block area, rather than the teacher establishing the rule on her own.

In terms of guidelines for the buildings themselves, she explained that often she is on the lookout for safety concerns. Of particular importance to Sarah is the

sturdiness of a building, starting at its foundation. She pointed out that if a tall building is wobbly, it could hurt other children in the block area if it falls. A stipulation for kindergarteners' block buildings is that they must be reality-based, meaning they would be found in their neighborhood or city. This is an important part of the block building program because the students' block work provides the foundation for their social studies program, giving them opportunities to make connections to the real world and understand how it works. During Monday planning sessions, Sarah encourages the children to choose buildings based on their experiences and the experiences of others—what they have seen and are familiar with in the city, and what interests them.

Though the block program in this classroom is reality-based, Sarah also includes the kindergarteners' development in her expectations. This means that although the buildings are based in reality, she acknowledges that they will incorporate an element of fantasy into their work since they are five and six years old. Sarah recounted an example, explaining that when she recently spoke with a group of children who were building a movie theater, they revealed that the rooftop was a spy headquarters. In such an instance, Sarah said that she might offer the group an idea that could occur in reality (such as the movie theater showing spy movies), but acknowledges that they may choose not to incorporate the idea. Sarah also pointed out the unclear distinction that exists between reality and fantasy—particularly with this age group, since they come with a range of experiences and understandings about the world around them.

### **Accessories and Additional Materials**

The children in this classroom use a variety of accessories to accentuate and add details to their structures as well as enhance their dramatic play. Sarah said that this particular group began using paper and crayons almost immediately to make signs for the buildings and clothing for the wooden people. She suggested that they likely made use of the paper so quickly because many had been using it in their block work the previous school year. When I visited the classroom, I saw paper drawings being used in a variety of ways, including decorating block people and animals, making signs for the buildings, creating stained glass windows for a church and movie screens for a movie theater.

The block people and animals at this school lend themselves particularly well to being decorated and accentuated because they are simple human-shaped wooden figures. These figures are proportionally scaled to the unit blocks and come in a larger and smaller size, representing adults and children. Sarah said that the wooden figures were designed by some of the school's teachers. Before this, the classroom had wooden figures with painted features on them, designating their careers (for example, doctors, firefighters, police officers) as well as their gender and race. The newer wooden figures provide more flexibility for the students, allowing them to determine what characters they want in their dramatic play and to design them however they like. The block animals are designed similarly to the wooden people—the shapes suggest different farm animals (for example, horses, cows, pigs) but there are no other features painted on them, leaving it up to the child to decide the rest of the details. Sarah also encourages the kindergarteners to make

their own animals if they want to incorporate a different kind of animal into their work.

In addition to paper drawings and wooden figures, the classroom also has wooden colored 1" x 1" cubes for children to use (organized into small wooden crates, making it easy for students to take the cubes to their buildings with them while they work) and scraps of cloth in a variety of colors and patterns. Sarah also pointed out "elevators" that kindergarteners use in their buildings, made out of a yogurt cup, some string and a pulley. A group of students, who were working on a multi-storey townhouse when I visited, put this accessory to use, bringing people up and down between the floors of the house many times. Sarah mentioned that while this is a practical accessory to include in the block area since it provides a way for children to move their people up and down inside their buildings, it also encourages the kindergarteners to build up, motivating them to experiment with building taller buildings than they usually do. She explained that one stipulation for using the elevator is that the building must be sturdy—the elevators can cause buildings to fall even when their foundations are strong, but they become particularly dangerous when the building is unsteady.

Another block accessory that Sarah brought to my attention was the children's woodworking pieces, which the kindergarteners construct at a workbench located in one corner of the block area. She mentioned that woodworking is an important part of the school program in each grade starting in preschool. However, something unique about the kindergarteners' woodworking is that they are expected to build something they will use with their block work. Sarah



listed a variety of items that students have made given this parameter, including transportation vehicles such as boats, helicopters, planes and trains; furniture scaled for the wooden block people such as beds, desks and couches; and more. During my visit to this classroom, many students were using their woodworking pieces as transportation accessories in their block construction and dramatic play.

Sarah also mentioned some accessories and resources that she puts out later in the year for the students. For example, she said that at some point in the year, she will bring out plasticene—an oil-based modeling clay—which children use for items such as food. In the meantime, kindergarteners met their needs with the materials that were currently available. For example, during my classroom visit, students used colored cubes to represent different foods in a supermarket.

A few months into the school year, Sarah said she puts out a “word box,” which serves as a resource for signs. The word box holds alphabetically arranged index cards. Each time children need a word for their block work, the teachers write the word on a card—one side in uppercase, the other side in lowercase. Then, the children can refer to the file if they want to spell a word for a sign. Sarah pointed out that, not only does the word box become a great resource for students as they build, but it also provides an opportunity to integrate language arts into the kindergarteners’ block work.

### **Motivating and Guiding Children’s Block Work**

When I observed the kindergarteners building with blocks in this classroom, I immediately noticed how excited and engaged they were in their work. Part of this motivation came from the tone of the room and the importance that block building

holds in this classroom and the school in general. Sarah's commitment and passion of toward block building played a role in this as well, since she modeled interest and engagement in the process. Sarah pointed out that she remains very passionate about the block work that goes on her classroom, even after 29 years of teaching. The tone that this teacher sets in the classroom affects the kindergarteners and their block work, helping them to find excitement in the work as well.

Since the block program in this classroom is reality-based, neighborhood walks play a significant role in guiding the students' building, both in choosing the kind of building they would like to work on each week as well as fleshing out what to include in their buildings. When I visited, the class had taken two full-group neighborhood walks so far during the year. The kindergarteners had also made a book about the neighborhood walk, which Sarah said she used to promote the children's first weeklong block experiences. She added that the group would continue taking more field trips throughout the year as well as smaller trips, such as a visit to a subway station or another part of the school to enhance and inform a group's building. Sarah pointed out the importance of kindergarteners having first-hand experience in learning about what they are building so they can discover the details for themselves through careful observation.

Such excursions and first-hand experiences are particularly relevant for students due to the reality-based nature of their block work. Sarah said that during the class's neighborhood walks, they look at different kinds of buildings, as well as the kinds of businesses that are in the area, different types of transportation, how people get around, and the signage they see. The variety of things the students

examine during the trips helps to extend and increase their knowledge about the buildings they will construct, as well as the play that goes on within their block community.

Students' discussion and reflection about their block work helps deepen their current work as well as their work in the future. These opportunities occur on both formal and informal bases. During my visit to this classroom, I noticed many informal discussions of this nature while the children were building. At this time, the teachers in the classroom circulated around the room, observing the students' work and speaking with them about parts of their building. At times, the teachers make suggestions or share what they notice about particular buildings, helping to extend the kindergarteners' thinking. Other times, they call on class members to share their own experiences. For example, Sarah recounted that one day while she observed children engaged in dramatic play in the block area, she saw that one of the wooden block characters was visiting the hospital because he broke his leg. After watching the students play out the scene of getting a cast, Sarah noticed a child had misconceptions and called on another student's expertise. She explained to me that a student in the class broke his leg over the summer, so she asked him to explain to the child what happened. While Sarah finds that students are attentive during such moments, she does not expect them to change their play or that the information will immediately translate into their block work. Instead, she says they have now been exposed to the information. These opportunities are important because Sarah explains that part of her role as the teacher is to enhance and increase the knowledge and interest that kindergarteners already have in a topic.

Informal discussions also occur on construction-related topics. For example, during my second visit to this classroom, Sarah told me about a carefully constructed church I had seen students build on Monday, which had fallen down earlier in the day on Wednesday. Sarah said that sometimes she tells children about the consequences of something they are doing. For example, she detailed a discussion that she had with that group of students about their own height in relation to the height of the walls they had built, noting that they would be leaning over them to play. When they did not use her recommendation and the building collapsed, another opportunity for reflection arose, since the children could think back to their discussion with Sarah and consider how they might alter their construction while rebuilding it. She also mentioned that this kind of incident provides a discussion topic for the group's Monday block planning session the following week. Bringing a small group's experience into a full-group discussion provides an opportunity for the kindergarteners to learn about challenges that others faced in the block area and learn from them as well. This type of reflection occurs in both a full group and small-groups. Sarah said that sometimes the children have discussions mid-week about where each group of builders is with their construction and what else they need to add to their building. For example, she might ask whether a group has created pictures to represent the movies at a movie theater, or about where the beds are in the hospital.

Another way that Sarah guides the kindergarteners' block work is through the building environment she creates for the students each week. Some weeks, she adds certain guidelines or geographical features for the children to consider and

take into account as they build. For example, Sarah shared that so far this year, at different times she had encouraged students to use a thin coat of tempera paint to paint a river, train tracks and outlined city blocks on the floor of the block area. Sarah said she thinks about and observes where the students are with their building skills and what might help them grow. For example, she explained that this particular group of students was focusing on the sturdiness and functionality of their buildings that week. Each week provides further insight into the kindergarteners' understanding of the world around them and where they are as builders. When students painted a river onto the floor, she encouraged the students to consider what buildings and structures might be found near or around water, as well as how that might affect transportation. As a result, the children built a variety of water-related structures, including a "harbor hotel," docks and boats.

During the week I visited, Sarah had painted city block outlines on the floor, creating a 2-foot by 2-foot square outline with another surrounding outline around it to indicate a sidewalk. She mentioned that this was the first time this year that she had painted spatial outlines on the floor for them to build within. Sarah explained that she hoped the outlines would encourage students to build up, rather than out. However, she pointed out that she would not have done something like this at the beginning of the year, since she wants kindergarteners to have the experience of building outward and near other children first.

Modifying the block area in these ways helps students think about the complexity of the world around them and the many factors that affect transportation options and buildings in the real world. This also encourages

children to develop planning and problem-solving skills. For example, Sarah described how students in the class decided to add train tracks during a week that water was painted on the floor in order to go around it.

In terms of the blocks themselves, Sarah said that additional block shapes are strategically added each subsequent year in the lower school, expanding as the children get older and move on to the next grade level. Gradually, the shapes move from basic to more elaborate. This provides motivation for students in multiple ways. For example, the children have new aesthetic options to incorporate into their buildings. They can also expand their building skills, since they discover new things they can accomplish with the new shapes they have. These features of the school's block program help students continue to expand and solidify their building experiences as they progress through each grade level.

### **Summary**

The block program in this kindergarten classroom is part of a larger, full-school block program. The large scope of the school's block program provides a sense of unity at the school, giving a commonality to all students and their experiences at school. The large-scale program was thought out in detail, including an expanding selection of block shapes available in each subsequent grade and developmentally oriented curriculum that ties into the children's block work. Sarah devotes a significant amount of time and space to block building, revealing its importance in this kindergarten classroom.

Sarah pointed out a variety of benefits that unit blocks offer children, including experience with concepts in academic areas such as math, science,

language arts and social studies, as well as social development through their interactions with other students in the classroom community. The children use block building as a way to explore social studies concepts such as communities, neighborhoods, transportation, jobs and interdependence. Integral in this learning process is the role of first-hand experiences and field trips, which enhance and deepen the children's work by allowing them to examine their surroundings in detail. Through trips and the students' block work, the kindergarteners examine the businesses in their neighborhood, the jobs that people do in the neighborhood, the role and kinds of transportation people use nearby, and the signage that helps people find the information they need in the neighborhood. To further support the development of students' understanding, the children build realistic buildings, encouraging them to recreate the world they are exploring around them to make better sense of it.

