Mentoring novice and experienced teachers on block play using the developmental-interaction approach in the Philippines

Kathrina Gancayco-Umali

Bank Street College of Education

Follow this and additional works at: http://educate.bankstreet.edu/independent-studies

Part of the Early Childhood Education Commons, Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education Commons, and the Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons

Recommended Citation


This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Educate. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Independent Studies by an authorized administrator of Educate. For more information, please contact kfreda@bankstreet.edu.
Mentoring Novice and Experienced Teachers on Block Play using the Developmental-Interaction Approach in the Philippines

By

Kathrina Gancayco-Umali

Mentor:
Wendy Pollock

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Science in Education
Bank Street College of Education
2012
Abstract

The Philippines, my home country, with a predominantly traditional educational culture, is one of the countries where the Bank Street developmental-interaction approach has taken hold through the efforts of homegrown teachers who have adapted it after completing their graduate studies at the college. This study sought to trace, through a mentoring program, the journey of traditional early childhood Filipino teachers in implementing the developmental-interaction approach in the block corner. Five novice and experienced teachers embarked on a professional development series of four mentoring sessions. They were given articles on unit blocks to read and asked to observe their students working in the block area. They were to share their thoughts about the readings and observations in group sessions and additionally to reflect on their understanding through journal writing. As a result of this process, teachers have demonstrated confidence and involvement in implementing the use of unit blocks through the developmental-interaction approach. The administration has agreed to adapt this as a model design for the early childhood program.
## Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Heading</th>
<th>Page Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rationale</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review of the Literature</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results and Discussion</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concluding Reflections</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Rationale

I first came across the progressive philosophy in education and the developmental-interaction approach when I was pursuing my graduate degree in psychology at Ateneo de Manila University 11 years ago. Prior to that, I was schooled in the traditional way from my elementary to college years. I attended an all-girls private school founded by nuns, as was mostly the case of all private schools in the Philippines. The normal teacher to student ratio in this kind of school was one teacher to 30-40 students in a class. I was used to sitting down in a chair for long periods of time listening to a teacher standing in front of a blackboard teaching us on one subject matter only such as math, science or social studies. I struggled with paper and pencil tests that were timed and understanding topics that were taught to us in a way that was far removed from real life such as chemistry formulas and geometry theorems which I ended up memorizing instead of gaining any comprehension.

Back then that was how I thought everybody should learn. There were some classmates of mine who were excelling in this method while there were those like me who were thriving in some subjects while struggling in others. Those who were completely overwhelmed sooner or later prematurely left school. My attitude towards school was that it was a chore and that I could not wait for the day when I would graduate and eventually work.

Such was my relief then upon knowing about another way of learning offered by the progressive philosophy particularly the developmental-interaction approach. I found myself identifying with its guiding principles when it came to educating very young
children, which sadly, I did not experience in my childhood days. I decided to pursue a graduate degree in psychology to equip me with the necessary background I would need to competently teach preschoolers. This was a big career switch for me coming from an undergraduate degree that had nothing to do with education. I decided that what I really wanted to do was to be with children for the rest of my life. Little did I know that this decision would change my personal beliefs about education and that I am and forever will be a learner myself.

For a decade now, I have been working in an institution inspired and guided by the developmental-interaction approach. I realized that knowing about and implementing the said approach, as a classroom teacher was not an end in itself. Though I was comfortable applying it for almost a decade of teaching young children, I found myself wondering up to now whether we are capable of adopting an approach that originated from another nation whose culture is different from our country. This predicament concerned me more when I began mentoring my assistant teachers and more so when I became a curriculum coordinator, interacting with teachers who had varying levels of experience implementing the developmental-interaction approach. My current studies in Bank Street College of Education has deepened my understanding of the principles undergirding this approach which has led me to compare what we have and do in our school with what I have been researching and learning about at this time.