Sarah helps the kindergarteners consider the geographical and spatial elements they experience in the real world by occasionally modifying the block area. Through careful observation, she pays attention to what experiences might benefit her students and incorporates geographical features into the block area that might be found in the real world by painting the features onto the floor with tempera paint. For example, when I visited the classroom, students had already helped to paint a river, train tracks and city blocks, onto the floor of the block area at various points in the year. Adding these kinds of features to the block area helps children learn about how different geographical features affect their own neighborhood, such as the kinds of buildings, businesses, and transportation that are available.

Sarah emphasizes the role of interaction in the block area, which occurs in a variety of ways. Children build in small groups, encouraging cooperation and communication among the kindergarteners with whom they build. Additionally, this block building program supports the interaction of the entire class, since the whole class builds at the same time. Interaction is also explored from a social studies standpoint, since students visit other buildings in the block area during their dramatic play. Their visits are realistic in nature, going to businesses for the needs they would meet there in the real world, such as getting groceries from the grocery store. In this way, kindergarteners are also learning about the interdependence of people in a community.

In this classroom, Sarah provides open-ended accessories that children can use to extend their block work, including wooden people and animals, 1" colored wooden cubes, pieces of cloth, "elevators" made of a yogurt cup, string and pulley, and more. The students also create their own accessories to use in the block area by making woodworking pieces at the workbench. Additionally, the children use art supplies such as paper, crayon, scissors and tape to create signs and add details to the accessories already available in the classroom.

Sarah is in tune with the developmental needs of her kindergarteners, thinking about how they learn best and what experiences would help them extend their knowledge. She focuses on the social studies aspect that block building provides while also being mindful of other subject areas that block building encompasses, such as literacy, math and science. She provides motivation for her students in a variety of ways, including trips, discussions, modifying the block area



and providing open-ended materials, which they can adapt to their needs in their building and dramatic play.

**The Downtown Eastside Public School:  
Meeting the Common Core Standards through Blocks**

**Description of School**

The second school I visited was a public school located on the downtown east side of Manhattan. The school has approximately 260 students, ranging from pre-k through fifth grade. The school serves a wide socio-economic range of students, including children from middle- and upper-class backgrounds as well as children from the projects nearby. The school has a progressive philosophy, centering its mission on community, social responsibility, democracy and conflict-resolution. The kindergarten classroom I visited is one of two classes in that age group. It has 27 students and one full-time teacher, Jane (name has been changed to disguise teacher's identity), though an America Reads participant and a student teacher come three days per week.

The classroom is a bright space, the far wall lined with windows. Though it is a moderately sized room, it is a tight space to navigate. Low shelves, delineating the block area from the rest of the classroom divide the classroom in half lengthwise. The block area is on the far side of the room, along the wall of windows. The other half of the room includes four tables, a meeting area and other shelves holding books, math manipulatives, writing and drawing supplies and other materials.

I visited this classroom once, during after school hours. While there were no students present during my visit, Jane showed me a video she had made about block building in her classroom, which included children actively building the different

projects she later described to me, giving me a good sense of the tenor and the type of block building that went on in her classroom.

### **The Block Program**

While block building has been an important part of Jane's classroom for many years (she taught first grade and now she is teaching kindergarten), the block building program is not school-wide. However, she did indicate that the block work in her classroom influences the work that other classrooms do with blocks. For example, she said that the other kindergarten class followed her lead, incorporating blocks into their classrooms as well.

Block building in this classroom is connected to the kindergarten curriculum, structured around the studies the children do throughout the year. While the block building in this classroom is most directly linked to social studies, Jane incorporates many other subjects into it as well, including language arts and math. Since this is a public school, the curriculum has its foundations in the Common Core Standards. Jane designs her block program with the standards in mind, which allows her to satisfy some of these requirements through the kindergarteners' block work. During our interview, Jane explained that she figures out how to tailor the blocks to meet her teaching needs. In addition to intertwining her block building program and the curriculum standards, Jane also documents the students' work to provide evidence of how these standards were met, and therefore shows how blocks fulfill these requirements.

### **Time, Space and Procedures**

In this classroom, half of the physical space is devoted to blocks. Low shelves filled with wooden blocks line the block area, separating it from the rest of the room. The block area is on the far side of the room, making it an undisturbed area when entering the room. The length of the block area is lined with windows, giving the students a bright area to work in.

Block building occurs during the “social studies” time in the class’s schedule—usually a 45-minute period. While students in this classroom do not necessarily build every day, the work they do each day ultimately relates to their block work. For example, in days leading up to a new project, children begin planning their block work with each other, sharing ideas and brainstorming how to achieve them. Other days, they are exploring and learning about the topic they are studying, which they will later delve into through their block building. For example, before they build towers that represent themselves during the “Me, Myself and Others” study, the kindergarteners begin to explore concepts such as similarities and differences from one another, as well as their physical and personality traits. Since the kindergartener’s block work is organized around the studies they explore in social studies, the temporal scope of the children’s block work is much longer than a week. The buildings often stay up for weeks at a time, with students enhancing and adding to them as the study progresses.

The social structure of the kindergarteners’ block work depends on the current study they are exploring. For example, Jane explained that during the “Me, Myself and Others” study, children work independently, creating towers that

represent themselves both in height as well as through the objects they use as decoration. However, during the class's family and school studies, the students work collaboratively in small groups.

In between studies, the kindergarteners have the opportunity to do free building, which would last for a week. During this time, children work in small groups and decide collectively what they would like to build. Jane explains that free building is not necessarily reality-based—students build things that might not be in their neighborhood, or that might be fantasy structures. For example, she explained that last year, many kindergarteners built the Empire State Building and other New York City landmarks during their free building time, but others built castles with a cave for dragons. Thus, free building remains open-ended in this classroom, both in the kinds of buildings children construct as well as the dramatic play that goes on there.

### **Developing Rules**

Jane provides both physical and social guidelines for students in the block area. When I asked her about any rules she had for block building in her classroom, the first one she mentioned was, “No throwing blocks.” While she pointed out the safety concerns that this rule takes into account, she also mentioned that in all of her years of teaching, no one has ever thrown a block in her classroom—even during years with very challenging students. She indicated that this reflects the students' value of the material and the honored place it has in her classroom, in terms of both time and physical space.

She also stressed the importance of the children listening to each other during the block building process, both before and during the actual building begins. Jane pointed out that everyone must share an idea in the planning process and be involved in it. Additionally, no one is the boss when it comes to group work—everyone’s ideas are listened to and taken into consideration. The social parameters Jane sets during the block building process reflect her description of how block building fosters a sense of community among students in her classroom—children gain experience communicating and developing their social skills during block building by expressing what they like or dislike about situations. Since the kindergarteners practice listening, collaborating and problem solving together through their block work, these skills extend to their social interactions at other points in the day at both academic as well as less structured times.

Each specific study and its coinciding block-building project have their own individual set of stipulations that guide the children’s block building. For example, the kindergarteners at this school do a “Me, Myself and Others” study, during which they think about who they are, what they like and dislike, and consider how people are similar and different from each other. Jane integrates block-building work into this study by having each child build his or her own block tower. Guidelines for the towers included a specific construction style, which Jane models for the class. Additionally, students must stay within an area outlined on the floor—a stipulation that Jane includes so that all 27 children in the class will have space to build in the block area. The towers must also be the height of the child who is building it, so it can serve as a kind of representation of the child. The final steps are creating a

drawing that represents the child, which is placed at the top of the child's tower, and decorating the tower with things that are important to the child, including objects, photographs and drawings. The guidelines for the towers serve multiple functions for the class, including making sure that there is enough space for each child's tower in the block area, helping to integrate the project into the goals of the study itself, and making the towers the same while at the same time, unique. Jane pointed out that this aspect of the towers being both similar and different from each other is part of the goal in both the project and the study, since people have similarities but, at a closer look, are different in many ways.

Since the guidelines for each block-building project provide a way for the specific goals of the current study to be met, the stipulations for the block structures during the family study are quite different. During this study, the aim is for a small group of students to build a multi-storey structure. Each child in the group decorates one floor of the building to represent his or her own home, including details such as different parts of the house and figures that represent the child's family members. While the children still build within a specifically outlined space on the floor for this project, the space is larger, since group work means that fewer buildings need to fit in the block area. Another stipulation for this project is that the building had to be more than one floor, since each child decorates a different floor of the building. Thus, the overall structure of the buildings the students make for each study is influenced by the goals accomplished with the structure (for example, creating a representation of themselves, building a multi-storey home) and how it links to the current study.

### **Accessories and Additional Materials**

Kindergarteners in this classroom create most of the accessories they use in their block building work. Children make many of their accessories out of paper, through both drawings they create on paper as well as constructions they make by folding, cutting and taping paper. Jane spent a few minutes of our interview talking about the process of students creating their accessories. Importantly, Jane has an art background, which seems to translate into the demonstrations she gives the kindergarteners showing how to create certain kinds of accessories. For example, one demonstration she mentioned teaches the children how to make a box out of paper, which they then use for a variety of purposes, including holding small items in their block schemes and representing actual boxes.

An essential part of this classroom's block program is the block figure people that each child creates. The kindergarteners make them out of paper as well, and learn how to make them during another demonstration by Jane. These figures are particularly important since the children each make one to represent themselves, which they then incorporate into both the "Me, Myself and Others" study as well as the family study and their free block play. Jane models this process by making a figure that represents herself, tracing a small human body outline on paper, adding features such as hair, eyes, nose, mouth and clothes, and then coloring the figure in to accurately represent her features as well as her skin tone. Next, she cuts out the figure and tapes it onto a small rectangular pillar or "butter stick" as it is often called, making the figure three-dimensional. In addition to creating a block figure that represents themselves during the "Me, Myself and Others" study, the children



also create such figures of their family members during the family study, so that the home each child creates accurately represents the members of the child's family.

While this method of creating human block figures allows flexibility in the students representing the race, ethnicity and gender of the figures they create, it also allows the them to become more involved in their dramatic play with their block-building, since they have a figure that represents themselves in the scheme.

Jane mentioned that the students also use plasticene—an oil-based clay—to create accessories for their block structures. The flexibility and malleability of this material provides the opportunity for children to use it in a variety of ways, making any number of things, including food, bowls, pets and more. Jane said she also does demonstrations with the plasticene to show students how they can use it to make items such as bowls. She pointed out that, after she gives the demonstration, children have the tools to use the process and then modify it to meet the needs of whatever they are making for their block structure. Similar to her description of the paper boxes she shows the kindergarteners how to make, the students can use the plasticene bowls for a variety of purposes in their block building work.

When the kindergarteners build the block towers for the “Me, Myself and Others” study, they can also use accessories such as photographs and small objects from home to decorate the towers in a way that reflects the child's interests, likes and dislikes.

### **Motivating and Guiding Children's Block Work**

Children in this classroom are challenged and motivated in different ways by each study, given the differing parameters for their buildings. In this way, the

studies provide the students with continual motivation in the block area. When they finish one project, they are working on something completely different afterwards. This variety gives them room for growth and continued discovery with their block building and dramatic play.

The large role that blocks plays in this classroom is also a motivation for these kindergarteners. Jane described the respect the children have for blocks in her classroom when she discussed how none of her students has ever thrown a block in her classroom. During our interview, Jane explained that “you honor the work by how much space you give it and how much time you give it” (personal communication, November 12, 2013). In this classroom, not only does the physical space and time devoted to blocks indicate its value, but Jane also sets an example of its importance by how seriously she talks about the block building process with her students. Despite the many demands on public school teachers, Jane continues to incorporate blocks into her classroom as much as she can, showing the respect she has for unit blocks and the process of block building. As Jane said during our interview, she figures out how to make it work, despite the demands of the standards, because she thinks that blocks are important. Through Jane’s love of blocks, the children come to appreciate them as well.

### **Summary**

The block program in this classroom reveals the work of a teacher devoted to the material of unit blocks and the process of block building. While it is not a school-wide program, Jane incorporates the public school requirements into her block building program, using the kindergarteners’ work in the block area to reach

these standards while the students simultaneously glean the many other benefits that block building has to offer, including conflict-resolution skills, math concepts, literacy and more. Jane has thoughtfully integrated her curriculum into the children's block work, continually reflecting about her work in previous years, considering how she can adapt what she has done in the past to make it even better.

The individual structure of each study the kindergarteners explore allows the children to work with blocks in different ways and to achieve different objectives, in terms of both their building as well as the social studies concepts they investigate. Jane has also taken into consideration how to document the students' block work in order to show how the children have met the curriculum standards.

Jane demonstrates a particular interest in the process of the students making their own accessories from a variety of materials, allowing the children's creations to be unique and original. Her demonstrations of how to use different materials to make accessories scaffolds the process for her students, while leaving it open-ended for them to change or add onto the process as they see fit.

## **Brooklyn Independent School: Block Building at Choice Time**

### **Description of School**

The third classroom I visited was an independent school in Brooklyn Heights. The school has approximately 760 students, ranging from preschool through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. This school's philosophy is centered on academic excellence, community, diversity and social justice. The kindergarten classroom I visited was one of three classes in that age group. The classroom had 22 children and two adults—one head teacher, Kate (name has been changed to disguise teacher's identity), and one assistant teacher.

The classroom is a large, L-shaped space, located at a corner of the building. Windows line two adjacent walls in the classroom, giving the classroom lots of natural light. Five large circular tables are spread throughout the room. Low shelves line most of the walls, filled with books, math manipulatives, writing materials, games and many other materials. A large meeting space takes up about a quarter of the classroom.

I visited this classroom during school hours and observed kindergarteners building in the block area on many different days. I also visited the classroom once after school to interview Kate.

### **The Block Program**

This block program is grade-wide, meaning that all three kindergarten classes implement a similar program in their classrooms. The kindergarten teachers refer to the program as "Block City," and the goal is for students to build realistic buildings that they could find in a real community. While unit blocks are a

material found in other grade levels at the school, including preschool and first grade, the kindergarten block program is more structured in how the children participate, ensuring that each child spends a significant time building with blocks throughout the school year.

During my interview with Kate, she mentioned the value she finds in block building, including the students collaborating and communicating with one another, developing conflict-resolution skills, and making better sense of the world around them by building with blocks and using their block structures for dramatic play. She also commented on the role that block building plays in the development of community among the kindergarteners in her classroom.

### **Time, Space and Procedures**

About one sixth of this classroom's physical space is devoted to blocks. The block area is tucked in a corner of the room, delineated by shelves of blocks and accessories. Block City occurs during the children's choice time—a daily part of the schedule that lasts about 45 minutes. The kindergarteners work in the block area in half-groups, meaning about 11 students are working in the block area at one time. When one half-group is in block area during a week, the other group has choice time. The following week, the groups switch. Both blocks and choice time occur in the same classroom.

Colored tape on the floor delineates the building area in this classroom, creating a large rectangular shape within which the building occurs. The taped outline is about one foot away from the block shelves, giving the children space to maneuver around the buildings when getting blocks. Within the large rectangle,

there are six 2-foot by 2-foot squares, also delineated with colored tape on the floor. These squares provide a space for each pair of builders to work. Children in this classroom usually work with either one or two other students, providing opportunities for the kindergarteners to work collaboratively, gaining experience in compromise, and planning with their peers.

Block City spans the entire week, with each day devoted to a different part of the process. On Mondays, the half-group has a planning meeting with a teacher, discussing what buildings the kindergarteners are interested in building that week and choosing what they will build and with whom. After the meeting, the children get started with their buildings. Tuesdays are accessories days, where students continue to build and begin to add any accessories they would like to include in their buildings. Students often begin playing with their buildings on Tuesdays. On Wednesdays, they continue to play with their buildings and add any additional accessories. Thursdays are “visiting days,” where the children can visit and play with other students’ buildings in the block area (when given permission by the builders). During this time, they often share their buildings with their peers, pointing out features they find particularly interesting about each other’s buildings and sharing strategies for how they achieved them.

Friday is block pickup, which Kate explained she calls “un-build.” All children working in the block area that week participate in the pick up process. Kate mentioned a variety of strategies to motivate the kindergarteners during pickup, including challenges such as, “Can you unbuild your building without knocking it down?” and, “Make stacks of four blocks before bringing them to the shelves.” She

also mentioned assigning jobs to different students depending on how their pickup is going (for example, some children might feel more successful loading the shelves than stacking the blocks) and playing music to see how many songs it takes them to finish putting away the blocks.

### **Developing Rules**

The kinds of buildings that kindergarteners in this classroom construct must be realistic ones that someone could find in a community. However, the buildings do not need to be from the child's immediate community, such as New York City. For example, during our interview, Kate talked about the Eiffel Tower, saying that if a student wanted to build it, the teachers could support the kindergarteners by printing out pictures of it, which they could use as a reference as they work. Kate explained that by allowing children to create buildings from other communities around the world, they are better able to make sense of their experiences and what they know. She also pointed out that her current students travel a lot, meaning many of them have seen these buildings in person before. This means she adjusts the procedures in the block area depending on the particular group of children she works with each year.

The kindergarteners in this classroom must be mindful of the space in which they build, as each group must stay within the taped-off square they choose. This provides physical parameters for the children to consider while building, limiting the building's footprint. It also encourages them to build up rather than out, helping them to develop new building techniques and add on to their previous block building experiences. Kate explained that the tape provides structure for the

kindergarteners at the beginning of the year. However, as the year continues, some groups show that they are ready to begin building without the tape, displaying a controlled building technique and body awareness in the block area as they navigate between block structures. Thus, she adjusts the parameters based on the specific needs of her current group of students. In addition to the length and width stipulations for the kindergarteners, there are also height limit for their block buildings—for safety reasons, their buildings can only be as tall as the builders in the group.

### **Accessories and Additional Materials**

This classroom has a variety of accessories students can incorporate into their buildings, including wooden vehicles such as cars, trucks, police cars and ambulances. There is also a variety of wooden block people with features painted on them, which the kindergarteners can use in their dramatic play. These painted features designate the occupation (for example, a doctor, a police officer, a firefighter, or a nurse), gender and race of each figure. The classroom has similar wooden block animals with features painted on them, indicating the kind of animal they represent.

In addition to these wooden figures, there are more abstract objects the students can use as accessories, such as one-inch colored wooden cubes, cloth, yarn and a variety of miscellaneous objects, including bottle caps and plastic film canisters. During our interview, Kate also indicated that the kindergarteners can always draw or write something on paper and tape it to their building if the premade accessories do not meet their specific needs, giving the children greater support and flexibility with their creations. In addition to these objects in the



classroom, Kate said that the students can also bring in accessories from outside of school to use with their block buildings. For example, they might bring in items from nature, such as rocks, pebbles, twigs and sticks.

### **Motivating and Guiding Children's Block Work**

Kate said that she views her role in block building as scaffolding the building process for the students. As part of this process, she provides building challenges to the kindergarteners each week, such as including a door in the building and the following week, including a door and a window. In this way, she gradually encourages the children to work towards more complex and realistic constructions, building on their experiences each week.

She said that the block builders have opportunities to share their work with their peers during "visiting day" every Thursday, which allows the kindergarteners to see the work of others and learn about how they achieved it. Not only does this add value to the process of block building, since the children appreciate and examine each other's buildings, but it also helps to scaffold the building process since they learn from each other.

Kate approaches the block program with a flexible structure, adapting it to the needs of each group of children. For example, she mentioned that she removes the taped squares if the students are adept at moving around and building in the block area. She also discussed certain block constructions that require a greater level of collaboration and coordination among the group. For example, she described building a theme park, where each partnership works on a different part of the park. By getting to know the particular students in her group each year, she

can better adapt the program to continue to challenge them, helping them grow in their building and dramatic play.

### **Summary**

The block program in this kindergarten class is structured and established across the grade level. While unit blocks are a material available in other classrooms in the school, the kindergarten block program differs from the other grade levels in that block building is a required aspect of the curriculum and program across all the kindergartens, whereas in preschool it is more informal. Although the classes work in half-groups, the children still benefit from many of the community development aspects that block building has to offer, including conflict-resolution, communication with peers, and collaboration. Sharing work with each other during “visiting day” also enhances the community that block building fosters in this classroom, while allowing the kindergarteners to share their work and their block building strategies with each other.

The block structures the children build are reality-based, allowing them to apply what they have experienced in the world around them and make better sense of it through block building and dramatic play. Many premade accessories are available to accentuate the block buildings, but children can also create their own accessories with paper and drawing tools. The physical and procedural structures of the block-building program provide a comfortable, predictable format for the children, making it easy for them to develop confidence with the material. While Kate thoughtfully implements the various aspects of the kindergarten block

program, she also emphasizes the importance of knowing the students and adapting the block program to the needs of each particular group.

## **What I've Learned**

### **The Appeal of Block Building for Kindergarteners**

The literature on block building gave me insight into why it is such an engaging activity for young children. Cohen (1972) maintains that the center of a five-year-old's being is his physical self. Block building provides a total physical experience for kindergarteners, reflecting how they interact with the world around them. Physical interaction with smooth, wooden unit blocks also provides a sensory experience for block builders, which is physically, socially and emotionally satisfying, supporting Piaget's description of how young children learn (Casper and Theilheimer, 2010). The weight and texture are particularly appealing to the senses of young children. The longer blocks provide a unique sensory experience since children need to balance the blocks when carrying them. Block building also creates opportunities for dramatic play—an engaging aspect of the material for kindergarteners, since they are naturally drawn to this kind of play (Cohen, 1972).

Unit blocks provide young children with social interactions that fit their developmental needs. While block building can be an engaging activity for children who are still egocentric, it also supports their social development as they begin to notice and interact with their peers (Cohen). In the block area, students have the opportunity to learn from each other, collaborate, problem solve, and play with others as they develop socially. Additionally, block building provides children with a chance to work independently from adults, making their own decisions and taking risks as they build and play (Casper and Theilheimer, 2010). Children can achieve this independence when working with blocks because Caroline Pratt designed unit

blocks so that children could use them without the guidance or instruction of an adult (Pratt, 1970). The flexible, unstructured nature of unit blocks makes them adaptable to all children (Cohen, 1972)—a goal that Pratt (1970) had in mind when she created them, allowing the material to meet students where they are developmentally while supporting their growth as they gain more experience. These elements combined along with kindergarteners' driving interest in block building make it possible for children to enter the zone of proximal development in the block area, creating an ideal learning environment.

### **Benefits of Block Building**

The literature detailed the wide range of benefits that unit blocks offer children. Block building supports children's physical development, including hand-eye coordination, visual perception, and hand manipulation (Hirsch, 1996). As previously mentioned, socially, kindergarteners in the block area can interact with others, gaining experience in cooperation and problem solving, as well as creating an opportunity to learn from each other (Hirsch). Block building also supports children's emotional development by providing risk-taking and decision-making experiences, giving them a sense of confidence and competence (Cohen, 1972).