One question brewing in my head is that while our classrooms may be equipped with the necessary open-ended materials and arranged to have various learning centers, I find myself wondering whether our teachers are providing the support and scaffolding children need to make meaning of their world in a way that is developmentally
appropriate. An example would be the block area which is an essential part of a classroom practicing the developmental-interaction approach. As a classroom teacher myself, I admit not spending enough time with my students who are exploring in the block area. During my early years of teaching, I was not so sure how to support their efforts, when to get involved and the kind of intervention that was appropriate. My appreciation of the blocks as a versatile learning tool has increased as I gained classroom experience but I still desire to be more competent in scaffolding each child’s journey of discovery with this material through personal research and continuous exploration with my students.

Sharing the same educational philosophy with that of the developmental-interaction approach has made me want to not only be adept in implementing it as a classroom teacher but also competent in assisting others in doing so now as a leader. The approach first reached our shores more than 30 years ago but it was only in the past two decades that it has gained popularity and enlightened Filipino parents as an alternative method of education. In this independent study, I will trace the beginnings of the approach and how this has melded into our Filipino culture. This historical account shall provide the background needed to assess where my school stands now in terms of genuinely adopting the approach. Furthermore, my independent study will focus on mentoring novice and experienced teachers on how to adequately support the discoveries of their students with the blocks. Aside from being a salient material of the developmental-interaction approach, I myself would like to get to know more about the blocks as a learning tool hence my choice of it as a focal point of this study.
Review of the Literature

History of the Developmental-Interaction Approach

The developmental-interaction approach also known as the Bank Street method attributes to the early years of the 20th century its beginnings (Shapiro & Nager, 2000). Referred to as the Progressive Era, women at this time were questioning their then socially acceptable roles and the prevailing beliefs about the proper education of the young child (Cuffaro, Nager & Shapiro, 2005). Among the pioneers was Lucy Sprague Mitchell who sought changes in the then landscape of education through her dynamic perception of a child and the influence of his environment on his growth (Shapiro & Nager, 2000). Mitchell was greatly inspired by John Dewey who was one of the leading thinkers at that time and a friend of hers (Grinberg, 2002). A fundamental tenet of the developmental-interaction approach which reflected Dewey’s work was the relation of education to the child’s real environment and experiences (Cuffaro et al, 2005; Grinberg, 2002). Dewey was also a strong proponent of exemplifying social justice and democracy through education, which was evident in the method of teaching that the approach advocated (Cuffaro et al, 2005; Grinberg 2002).

In 1916, Mitchell established the Bureau of Educational Experiments as a result of her determination in seeking alternative methods of understanding and nurturing young children (Cuffaro et al, 2005). The Bureau was first and foremost a research institution that focused its efforts in observing children in schools that were not following the conventional approaches at that time. Its staff was composed of professionals who worked together in an atmosphere of cooperation (Shapiro & Nager, 2000). The Nursery
School was opened in 1918 under the initial tutelage of Harriet Johnson catering to children ages 15 months up to three years old (Cuffaro et al, 2005; Shapiro & Nager, 2000). Through Johnson, Mitchell met Caroline Pratt, who soon after established the City and Country School also in New York City which was known as one of the few progressive schools at that time (Shapiro & Nager, 2000). During this period, the Bureau persisted in its research thrust and from these efforts Mitchell’s advocacy for a learning approach that focused more on the child became further grounded. As a result, there was a need to establish an educative curriculum for teachers that would enhance their skills in adapting this emerging and alternative approach (“Bank Street: A Brief History,” n.d.).

In 1930, the move to 69 Bank Street was as significant as the milestones that were to happen next. The new building could now accommodate both the growing Nursery School and the Cooperative School which was a collaboration between the Bureau and several progressive schools at that time (“Bank Street: A Brief History,” n.d.). The institution was determined to imbue in its teachers learning through keen exploration that is akin to the manner with which children discover about the world as well (Cuffaro et al, 2005).