As authors point out in the *The Block Book* (Hirsch, 1996), unit blocks also offer learning opportunities for children in a variety of academic areas. Block building provides opportunities for children to explore mathematical and spatial concepts (Leeb-Lundberg, 1996) such as size, shape, number, categorization, and area. It also provides experiences with scientific inquiry and concepts of physics, including the interaction of forces such as gravity and resistance and how they affect

equilibrium, balance and stability (Moffitt, 1996). Children also apply literacy skills during block building since it is a language-based process. When children build together, they discuss ideas and opinions with each other, gaining experience in collaboration, cooperation, compromise, and learning the language used in a compromise. Kindergarteners also practice reading and writing by make signs for their buildings and reading charts and lists of what is happening in blocks (Hirsch, 1996). Block building adds important dimensions to social studies, allowing children to recreate the world around them and make better sense of it through the building process and dramatic play (Brody and Hirsch, 1996). During this process, children take their understandings and experiences and externalize them, making them public. Through block building and their dramatic play in the block area, they act on these experiences and share them with others. Recreating their experiences through an open-ended material such as unit blocks is essential to the learning process, since it provides children with an opportunity to apply their understandings and make better sense of them (Mitchell, 2001).

The elements of play involved in block building are also an important developmental benefit of unit blocks (Cuffaro, 1996). Through play, children make better sense of the world around them by applying what they know and understand to recreate their environment and experiences (Brody and Hirsch, 1996). Additionally, they share what they know with the other children involved in their play, allowing them to reconcile the ideas and knowledge of others with their own experiences and understandings (Cohen, 1972).

The play that occurs in the block area also helps children develop self-regulation (Cohen, 1972). Spiegel (2008) supports this finding, explaining that dramatic play helps “build a critical cognitive skill called executive function.” While executive function has a variety of elements to it, Spiegel points out that “perhaps the most important is self-regulation—the ability for kids to control their emotions and behavior, resist impulses, exert self-control and discipline.” This means that dramatic play helps children develop the control they will need to become a successful student in later years and eventually, competent adults.

Social and emotional benefits of block building were also echoed by the teachers I interviewed. All three teachers said that block building significantly influenced the social climate in their classroom, providing opportunities for children to collaborate, problem-solve, and communicate with each other. While practicing these skills in the block area helps young students achieve their immediate block building goals, it also provides them with a social foundation, giving them the tools to work through problems with their peers and persevere through challenging or frustrating tasks.

### **Block Programs in General**

My classroom observations and interviews showed me that a block program is deeply influenced by the context in which it exists, including the school, the teacher, the students and the spatial layout of the classroom. The design of a block program reflects the values of the teacher that implements it (see Appendix A, Cuffaro interview) and what she feels blocks have to offer. For example, Jane at the downtown east side public school mentioned the social aspect of block building and

how it influences the overall social climate in the classroom. The social aspect of block building is therefore a focal point that Jane incorporates into her program, which she mentioned when she talked about the conflict-resolution strategies that she uses with children when they disagree about something that happens in the block area. Sarah at the downtown west side independent school incorporates the values she feels blocks offer into her program, mentioning the social benefits of block building, as well as mathematics, literacy and social studies benefits. Sarah also encourages and supports children's growth by encouraging kindergarteners to consider various geographical elements of a real city. For example, Sarah discussed designating an area of the floor in the block area onto which the students paint bodies of water such as a river, which affects what kinds of buildings they will build that week as well as where they will build them. In this way, Sarah guides the children to experience a greater range of the possibilities that exist with block building.

Block building programs also reflect the philosophy of the school. For example, at the downtown west side independent school, the school's mission focuses on social studies. As a result, the block building program is integrated into social studies. The students build neighborhoods in the block area, and take trips throughout the school and neighboring community to delve deeper into what they are learning about. This focus on social studies in the block area reflects the importance of social studies in the school as a whole. In contrast, the block program at the down town east side public school is influenced by the common core standards, which put a great demand on the teachers and determines how they



spend their classroom instruction time. As a result, Jane integrates block building into the curriculum she needs to cover. For example, after the children build block towers that represent themselves in height, they measure their buildings, record its height, and label and write about the objects that they used to decorate the tower. In this way, the demanding academic environment at the school is reflected in the block program.

The student population and the needs of the particular group of students also influence a teacher's block program. For example, at the downtown west side independent school and the Brooklyn independent school, the teachers talked about how certain groups of children they worked with in past years had different needs. At the downtown west side independent school, Sarah described how focused her current students are in their block building and mentioned that this particular group of kindergarteners does not need much guidance during pickup. At the Brooklyn independent school, Kate described how children begin the year with outlines on the floor to create a boundary designating where they can build. However, she explained that some years, students show that they can safely move their bodies and negotiate the space, so she removes the tape outlines. Other years, Kate might keep the tape outlines all year, depending on the needs of the group.

### **Time, Space and Procedures**

Because time and space are both finite resources, they are highly coveted at schools. This means that the time and space a teacher devotes to block building in her classroom has a direct correlation with the importance of the material to the teacher—the more time and space that a teacher devotes to block building, the

clearer it is that block building is important to her (see Appendix A, Cuffaro interview). These choices send a message to the students about the material's importance and value, which in turn affects the respect they develop for blocks and the process of block building.

Space needs differ from classroom to classroom depending on the specific context, including classroom size and shape, the number of students, and what they will be working on in the block area. For example, at the downtown east side public school, Jane taped off 27 squares (one for each child to build in) on the floor of the block area, which created boundaries for the children's structures in terms of both length and width. While this limits how much the students can build outwards, it encourages them to build up and makes it possible for all 27 kindergarteners to work and fit in the block area. While this configuration made sense for that specific study because the children worked independently, the set-up changed for studies later in the year, where children collaborated in groups, meaning there were larger and fewer outlined building areas for the students to build within.

The specific procedures in a block program, such as when and how often students build, how many children build at one time, and how long the buildings stay up vary depending on the context. For example, although it is not possible for the kindergarteners to build every day at the downtown east side public school because of the heavy academic demands, the block program still plays a significant role in the classroom. Similarly, at the Brooklyn independent school, the children work in half-groups in the block area, taking turns building every other week. This

provides an opportunity for all students to build for a significant amount of time while giving them adequate space to work.

The expectations of how the block program is used (whether it is integrated into specific curriculum, reality-based, etc.) depends on the school's expectations of how time is spent in the classroom as well as the teacher's goals and what they want students to get from block building. For example, at the downtown west side independent school, blocks are an important part of classrooms school-wide and are a part of the social studies curriculum. As a result, the program is reality-based and Sarah uses the children's block building experiences as a jumping off point for learning more deeply about the community around them. Sarah also encourages students to benefit from the value block building provides in other arenas. For example, she supports the kindergarteners' development of mathematical skills by encouraging them to think about the spatial layout of their buildings. She also supports their development of social skills by having the children create the rules for the block area and supporting kindergarteners who are working through a conflict with each other. At the downtown east side public school, Jane explained that despite the heavy academic demands of the common core standards, the principal supported how she was using the block program to cover these standards—an idea she pitched to him herself. By using the block program to meet the common core standards, Jane supports her students' development in the academic areas that the standards outline, but the kindergarteners also get additional benefits that block building provides—experiences that support their social and emotional development.

## Developing Rules

Rules in the block area support the specific values the teacher is trying to instill through the block building process. Rules help to make the block area a safe, functional space so that children can reap the benefits of using the blocks. Rules such as “no throwing blocks”—which the Sarah at the downtown west side independent school and Jane at the downtown east side public school mentioned—and routines for pickup send a message to students about respecting the material: if you value something, you take care of it.

Rules also help to foster a positive social dynamic in the block area. For example, without rules about not throwing blocks and limits on the buildings’ height, some children might feel unsafe or scared of being in the block area. Rules about student interaction also foster a positive social climate. For example, Jane at the downtown east side public school mentioned that she tells the kindergarteners that no one is the boss and everyone must share an idea when they brainstorm during collaborative building times. These kinds of rules make each child a valued part of the building process. Rules and procedures for problem solving also provide children with the support they need to work through issues that arise with their peers. The social skills that kindergarteners develop and practice through such rules support the students’ social growth in their interactions with others in the block area, as well as the social climate of the classroom as a whole.

All three teachers had ground rules they started with that were non-negotiable. While there were only a few of these in each classroom, these rules were basic and very important to the teachers, including no throwing blocks, no knocking

down buildings, and everyone helps during pickup. At the downtown west side independent school, Sarah described how issues that arise in the block area provided opportunities for children to help create the rules. Through this process, the rules apply to the specific needs of the current group of children. The children's involvement in making the rules also promotes their interest and investment in following through with them, since the rules came from their own experiences in the block area.

### **Accessories and Additional Materials**

Accessories and other materials that students incorporate into their block buildings allow them to delve more deeply into their block work. These accessories and materials serve two functions: they extend the child's structure and enhance the child's play (Hirsch, 1996). Adding details to a structure through accessories and other materials encourages children to think more deeply about what they are building and about the real-world functioning of what they are constructing.

Accessories can also extend a child's building skills, further developing mathematical concepts, spatial awareness and more. For example, the use of elevators made of a yogurt-cup, pulley, and string at the downtown west side independent school encouraged students to build up rather than just outwards, fostering more structural problem solving, such as how to make a lower level sturdy enough to support a second storey.

While additional materials add details that can make a building more realistic, they also help to flesh out children's play, making it richer. This can particularly be true when students create their own accessories, giving them

creative ownership over what they create, allowing the options to be more open-ended. All three schools provided examples of this, including signs the children added to the buildings, people and animals they designed and bowls they made out of plasticene. Although creating their own accessories can be time consuming, this process can also develop other skills, such as woodworking, modeling with clay, and developing fine motor strength through drawing, writing and work with clay.

All three teachers used many of the accessories that Stanton, Weisberg and Apelman (1996) recommend in their appendix of *The Block Book* called *Suggested Equipment for Block Building*. These accessories include human and animal figures, colored wooden cubes, pieces of fabric and carpet, vehicles, objects from nature such as pebbles and twigs, and more. All three teachers pointed out that certain accessories were introduced or incorporated as the year progressed to meet the children's needs as they developed, supporting Hirsch's (1996) assertion that there should be a "reserve [of accessories] available to enrich special interests if they occur" (p. 123). For example, Sarah at the downtown west side independent school mentioned that she had recently put out the yogurt-cup pulley elevators because one group had a need for it—they had built a multi-storey building. Jane at the downtown east side public school mentioned that as the kindergarteners begin designing the homes for their family study, she works with them to create accessories for their buildings such as paper boxes, which they use for tables, televisions, vessels to hold objects in, and more. Kate at the Brooklyn independent school said that sometimes children in her classroom incorporate found objects from nature into their buildings, which they bring in themselves.

These teachers introduce new accessories to meet the students' needs as they develop during the course of the year. This means that the pacing and accessories they introduce may differ from year to year, depending on the group's needs. This also supports Hirsch's (1996) statement that "A wise teacher does not display all accessories at one time...Reserves are necessary to pick up activities when they lag around mid-year" (p. 123), meaning accessories can help inspire and reinvigorate children's work if they begin to lose interest.

### **Motivating and Guiding Children's Block Work**

The teachers I visited all played a significant role in motivating and guiding students' block work, scaffolding their knowledge of building techniques as well as the content they explored through their block building, so that they could grow as builders and learners. While this guiding and motivating can occur in many different ways, *it is influenced by the teacher's knowledge of what can be done with unit blocks*. During my visit to the downtown west side independent school, one way that Sarah supported and extended children's work was through questions she asked the kindergarteners. For example, she spoke with a group of children that was building a hospital, asking, "Are there beds for the patients to stay in?" "What might people see inside the entrance of a hospital?" "Is someone usually there to help visitors and tell them where to go?" These questions helped the children examine and clarify their work (Brody and Hirsch, 1996), adding further detail to their building and encouraging them to examine what they know about hospitals. At the downtown east side public school, Jane used the variety of building styles she knew was possible with unit blocks to expand children's building experiences. For

the children's first study, they built high, thin towers independently, which she modeled how to build. However, the other projects were shorter, wider, more collaborative buildings. In this way, Jane gave children experiences working alone, working in groups, building tall buildings and creating shorter buildings. By knowing the range of building possibilities available in the block area, Jane was able to provide her students with a variety of experiences that stimulated their interest.

One way the teachers I observed motivated the block work in their classrooms was through the teacher's respect for the material. The teacher's excitement about blocks was reflected in the work of the students, who saw that block building was an important part of their classroom and therefore wanted to do it. The teachers showed value and respect for blocks in their classroom by providing adequate time and space for the children to build with blocks, as well as the way they spoke with the kindergarteners about their work with the material. Jane's respect and excitement for blocks was a particularly strong moving force for her classroom. She had to present the idea for her block program to her principal, showing how she could meet the common core standards through block building. Ultimately, Jane's experience as an effective teacher, her vast knowledge of the curriculum and benefits of block building, as well as her conviction in what she wanted to provide for her students helped her gain the support of her principal.

These teachers also motivated their students in their block work by introducing new materials for them to use. For example, Sarah at the downtown west side independent school mentioned that additional block shapes are added in each subsequent grade level at the school, meaning the variety of shapes the



students build with expands as they get older. Additionally, all three schools mentioned the addition of new accessories at different parts of the year, including elevators at the downtown west side independent school, bowls and boxes at the downtown east side public school, and items from nature at the Brooklyn independent school.

Providing these additional materials throughout the year can renew the children's interest in the building process and inspire new themes for building, helping them to maintain their excitement about block building throughout the year. For example, Sarah at the downtown west side independent school mentioned that later in the year, she puts out plasticene so that children can make small items such as food. In this way, she provides the kindergarteners with the opportunity to add details in a different way than they have been so far during the year.

Changing the building environment in the block area can also motivate children in their building. For example, at the downtown west side independent school, Sarah changed the geographical environment the students were building in, having the children help to paint bodies of water such as a river using a thin solution of tempera paint which washes off easily or train tracks onto the floor. This sparked the students' interest, offering them a new challenge. Such changes encouraged the kindergarteners to think about how a specific geographic feature or environment might affect the kinds of buildings they would build and what transportation would be nearby. Similarly, altering the spatial aspects of the building area can guide children in how they build their structures. For example, depending on what they were doing, all three schools made use of taped or painted outlines on the floor that

indicated the parameters for the kindergarteners' buildings, encouraging them to try building up rather than out.

Providing challenges to the students before or as they build can also help to scaffold their building techniques. For example, Kate at the Brooklyn independent school mentioned that one week she might tell the children to include a door in their building. The following week, she might tell them to include a door and a window, adding on to their previous experiences gradually to encourage constructions that are more complex. As students develop strategies for incorporating these elements, they learn more about the functionality of the buildings they create as well as the buildings they interact with in the real world. The students also deepen their mathematical and spatial understandings, figuring out how to make the building sturdy even though there are empty spaces in the walls for the doors and windows.

These three teachers also provided motivation and guidance through the children's social interaction with each other. For example, in all three classrooms, kindergarteners had the opportunity to collaborate with others during the building process, giving them the chance to work together and communicate with each other. Students in each classroom shared their buildings with each other, either through a visiting day as occurs the Brooklyn independent school or during their dramatic play when they visit other buildings in the block community, as occurs the downtown west side independent school. During my visit to the downtown west side independent school, a group of children engaged in dramatic play visited the grocery store to buy food and another group visited the hospital because they were sick. In this way, the kindergarteners were interacting with each other in a way that

reflects real life, using the businesses children had built in the block area as they would in their neighborhoods. While the kinds of interactions differed in each classroom, each teacher supported the learning process through social interaction. Social interactions with their peers allow the kindergarteners to learn new and different building techniques from each other, learn about specific buildings that others were making—which another child may have been unfamiliar with previously—and learn about the interaction that exists within a real community, which they reenact through visits to other people’s buildings during their dramatic play.

The teachers I interviewed all exhibited flexibility in their procedures, adapting them to the specific needs of the group of children. For example, Kate at the Brooklyn independent school mentioned that the spatial configuration in the block area changes depending on the needs of the students each year—she removes the outlines if she sees that the children no longer need them. At the downtown east side independent school, the variety of studies the kindergarteners explore through blocks provides experience with different structural parameters for what and how they will build. For example, the students have the opportunity to work independently on their towers during the “Me, Myself and Others” study, while they work in small groups for the family and school studies. The teachers also showed flexibility in response to their students’ needs. For example, Kate at the Brooklyn independent school allowed the kindergarteners to build structures that might not be found in their neighboring community because she knows the population of

children she works with travel, giving them the opportunity to continue to make sense of their experiences.

The teachers also provided motivation and guidance for their students through first-hand experiences. For example, the teacher at the downtown west side independent school mentioned that trips play a vital role in the kindergarteners' block work. She said that in addition to neighborhood walks, small groups of students would also take trips to see something specific they had decided to build, such as a subway station or another part of the school. This allows the kindergarteners to learn more about what they are building and observe details they might choose to include in their building.

Through these simple trips, the children experience what they might otherwise consider commonplace in a different way, taking greater notice of it. Trips provide children with the opportunity to see the relationships that make their community work by meeting people and seeing the jobs they perform, which they can later incorporate into their recreation of the experience during their block work. Trips allow the children to have a shared experience, providing them with the opportunity to bring their own perceptions. Back in the classroom, the children have the chance to recreate the experience, sharing their impressions with each other. In this way, the process reflects Mitchell's (2001) "intake" and "outgo" model, where children have a first-hand experience and use adaptable materials to apply their understandings to recreate elements from the experience back in the classroom. When a trip is not possible, Kate at the Brooklyn independent school provides her students with other resources that can help scaffold their knowledge.

For example, she might provide students with a picture of the building they are constructing, providing them with visual cues of details they might include as well as structural choices they will make during the building process.

## Conclusion

Examining three different kindergarten classrooms and the way unit blocks are used in each setting has provided me with specifics about different approaches to block building with kindergarteners. While there are many differences between the school settings I visited and how kindergarteners use unit blocks in each classroom, there are also similarities in the teachers' expectations of students—their use of the material and in each teacher's emphasis on the importance of blocks, both academically and socially. For example, all three teachers implemented rules that show a respect for the material, such as "no throwing blocks" and "no knocking down buildings." These rules send the message that blocks are classroom tools that students must take care of. Jane at the downtown east side public school and Cuffaro (see Appendix A) both discussed how a teacher shows the value of blocks in her classroom through the time and space she devotes to it. All three classrooms devoted a significant amount of space for the block area and set aside ample time in the schedule to devote to the children's block work. The number and variety of blocks available in each classroom also underscored each teacher's respect for the material, meeting or exceeding Stanton, Weisberg and Apelman's (1996) suggestion for how many and which kinds of blocks teachers should provide for children of different ages.

After learning about these block programs, reading about blocks, and consulting an expert in children's block building, I have a much better sense of how I would incorporate block building into my own kindergarten classroom, as well as my reasoning behind each decision. Now that I see the relationship between the

school, the teacher and the classroom's block program, I also have a better understanding of the kind of school that would allow my block program to fit organically into the school's culture and values.

### **The School**

To best implement my block program, I would want to work at a school with a strong emphasis on social studies. This is important to me because block building provides children with opportunities to explore and better understand social studies topics such as neighborhoods, the interdependence of people and the work they do in the community, and more (Brody and Hirsch, 1996). All three of the schools I visited for this study provided strong examples of an emphasis on social studies, which included family studies, neighborhood studies and school studies. In each classroom, children in the block area had opportunities to build structures related to these topics, learning about each area of study as they recreated them with blocks as well as through their dramatic play. This reflects the important learning process that Mitchell (2001) outlines, including the "input," of information from a first-hand experience and the "outgo," or the child's opportunity to physically recreate parts of the experience through adaptable materials, applying what they know in the process.

### **The Block Program**

I would want my block program to be the bedrock of my kindergarten class's social studies work, providing a way for children to demonstrate their understandings of topics we are studying while continuing to build on and deepen these concepts (Mitchell, 2001). I would provide kindergarteners with the

opportunities for first-hand experiences related to the area of study through activities such as neighborhood walks, visits to different parts of the school and family shares, which the downtown west side independent school modeled and Brody and Hirsch (1996) discuss. Children would apply what they learned from these experiences to their work in the block area through building and dramatic play (Cuffaro, 1996).

In addition to and deeply related to social studies exploration that kindergarteners would undergo in the block area, I would also want the block program to have a social function, supporting and developing the social interactions among children in the classroom, ultimately affecting the entire classroom community (see Appendix A, Cuffaro interview). All three teachers described the substantial social impact that block building has in their classrooms, making me realize how vital this part of children's work in the block area is to the classroom's social climate as a whole.

### **Space, Time and Procedures**

Harriet Cuffaro (see Appendix A) and Jane at the downtown eastside public school both pointed out that the space and time you devote to block building sends students a clear message about its importance in the classroom. Visiting three classrooms allowed me to see a range of space and time usage for block building. After observing these classrooms, I am clear that I would want at least one third to a half of my classroom designated as the block area, much like I saw in the classrooms in both the downtown eastside public school and the downtown west side independent school. A block area of this size is important to me because of the



message it sends to the students that blocks are important. This size is also a practical choice because I would like all children in my classroom to build at the same time, which would not be possible if the block area is too small. It is important to me that the whole class builds at the same time because of the social impact that block building has in a classroom, as emphasized by all four interviewees for this study. If the entire class builds at once, a sense of community and more opportunities for interaction can be developed among the entire group rather than just the children who are currently in the block area. I was able to see this effect in action in both the downtown eastside public school as well as the downtown west side public school.

I would also want the kindergarteners to have a significant amount of time to engage in block building, although the school itself would likely influence the exact schedule. Ideally, the children would build every day for at least 45 minutes as they do in the Brooklyn independent school and the downtown west side independent school. This timeframe would allow students to fully immerse themselves in their work and engage with their peers about it. However, the downtown eastside public school shows that kindergarteners do not need to build every day for it to be an important part of their classroom. This means that even if block building every day is not possible, blocks could still be an essential part of my classroom.

I would encourage children to build and interact with each other in the block area—particularly in the way the students in the downtown west side independent school did. In that setting, I especially liked how the kindergarteners visited other buildings in the block area during their play, using each building as they would in

real life, such as visiting a grocery store to buy food. Encouraging this kind of interaction would support children in learning about topics such as interdependence in a community, as well as foster the social development that block building provides for students.

I would encourage kindergarteners to build their structures with each other in small groups, as I observed in all three schools. This would provide students with experiences in collaboration, cooperation and problem solving. It would also promote the sharing of children's ideas and their understandings of the world around them, which may differ from child to child (Cohen, 1972). I would encourage kindergarteners to work with a range of different classmates over time, giving them social experiences with everyone and the chance to exchange ideas with all of their peers. However, I would also encourage children to work independently at times if they wanted to, since working alone can give students a different kind of experience. Seeing the balanced experiences that kindergarteners at the downtown eastside public school had with group and independent block work was very appealing since it provides children with a range of experiences.