Barbara Biber’s research on children’s drawings has had profound impact on the changing direction the Bureau was to undertake (Shapiro & Nager, 2000). Biber emphasized the significance of qualitative rather than quantitative evaluation that was more in tune with the method of data collection the researchers were using at that time in observing children in their classrooms. Biber also focused on the maturation of children as a strong foundation of her work and stressed the importance of the school as an influential setting (Cuffaro et al, 2005). She laid both the groundwork and the
applications of the approach. Later, other developmental theorists were also influential in shaping it such as Jean Piaget, Heinz Werner and Lev Vygotsky who in their own work acknowledged the value of the child’s efforts and the milieu in which learning took place (Cuffaro et al, 2005; Shapiro & Nager, 2000).

It was after this era that the developmental-interaction approach and its guiding principles became more distinct. Shapiro and Biber (1972) defined developmental as the maturation that occurs with age as a result of a child’s efforts in resolving conflict and his eventual assimilation of newly acquired learning. Interaction highlights the significance the approach places on the context within which a child learns, taking into consideration as well his socio-emotional progress (Shapiro & Biber, 1972).

When the Bureau assumed its current name of Bank Street College of Education in 1950, it was permitted to bestow upon its enrollees a Master of Science degree in Education by the state’s Board of Regents (“Bank Street: A Brief History,” n.d.). Since then, Bank Street College has focused its efforts in responding to the needs of a diverse group of children. Through the years, it has developed and implemented programs that reach out to the underserved populations of society (“Bank Street: A Brief History,” n.d.). Coupled with the move to its present facility on West 112th Street in 1970, the College offered an increasing number of degree programs to teachers and caregivers. Grants and research projects that adequately responded to the challenges that education brought forth with the changing times were keenly sought during this period of expansion (“Bank Street: A Brief History,” n.d.).
As a leading school for educators, teachers from other parts of the globe who share the same philosophy as the developmental-interaction approach have pursued graduate degrees in Bank Street College of Education in the hopes of assimilating the same method in their own countries. The Philippines is one country where the developmental-interaction approach has taken hold through the efforts of homegrown teachers and has continued up to the present to offer an alternative method of educating the Filipino child. Following is an account of how early childhood education began in the Philippines and the circumstances that led to the establishment of schools implementing the developmental-interaction approach.

**History of Early Childhood Education in the Philippines**

Prior to the coming of the first colonizers in 1521 (Carson, 1978) the indigenous people of the Philippines already had a crude form of education. A local alphabet was in use, which was a mode of communication evident through writing frequently on banana leaves (Javier, 2005). Under the auspices of their own parents and in their humble abodes, most children were casually taught literacy and math skills, and domestic chores while those of aristocratic breed had specialized teachers instructing them on the art of weaponry (Bazaco, 1953; Javier, 2005). A more formal system of education developed when the Spaniards came who sought to mold the natives in the doctrine of the Catholic Church (Bazaco, 1953). The first colonizers introduced the Roman alphabet and opened schools through the auspices of various religious orders such as the Augustinians, Franciscans, Dominicans, Jesuits and Recollects from the middle of the 1500s to the early 1600s (Bazaco, 1953; Javier, 2005).
The public schools currently in existence traces its roots back to the parochial schools established by the various Spanish orders (Bazaco, 1953). It was not until the 1800’s that a standard elementary system of education was developed through Royal Decree 1863 which also paved the way for the creation of schools to prepare teachers for the young (Carson, 1978). Most schools were concentrated in the capital of Manila and those who were able to attend were predominantly from the privileged class who had to pay tuition fees to at least cover teachers’ salaries (Bazaco, 1953; Javier, 2005). Estolas and Nunez (1974) described preschools during the Spanish era as conducted at home which usually lasted for a short time taking the form of individual instruction wherein three to six year olds learned the rudiments of literacy and math. Those of the privileged breed were also exposed to the “Cartilla,” which was a leading educational material at that time instructing them on the alphabet and basic prayers (Estolas & Nunez, 1974).