For kindergarteners, I would guide students to build realistic structures, specifying that they must be establishments that could be found in the surrounding neighborhood or city, much like Sarah at the downtown west side independent school did. This is important to me because it increases the likelihood that other children in the class would have had experiences with that building, allowing them to add and extend their own knowledge about it through work with their peers (Cohen, 1972). By having students create buildings that could be found in the

surrounding neighborhood, I could also better support their work through experiences such as neighborhood walks, where the child could see and observe the building first-hand. In this way, I would use blocks in the service of social studies, providing children with both “input” and “outgo” to support their process of understanding the world around them. Similar to what Sarah at the downtown west side independent school described, I would begin the year with children picking up their blocks the same day they built. I would gradually phase into keeping blocks up longer, having students eventually leave them up for a week. By leaving the buildings up for multiple days, students would have the opportunity to return to their structures, modifying or adding details. This longer time frame would also make it possible to incorporate trips into the students’ work, since they could visit the kind of building they were creating and then return to their own work, adding what they had observed about the real building to their block structure.

### **Developing Rules**

I think that establishing rules is an important process for children to be part of in a classroom, since it makes them think about what needs to happen for the classroom to be safe and fun for everyone. Involving students in making the rules also gives them a sense of ownership, since they are able to express their opinions and play a role in deciding what the rules are. For this reason, I think that children should be part of the rule-making process, as they were in Sarah’s classroom at the downtown west side independent school.

However, I also think that there are certain rules I would implement as issues arose, which would be non-negotiable. For example, all classroom teachers I spoke

with mentioned that children could not throw blocks in their classrooms, and two mentioned height considerations for the students' buildings. Non-negotiable rules I would implement would concern issues that I felt would support kindergarteners' block building or safety in a major way, but that the children might not think about on their own (Dreier, 1996). For example, I might indicate how far from the block shelves students need to build so that others could access the blocks they need, since young children might not realize how this would affect other builders. Similarly, the height limit of a block building might also be difficult for a child to establish a rule about. For this rule, I would say the building could be as tall as the tallest member of the group that is building the structure, as long as it is structurally solid. This means that if students were building a structure and it was wobbly, I could tell them they could not build higher unless they strengthened it. This rule creates a compromise between providing children with building opportunities and expanding their skills as builders while also maintaining safety in the block area. Jane at the downtown eastside public school and Sarah at the downtown west side independent school both discussed the importance of a strong foundation for children's building. This was particularly vital in Jane's classroom because the kindergarteners build structures of the builder's height for their "Me, Myself and Others" study. As a result, this study emphasized the importance of a strong foundation when building vertically.

Outside of these few non-negotiable rules, children would help to develop the rules organically through discussions about how interactions in the block area were going as well as reflections on what might make interactions in the block area safer

or more enjoyable. Sarah's class at the downtown west side independent school provided an example of this, since she gave children multiple opportunities for reflection, both in large and small groups. In this way, kindergarteners would help to develop and foster a collaborative, supportive environment in the block area, allowing them to play a role in the community they establish there and create a space where they feel comfortable.

### **Accessories and Additional Materials**

I was particularly interested and drawn to the open-ended materials that Sarah at the downtown west side independent school provided for block accessories. Similar to this classroom, I would like wooden figures in the shape of animals and people, which have no features painted on them. This would allow the children to determine the race and gender of the people as well as choose how to dress them. They could also create the animal of their choosing if it was not included in the set of wooden animals. They could create this using cardboard, plasticene or a variety other materials. This would give students more creative ownership of their work, allowing their play to go in the direction they want it to without needing to adapt their ideas to predetermined features on the accessories.

I would also provide kindergarteners with many of the accessories that Stanton, Weisberg and Apelman (1996) list in their section of *The Block Book*. For example, I would include pieces of fabric and carpet as well as a variety of containers, which children could use in many ways on scale with the unit blocks. Stanton, Weisberg and Apelman illustrate an example of how such materials can be

used in the children's block work, describing that a small container could be used as water containers for animals at the zoo.

In addition to these open-ended objects, I would also make sure that crayons, paper, scissors, and tape were available to children working in the block area, which Stanton, Weisberg and Apeleman (1996) suggest. These materials would allow kindergarteners to add nearly any detail imaginable to their building by drawing it on paper and taping it to the building, much like students in the downtown west side independent school did when creating movie screens at a movie theater and stained glass windows at a church. Children could also use paper, crayons and tape to add details and clothes to wooden people, to add features to wooden animals, to create signs for their buildings, and more. All three schools incorporated these kinds of materials into the children's block work.

In addition to these open-ended figures, I would also like students to design figures similar to those made in the downtown east side public school, which included a drawing of themselves on cardboard, cut out and taped onto a small rectangular pillar. Including such figures in the block area would provide children with a representation of themselves scaled to unit blocks. This would help kindergarteners make the jump to representing themselves in play via a small figure rather than acting it out with their full body as would occur in a dramatic play area of the classroom. Including figures that represent each class members would also strengthen the community within the classroom, since all students could be incorporated into the dramatic play going on in the block area.

I would encourage children to create their own objects, which they could use as accessories in their block work. Both the downtown east side public school and the downtown west side independent school provided examples of this concept in different ways. For example, at the downtown west side independent school, the kindergarteners used their woodworking in the block area. At the downtown eastside public school, Jane modeled how to make objects such as clay bowls and paper boxes. In both instances, the children could use the figures they made for a variety of things during their play because they were open-ended. The act of creating the objects also gave the kindergarteners creative ownership over their work, allowing them to make choices such as color, shape and use for the object, as well as a sense of confidence in the contributions they were making to their work. I would approach accessory creation mindfully, balancing the time children spent learning how to make new objects and the goal I felt the process of creating their own accessories added to the building process. I would also think carefully about how making accessories might enhance the students' current work, such as providing children with new motivation if they began to tire of the existing accessories they had to work with. To support this, I would model how to make accessories that were open-ended, such as the bowls and paper boxes that Jane at the downtown east side public school shows her students how to make. This would allow the kindergarteners to use the objects in a variety of ways.

### **Motivating and Guiding Children's Block Work**

Over the course of the year, I would strive to create a balance between consistency and change in the block area, encouraging the kindergarteners to

become comfortable with the routine of block building and the expectations in the block area, while also expanding their thinking and experimenting with new ideas and ways of building. Sarah at the downtown west side independent school provided an example of this, beginning the year in a familiar way for the kindergarteners, which mimicked the block work they did during their previous years at the school, then gradually transitioning into new experience, such as leaving buildings up overnight. To do this, I would provide fewer building parameters for children at the beginning of the year, such as building within outlines on the floor. Instead, I would focus on establishing a routine for building in the block area and determining rules. This would give students time to become more comfortable in the block area with each other. It would also provide me with a chance to observe children build and interact with their peers in the block area, noticing what they chose to build and what themes began to emerge from their building and play. This would help me learn about the students, informing me about their understandings, interests, and misconceptions. Then, I would use this information to determine what experiences would best support their learning and growth.

After a few weeks like this, I would use what I had learned about the students to begin modifying the block area periodically, changing the geographic elements that the kindergarteners might take into consideration while building. I thought Sarah at the downtown west side independent school did this in a particularly effective way, since she made different geographic features tangible for the children through a thin coat of paint on the floor representing a body of water such as a river



or train tracks. I would periodically adjust the parameters in the block area based on the response and needs of the students. For example, if they seemed particularly excited about the presence of water and the buildings and transportation it inspired, I might give them more than one week with that experience. Including these features in the block area would allow children to make better sense of the world and how geography affects their own neighborhood and community.

In addition to adjusting the geographical elements the students might take into consideration, I would also periodically adjust the spatial parameters for the kindergarteners' buildings each week, much like Kate at the Brooklyn independent school did with the outlines of tape on the floor of her block area. While I would not want any taped outlines on the ground at the beginning of the school year, I might include them if I wanted to encourage children to build up rather than out or if I wanted them to consider the shape of their buildings. The exact spatial parameters and length of time I would set them up for students would vary depending on the needs and interests of the particular group. Sarah at the downtown west side independent school showed an example of this, providing children a variety of opportunities to expand and strengthen their building skills.

I would encourage interactions among kindergarteners in the block area during the block building process as well as their play by facilitating group discussions and asking the children questions, as demonstrated by Sarah at the downtown west side independent school. For example, if a character in a child's dramatic play scheme was sick and another group had built a doctor's office or hospital in the block area that week, I might ask if there was somewhere the

character could go in the block neighborhood that could help. In this way, I would be supporting the children's understanding of interdependence within a community. Additionally, I would be encouraging more social interaction among the kindergarteners, since the children would be interacting with peers outside of the group they built with.

Having the entire class build at one time would be important for providing children with motivation in the block area since it would ensure that girls and boys participate equally in the block area (Cuffaro, 1995). This would also help to maintain students' interest since, if the entire community is involved in the process, children will be more motivated to take part in it. All three schools provided examples of kindergarteners collaborating and working together in the block area.

Although there are many ways I would like to keep students motivated and interested in their work in the block area, the choices I would make to support this interest would be based on my own observations of what occurs there. These observations would span a variety of elements, including children's construction styles, how they use the accessories, themes that arise in the block area through their buildings and play, and the attitude of the kindergarteners during their block work (for example, whether they are bored, excited or engaged). Through these observations, I would mindfully provide new materials, accessories and block area arrangements to support children's work and extend their building and dramatic play. I would also use these observations to determine which experiences might extend or spark a renewed interest in a topic. All three classrooms I visited showed the importance of observations of students' work in the block area, which played a

role in making decisions about materials, discussions the kindergarteners had about their block building, and block area arrangements.

### **Classroom Tone**

In addition to choices about materials and procedures in the block area, I have realized through my research that the classroom's tone also affects the block building that goes on in a classroom. One important aspect of the tone is that children feel free to discuss what is important to them, that they have opportunities to ask questions and find answers, and that discussion is a critical part of classroom life. It is important to me that the block area in my classroom is structured enough for children to feel comfortable with the activity, but that there is also enough flexibility for kindergarteners to feel supported and interested in the process. I want students to have ownership over what happens there—in terms of the procedures, building process and play. This ownership will help children truly invest in their block work, helping them glean more of the benefits that block building has to offer. Importantly, I also want the students' work in the block area to positively influence the social climate in the rest of the classroom, providing children with opportunities to develop their social skills and learn more about their community and neighborhood.

### **Conveying the Importance of Block Building to Parents**

If a significant amount of time and space is devoted to block building in my classroom, it would be necessary to convey its importance to the kindergarteners' parents since their children will spend so much time doing it. One way I would communicate the importance and benefits of block building for kindergarteners

would be during the school's curriculum night. During this presentation, I would include a section about block building, providing examples of the benefits children gain from block building as well as pictures supporting these assertions. For example, to illustrate the literacy work a child does in his block work, I might feature a picture of a kindergartener writing words on a sign he is creating for his building.

To further illustrate the benefits and importance of block building to parents, I would offer a block workshop for them at some point during the year. I would hold this in the evening, inviting parents in to build with each other and work together in the block area. At the end, I would have them talk about the buildings they created and discuss what it was like working in the block area together. I would also have the parents talk about the benefits they think block building might offer children, having just experienced the process. I would end the evening with some literature explaining the value of block building academically, socially, and emotionally. In this way, I would support the parents' experiences with the words of experts on the subject, further emphasizing what we had discussed that evening.