In 1901, following the arrival of the Americans after the revolution against the Spaniards, the public school system was further enhanced through the adoption of the philosophy and methods of the new colonizers (Carson, 1978). English was made a medium of instruction with teachers coming from the United States as principal instructors (Carson, 1978). Eventually, Filipinos became teachers as well after being trained on American soil (Javier, 2005). A highlight of this era was the establishment of the Bureau of Public Schools, tasked to ensure the delivery of education for the country’s young while also focused on training educators and responding to the needs of the gifted, disabled and drop-outs (Carson, 1978). The founding of the State University in 1908 indicated the country’s readiness to provide the standard range of educational system up to the tertiary level (Javier, 2005).
The American era saw the growth of private educational institutions alongside the more established religious schools mainly in Manila (Javier, 2005). With this development came the impetus for preschool education. Harris Memorial School Manila led by Ms. Mary A. Evans was considered the forerunner of early childhood education in the country (Estolas & Nunez, 1974). In 1924, the first kindergarten class was created under the auspices of Mrs. Brigida G. Fernando who studied in Columbia University’s Teachers College (Estolas & Nunez, 1974). Later on, the National Federation of Women’s Clubs (NFWC) initiated what was to become the precursor of nursery classes catering to very young children of busy parents (Estolas & Nunez, 1974). Other civic organizations followed suit such as the Catholic Women’s League who sought to reach out to the less privileged preschoolers of the nation (Pangan, 1976). The unstoppable growth of preschools merited its formal inclusion in the private school system that was to be temporarily halted during World War II (Estolas & Nunez, 1974).

After the war, preschools resumed their operation with schools gradually re-opening their doors to both children and teachers, eventually flourishing in number (Estolas & Nunez, 1974). Under the direction of Dr. Miguela M. Solis who was the Superintendent of Teacher Education in the Bureau of Public Schools, preschool education began to be a part of the public school system as well (Estolas & Nunez, 1974). Moreover, “play centers” (Estolas & Nunez, 1974, p. 12) were established in 1956 by the Manila Health Department through the initiative of Dr. Demetrio Belmonte who was the Assistant City Health Officer at that time. Dr. Belmonte and his team brought to the play centers the knowledge they acquired from their observations of similar schools abroad (Estolas & Nunez, 1974). From 1964 onwards, the number of preschools also referred to
as day care centers have steadily increased both in the nation’s capital and provinces (Department of Social Services and Development, 1992). A joint undertaking between the Social Welfare and Administration and UNICEF, the day care centers were established to provide early childhood education to the marginalized youngsters of society (DSSD, 1992).

The 1970s was a time of recognition of the importance and popularity of preschools. The preschool level was added to the elementary public school system (Carson, 1978; Estolas & Nunez, 1974; Pangan, 1976). In response to improving and advocating for the betterment of the nation’s day care centers, the First Country Program for Children (CPC) was initiated in 1978 (DSSD, 1992). Furthermore, conferences and training seminars were conducted for both teachers and parents by civic organizations while associations were established to bring together people in the field (Estolas & Nunez, 1974).

Preschools run by different religious, private and civic organizations proliferated in the 1970s. However in time, pressing problems surfaced. First among these was the shortage in teachers and classrooms hence the large class sizes (Javier, 2005). Secondly, the use of both English and Filipino as modes of instruction handicapped the child in securely acquiring a host of concepts (Carson, 1978). Lastly, the implementation of a didactic method of teaching and curriculum that was behind the times and removed from real life was becoming outdated (Gregorio & Gregorio, 1979; Pangan, 1976). These problems arose as a result of an educational system whose main purpose was to instruct as many children as possible without considering its available resources such as infrastructure and qualified teachers. Teaching was not child-centered but focused more
on moving a class as a whole to the next level. The progressive philosophy in education began its entry into the Philippines during the 1970’s when it was already taking a strong hold in the United States. One particular approach that the Filipinos easily adapted to was the developmental-interaction or Bank Street method whose beginnings in the Philippines were as follows.