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## Appendix A

Harriet Cuffaro Interview Transcription: October 29, 2013

**Abbey:** What should my role as a teacher be? How can I better inspire or motivate them in the block area?

**Harriet:** Those are fundamental questions. And, this is not a correction, but I think in order to think freely about your question, let's avoid "role," the "role" of the teacher, because "role" means you have a script—either your own or somebody's given it to you. So, what is the work of the teacher? What is the function? The job? Because I think some of my feeling about that word, the second one I just said, is that it came up when we were exploring sexism in language. Because in a way, women were asked to play roles. You know, the domestic, caring, lovely...

Also, if you wanted to talk to the children, if you said to them, "I'm trying to think about my role" they would think, "Are you talking about yourself being a piece of bread?" So, as simple as possible.

**A:** Then I guess that my question is, what do you see as being the job or function of the teacher in blocks in the classroom?

**H:** I think that grows out of your philosophy and what it is that you value. It would be different for each person. But I think there are certain fundamentals that I think we should—and I say "should," which means that it has to happen, regardless of who you are—be considered. For example, "Do I know this child?" or "Is it what



Piaget said about four-year-olds?” Because Piaget didn’t meet everybody. And even though I admire Vygotsky a lot more, he didn’t meet everybody either, and the ones he met were thousands and thousands of miles away from here. So I have to consider the uniqueness and individuality of each child and the child’s culture, because that will definitely make a difference.

And I say this, Abbey, especially because I’m bilingual and bicultural. My first language was Greek. I didn’t learn English until I went to kindergarten. Being American is sort of an abstraction, because in terms of one’s home, one’s parents, one’s family, you were Greek. And also as first generation immigrant—I was born in New York—but first generation in my family, we were all part of an immigrant experience. There are other people with that experience and you would meet people from another country and they also had that.

I think that sometimes we have to be very careful to situate, historically and in terms of time, what are we talking about. Because when I went to school, you know they didn’t do testing? I don’t remember any kind of testing. There was testing, but obviously it wasn’t significant. A very vivid memory of being five years old in kindergarten was sitting in a circle in the chairs, the whole group—there must have been about at least 20 or more of us. It was large, and over there was the teacher, playing the piano. And I think it’s significant that I remember that because, since I didn’t know the language, what I found was that communication was music. And even though it was different from the music I heard at home, it still was a means of communication.

In America, we pay very little attention to culture, to our detriment, and wars. So, those are the kinds of things I think you have to think about. But then there's the basic question that teachers must always have, and that is: "What is worth knowing? What do I want children to know?" So that that will influence what the curriculum will be, especially social studies, which is a major interest of mine. Because children don't call it social studies. They don't know about all these compartments that we make. But they're curious about the world, about themselves, all those kinds of things, and that's the social.

And of course, I think in everything I say, you'll always find the word "social," "community," together," "cooperation," "helping." And I think blocks are a particular material that promotes that. In fact, I don't know if you've come across this, but Caroline Pratt, who designed the unit blocks, she also designed the outdoor blocks, that are used at City and Country. The large square and the double rectangle. Many manufacturers, including Community Playthings, have made them open-ended. Caroline Pratt made sure to keep all sides closed because that made them heavier, which meant cooperation. So the way she constructed the material, she also had an additional thought. Not just how to use those blocks outdoors, but how can we promote communication and cooperation?

I am very much influenced, as I'm sure you know, by my years as a teacher at City and Country. Although I never taught there when Caroline Pratt was there, she died the year I joined the faculty, she had retired, but the philosophy is lived there, it's not just talked about. In fact, that's one the things that's done every August. There are readings, which are chosen for everybody to read, and then evaluated and

what is reviewed is the school's philosophy. So it doesn't just sit there; it's looked at each year. How are we living our concept of community? In the twos? In the fives? In the thirteens? What does it look like? If you walked into that classroom, would you see democracy? Would you see community? It's that.

**A:** What age did you teach there?

**H:** I taught four-year-olds and five-year-olds. There's a job program at City and Country, and with time, I began to also, as the fours teacher, work with the twelve-year-olds, who came to work with the fours. I had the incredible experience of finally, one year, working with the group of twelves that I had taught as fours, and it was unbelievable. But then, with my interest in social studies and history, I also worked with other groups. I happen to be very interested in the Middle Ages, so I worked a lot with ten-year-olds bringing in materials I had collected, raising questions and things like that. So, at City and Country, there is a lot of communication between and among and so on; it isn't just the fours teacher talks with the fives, or the threes and so on it's, what's happening in school?

**A:** How do you motivate and stimulate children's block play? How do you encourage them to want to build there and feel like they're motivated from within?

**H:** I think part of the answer to that is: what position have you given to blocks in your curriculum? When I taught the course in Early Childhood Curriculum [at Bank

Street College of Education], in the very first session, a question which was asked, and we then dealt with it later, was: what percentage of your classroom is devoted to block building? Nowadays, I doubt if you would get maybe an eighth of the room. At that time, I could get any kind of an answer from a third to a half, and so on and so forth.

So, the amount of time and space devoted to block building is part of your answer. Because if there's only an eighth of the room, just as I walk in as a child, they're not important. But if I see a table with lots of pens and pencils and papers and workbooks, I figured well, that's what goes on here. So, I think any room, just like any apartment, tells you something about the person who lives there, or the person who teaches there, because they've said this is how we'll use time, this is what the schedule is. Is the schedule going to mean that every half hour we have a transition or, as in the open classroom, you could just do what you were interested in for maybe the whole morning? One thing which came up as an issue around that was in progressive classrooms, or those that call themselves that, Juice Time was an important community time. But if Juice Time was not scheduled, and you can go and have juice whenever you wanted and just clear up after yourself, teachers who were doing the open classroom from England suddenly realized that they had lost the community time, so they put it back in.

So, what we do with time has a lot of consequences. And it's not just the transitions; it's how much time are they going to have for their questions to surface, for their curiosity. That's one way as a teacher I'm promoting their curiosity, because I'm giving them a range of materials that have possibilities that don't tell

them exactly what to do. And I'm also saying you have time. And I'm not interrupting you. That's an unspoken message to children. But at the same time, it doesn't mean that I go out to lunch. I'm there as an observer. And if I see something that I think is either problematic, curious, interesting that a child is doing, I may go over and stand nearby. I may go a little further and say something seemingly inconsequential, like, "Gee, I see you're very busy", or, "You know, I was watching and boy it's interesting what you're doing." Things like that. But you're just saying, "I care" without stating that "What are you doing right now? wish I knew!" And some children will respond.

But I'm not going over there to say, "What are you making?" which is a typical adult question, or "What is it?" Because everything has to be "it." Whereas by doing that, you're disempowering the experimentation. Because the child doesn't know sometimes what he or she is doing, they're creating. That's why, sometimes, in the fours, I would remain breathless because as fours can do at that age, they build a beautiful structure and look at it and then walk away, because it was just the making of it. And quite often it wasn't something. And I think you, in a way, soil it by wanting it to be something instead of a moment of beauty, which is what the child has done.

**A:** Is there anything specific about that age range of fours, fives, sixes about how they interact in the block area? For example, something I've been thinking about is, how fives and sixes are still pretty egocentric, but they're becoming less so and more

social. How do you think that that manifests itself in terms of either interactions in the block area or around blocks?

**H:** I think it's promoted, Abbey, by having discussion. By what you're doing in the block area and the transition from five to six, and it begins at five, in gentle ways is, "So what are we going to do? It's Monday, it's blank here, so what are we making?" From my own experience, because I taught sixes one year, but also toward the end of the year with five-year-olds, I sometimes would say, "We've had a lot of buildings, that had..." and I'd mention some of them. Then I'd say, "I wonder what it would be like if we had a river going in the middle?" And somebody might say, "So what?" And I'd say, "Well, if the police station is here, and you live over here, how do the police get to your house?" And right away, someone says, "Oh we'll build a bridge." It's those kinds of things. Or the time, which I've written about and it was really very funny, when I said to one group, "Suppose all the floor is an ocean." And so Suzanne says, "So what do we do? Swim all day?" So, how that develops and what comes of that and the experience.

I'm not suggesting that one does those things, rather, what kind of question can create an opportunity for thinking about the setting. Because, as much influence and importance as I give to the social, it is because as individual, as unique as we are, we are always in context, we are always related, whether we acknowledge it or not. And that is a connection I want to work a lot on. Because unless we maintain that and strengthen it, we will never have community. We will never have, what Dewey called in terms of democracy, "Shared common purpose," so that if there's a

problem in the block area, it's not my problem only—it's our problem. And in discussion, what can we discuss? What can we suggest? How can we try? It's always, "We." So it isn't that I've lost myself in making "we" so prominent, it's that that's what it means to be a social individual—the "I" and the "We" are interconnected.

And our present society, starting from our government, going down to just the street, we don't have that anymore. And I say that with more than sadness because I grew up in New York City when there was community, when, I still remember, the grocer across the street from our tenement. If you, by any chance happened to be seen by him talking to a stranger, you can be sure your mother found out about it right away. That kind of caring. I'm not living in the past. It's just simply, I don't want us to lose what democracy is really about so that we just talk about democracy [instead of living one]. I think with children, we have to make sure we encourage the attitudes and behaviors that promote what we're talking about. It's not everybody's goal, but that's what I feel with my goals.

And I think one of the things that's happened in early childhood is that, and this was true in part with Bank Street's history, the importance given to child development, to such an extent that sometimes, child development became the philosophy. And it's not. It's part of your perspective. Your philosophy is what you value, what you want to create, what you love—it's those things. And one can always assume that I'll pay attention to child development. And not just everybody's theory. For example, there were certain periods of teaching the curriculum course that it would be, "This is now going to be the time of such and

such behavior because that was what Piaget was talking about right then.” This is going to be “blank,” and then I would find myself writing on the student’s paper, “Are all the five-year-olds in your classroom like that? Is there anybody different?”

**A:** You have researched and done so much with blocks. I was wondering, I what draws you to the material? What drew you to keep exploring and thinking about blocks?

**H:** Well, for one thing, I had a placement at City and Country, so I had the experience of seeing what this material offered. I think if I had been placed somewhere else, it may have been no blocks. But there I was, placed in the birthplace! I can tell you that for sure for myself. But at the same time, I can tell you the experience I’ve had with Iceland bears similarity. Quite a few years ago—more than a decade ago—a member of the college faculty in Reykjavik, Iceland came to explore masters programs in New York. She came to Bank Street as one of the places. And, as it turned out, I was one of the faculty members who interviewed her. She found that what we asked of her at Bank Street matched what she wanted, because as she said to me years later, “What you all kept saying to me is, ‘What do you want to learn?’ Whereas at other places, I was told what I was going to learn.”

I became her advisor and I remember one time, we were on a bus going to visit a classroom and I said to her, “Jonina, what do the children in Iceland do with blocks?” and she said to me, “We don’t have blocks.” Of course, with my ethnocentric perspective I said, “You don’t have blocks?” When she left in June after



her year of study, she said to me at the bus stop, "I'm going home and I will get blocks to Iceland and you will come and teach a course." I said, "Sure." A year later, I was in Reykjavik, where I taught a course to teachers from five play schools and some of the faculty from the university. Jonina had been able to get some Icelandic ship owners to take sets of blocks from New York to Iceland at no charge.

Once the blocks were there, after I did the course, Jonina decided that they would divide the blocks and give them to two schools. The early childhood schools in Iceland are called "Play Schools," and the two schools got the blocks and then began a research study. I asked the teachers at both schools to please write journals about what they were thinking, what surprised them, what was going on. And at the same time, to also write logs of what the children were doing. They would send them to me by email, I would ask questions, I would respond, and then the teachers from both schools would meet with Jonina and members of the early childhood administration about every month or six weeks and they continued the conversation. And this went on for a good year.

And then I got a grant from the Spencer Foundation and went back to Iceland to interview the teachers and to see what was happening. And that was one of the most incredible experiences ever, because I was able not only to see the similarities. But also, the cultural differences and the differences in the aesthetic were tremendous. And Jonina arranged for me to meet with some artists and architects and we talked about children's building and I also showed them some slides of American children's buildings. And I have some pictures to show you.

Play schools go up to six, but you also can have infants in the same school. And one of the things you find in Iceland is, if a building falls over, and they do a lot of using blocks vertically rather than horizontally, so if they fall over what you'll get is, "Oh, there was an earthquake!" So, they use the nature that they know, even if they happen to have helped cause the "earthquake." And of course, things that we're not familiar with, such as starting in September into October, in the afternoon it would be almost dark. And at 8 o'clock in the morning when I would go visit some of the schools in October, it was pitch dark. But children were outdoors, because it was their outdoor time. So, they do a lot of artwork and a lot of sewing, embroidery. It could be raining, but that doesn't mean they're not going out. Because if you go by the weather, you may never go out. Although Reykjavik, in comparison to other parts of Iceland, has seemingly mild weather, but you never know what a day's going to be like. And the winds were ferocious sometimes.

**A:** I'm so interested in the cultural context of education. I taught in Egypt for two years in Cairo and I think, not only are you learning so much about their culture but you're also learning so much about your own.

**H:** I think, that's very important in terms of what you're doing, to include that. And, I respond to your saying Egypt because, although my background is Greek, my family were of the Greek people who lived in Asia Minor. Who, during the early 1920s and so on, with the wars, they had to leave as refugees, and they went to Alexandria because there was a large Greek community there. My mother and father had met in

Alexandria and were married there, and came here. And when I was six, my mother decided she wanted me to meet my aunts, uncles and grandparents. So, we went by boat. And at six, I was in Alexandria, so what you're speaking to, not only the location, because I can still hear sounds, smell the pita being cooked, the spices, the herbs. But also, what it was like to live in a family, a neighborhood, a life experience where there was such variety of people. And, when you said "neighbor," it meant everybody. It was inclusive. It wasn't a study in multiculturalism.

And with some of the students I had at Bank Street, some came from other cultures. Some who returned to India, to some parts of China, and then I would receive photographs of what they were doing. To some extent, what Caroline Pratt started with her love of wood and what she designed and created is just so incredible. I wish she could see it now.

And then, Patty Smith Hill [who created a different kind of building block] from Teacher's College, they had a correspondence, which had to do with the different things they created. And in one correspondence, Patty Smith Hill is saying, "Caroline, can you imagine what it would be like if we had ever patented our blocks?" There was no response, but I can tell you—schools would have been billionaires! But knowing our financial world, somebody would have figured out how to take the patent away.

**A:** I read your article about the role of sexism in curriculum and one of the sections talks about block building. What is your opinion of that these days? Do you think the dynamic of the block area as being considered the "boy's area" is still true?

**H:** Abbey, I think it depends on what school you go to and what values the children are reflecting from their homes. I think girls have become a lot more present, a lot more physical, seen as capable. But, one interesting little thing: at one point at City and Country, when I was researching blocks, I went into the archives. And I was looking at some logs the teachers had written about some activity with the blocks, and Caroline Pratt, on the side, in the margin says, “What an interesting idea. We should do more to promote this with girls.” So, it’s again, what is the society? What is the context at the time that we’re working, and what questions should we be asking ourselves? I mean, right now, I find myself so much more concerned about physical violence, about younger and younger people killing. It’s mostly male, but lately there have been girls.

**A:** Is there anything else that you think I should be looking at or questions that I should be asking that I’m not?

**H:** I think that you have raised some questions that too many people never even look at—and that’s culture, for one thing. You are also going back to—because it would seem that you’re not satisfied—you want to know: what is the teacher’s role, what is the teacher’s function? Because, in all your experience, you’re wondering what are they doing? Everybody is doing something else and it’s all called teaching. And I have more questions than I had before, so, what’s going on? And I think, to me, that’s not confusion, Abbey. That means you’re learning. Because, if you’re

filled with questions, a lot of boxes have been opened. And you want to know what's inside, so having conversations. I know one of the things I tried to encourage very much in the placements my advisees had, I wasn't a visitor to the classroom; I was the advisor from Bank Street. But, I felt it was very important to create a relationship with the teacher. Not to test what were her aims, but to try to figure out, is the way I'm understanding what I see what she or he is really trying to do? So, to me it meant paying attention all the time.

And I'll tell you just a very quick anecdote, which has to do with culture also. As my hair turned grayer and grayer, when I would walk into a school new, I always got the same greeting from children—especially the younger ones. They'd say, "Whose grandmother are you?" And I thought, "Look at how young they are and I'm already in a box. Not a person; I'm somebody's grandmother." And then, I became the member of a research project at Bank Street in which we were doing an examination and research in early childhood programs on Indian reservations. I walked into a daycare center in New Mexico and a five-year-old boy came up to me, looked at me, and I thought, "It's going to happen again." He looked and said to me, "Why is your hair old?" It was such an incredible moment of feeling really known, really seen. He was finding a discrepancy and he wanted to understand. He didn't box me; he saw me. Without even realizing it, I took his hand, because we had to connect as people—not I'm a grownup, he's a child, or whatever categories—and I said, "That's the way it's been in my family. People very early had grey hair—my mother, my father. And I said, I don't have any brothers and sisters, so I can just tell you." And he said, "Oh" and that was that and he went on.

Abbey, I learned so much from that experience and I thought, this is what it's all about, how we can continue learning from children. And I say that not because Caroline Pratt said it, but because that's why we have to pay such attention—because they're there to teach us. And when we're lucky, it's reciprocal. And we help each other. So, I don't know if that answers in any way your question. But to me, teaching is something you experience. It's felt. Yes, of course we think about it and we must think about it, but we must include how we feel and what it was like to be learning. Because to be a learner is a very vulnerable position. It's like, "I'm saying I don't know?"

**A:** I was reading your article in *The Block Book* and something I was wondering is: we try to integrate everything into the curriculum, so we're building related to the curriculum in the block area. But then I wonder, how rich is the play if it's staged—if we're dictating what they're building and the context in which they will be playing?

**H:** Why is anybody doing that? So, you have the group and it's Monday. And I might say, "Okay, what are you thinking of building? Think about that for a few minutes." Do I have a rule that everybody builds their own building? Or that you have to have a partner? I mean, those are decisions you make. So, I would remind them of whatever it is. And then I would say, "Abbey what are you going to build today? Harriet, what are you building today?" As we go around, if someone chooses a toy store and someone chooses a pet store, I'd say, "Oh, you know, I just thought of

something. In your toy store, will you be having some toys for pets?" "No!" "Okay I just wanted to know." It's showing that there are connections.

Or, if I'm talking about sixes and we've been studying the neighborhood, I might start off, "We took a few trips last week. We went to the restaurant, we went to the super market. Did we go anywhere else? Okay, so on Friday, we picked up. So, we're starting a whole new neighborhood. Could we all think for a minute: what do people need in a neighborhood?" And I would pause; I wouldn't say another word for a few minutes. And I would encourage questioning. So, somebody would say, "Wait, I don't think that's fair. That's two movie theaters. I said I would do one and now she said she wants to do one." And I would say, "Okay, can we talk about that? Do people need movie theaters? Do they need two?" And some child might say, because of what we've been doing, "Why don't we go out and see how many there are?" "That's a good idea, okay!" "Can you think of something else you'll do just in case?" But, each time it's an experiencing of a shared common purpose and communication. I don't remember ever, in my own teaching, not that that's a marvel, but anybody else whose work I admired, telling the child what they were going to build. Because then, I wouldn't be surprised if the kid said, "Why don't you go ahead and build it?"

I'm still the teacher. The fact that we communicate and share doesn't mean that I have no responsibility, because let me tell you. If there were a fire, I'm responsible for your life. If you're doing something to endanger yourself or somebody else, I don't ask you about it—I stop it. If we're going on a trip, you can't

decide you're going to run across the street. That's why we talk about the rules, before we go out.



## Appendix B

### Permissions

The following letters of consent were signed by the interviewees for this thesis. The first letter of consent was signed by three teachers, who agreed that content and quotations from their interviews could be used in this thesis, but that their names and schools would be disguised. The second letter of consent was signed by Harriet Cuffaro, who agreed that quotations and a transcription of her interview could be included in this thesis, as well as consent to use her name.

Abbey Butcosk  
 201 West 105<sup>th</sup> Street, Apt. 45, New York, NY 10025  
 646-660-4258  
 abbey.butcosk@gmail.com

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

As you know, I am studying Early Childhood and Childhood General Education at Bank Street College. I am in the process of completing my Master's Degree and am doing an Independent Study, a requirement for my degree and a culmination of my studies. For my project, I have chosen to examine the teacher's role in the block building process in kindergarten classrooms. For this study, I will interview three classroom teachers who feel that block building is an important part of their classroom, and who make deliberate use of unit blocks through their block program. In doing this, I hope to learn about what the teachers find important about block building and about the choices they have made in implementing the block program in their classroom. I will also observe the students in each of these classrooms during their block building time, noting the children's interactions with their peers and the materials in the block area, as well as the teacher's interactions with the students during this time. I would like to obtain your permission to use and quote from the content of our interview in my Master's thesis. Your identity and the identity of your school and children will be disguised. The study will be kept in the Bank Street College Library and will be available to be borrowed within and outside the Bank Street community.

Please sign and return this form to confirm your consent.

Sincerely,

Abbey Butcosk

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I, \_\_\_\_\_, grant Abbey Butcosk permission to use and quote from the content of our interview on \_\_\_\_\_ for her Master's thesis at Bank Street College. I understand that my identity and the identity of my school and children will be disguised.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Dated \_\_\_\_\_

Abbey Butcosk  
201 West 105<sup>th</sup> Street, Apt. 45, New York, NY 10025  
646-660-4258  
abbey.butcosk@gmail.com

Dear Harriet,

As you know, I am studying Early Childhood and Childhood General Education at Bank Street College. I am in the process of completing my Master's Degree and am doing an Independent Study, a requirement for my degree and a culmination of my studies. For my project, I have chosen to examine the teacher's role in the block building process in kindergarten classrooms. For this study, I will interview an expert in early childhood block building to learn about her views on the teacher's involvement in block building. I will also interview three classroom teachers who feel that block building is an important part of their classroom, and who make deliberate use of unit blocks through their block program. In doing this, I will learn about what these teachers find important about block building and about the choices they have made in implementing the block program in their classroom. I will also observe the students in each of these classrooms during their block building time, noting the children's interactions with their peers and the materials in the block area, as well as the teacher's interactions with the students during this time. I would like to obtain your permission to use your name and to quote from and include a transcription of our interview in my Master's thesis. The study will be kept in the Bank Street College Library and will be available to be borrowed within and outside the Bank Street community.

Please sign and return this form to confirm your consent.

Sincerely,

Abbey Butcosk

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I, Harriet Cuffaro, grant Abbey Butcosk permission to include my name, quotations from and a transcription of our interview on 10/29/13 for her Master's thesis at Bank Street College.

Signed Harriet K. Cuffaro

Dated February 7, 2014