**The Developmental-Interaction Approach in the Philippines**

The current educational system of the Philippines has been the product of both Spanish and American influences. Since it was the Americans who established the public school system, English was adopted as the main medium of instruction even up to now. Democracy was a battle cry of both the United States and the Philippines during the American colonial period. Dewey, a prominent theorist then, together with the ideals of a democratic government influenced the educational philosophy of the Philippines (Gregorio & Gregorio, 1979; Javier, 2005). There were Filipino educators who had the opportunity of studying in the United States and who eventually brought back home their newly acquired learning, hoping to improve and affect much needed changes in the current school philosophy and system.

The University of Philippines, established during the American era, opened its Child Development Center (UP CDC) in 1961 as its preschool arm under the auspices of the College of Home Economics (CHE) according to an interview with one of its pioneer teachers, Evalyn Hizon (personal communication, October 6, 2011). The school’s approach at that time was already progressive as it was based on Jean Piaget’s principles. It was when Germelina Lising joined the CHE in the late 1970s as a faculty member that
the developmental-interaction approach was introduced in the country’s state university. Fresh from her studies at Bank Street College in New York City, Lising raised the awareness of her colleagues about facets of the developmental-interaction approach such as focusing on the needs of the child and implementing an integrated theme-based curriculum (E. Hizon, personal communication, October 6, 2011). She eventually became the chair of the Department of Family Life and Child Development (FLCD), which oversaw the UP CDC, until the early 1980s. When Lising left the department, UP CDC developed its own curriculum that they have termed the Integrated Core Curriculum which was a combination of various progressive principles in education (E. Hizon, personal communication, October 6, 2011).

Lising later on went back to the United States for personal reasons. However, during her stay in the Philippines after graduating from Bank Street College, she was able to share her knowledge of the developmental-interaction approach to several educators. It was during Lising’s stint as a faculty member of the FLCD that Feny delos Angeles-Bautista came to know of the developmental-interaction approach. In an interview with Bautista (personal communication, September 27, 2011) she credited Lising for introducing her to the developmental-interaction approach through readings and videos the latter shared with her. Bautista opened Community of Learners Foundation (COLF) in 1983 as the first preschool in the Philippines implementing the developmental-interaction method. Aside from Lising, other compelling influences for Bautista (personal communication, September 27, 2011) in advocating the developmental-interaction approach were her personal beliefs and other educational theorists like Paolo Freire.
According to its website, COLF is engaged in both education of the young through its School for Children and community work, serving indigenous people and underprivileged urban groups strengthen their existing instructional programs. The School for Children is comprised of three levels, namely preschool, elementary and secondary. To date, COLF’s School for Children has more or less 687 enrolled students. Bautista (personal communication, September 27, 2011) herself studied and worked in Bank Street College of Education from 1987 until 1990, completing a master’s degree in Educational Leadership. She considered her studies in the College as strengthening her grasp and appreciation of the approach’s guiding principles. Bautista (personal communication, September 27, 2011) asserted that the developmental-interaction approach fitted well with COLF’s goal of welcoming various levels of diversity through its community work and education of children.

In 1999, three women who finished graduate degrees from Bank Street College of Education established Explorations Preschool, another school primarily influenced by the developmental-interaction approach. Didi Manahan, one of the founders and currently school directress, also credited Lising for introducing the said approach to her when she worked in an experimental school where the latter was conducting teacher training (D. Manahan, personal communication, October 4, 2011). Manahan, fresh out of college, found herself lacking in educational background to become a preschool teacher—a career she did not aspire for during her college years but has grown to love when she started working in the experimental school. She then decided to pursue her master’s degree in education at Bank Street College and did so from 1987 until 1995. Like Bautista, Manahan (personal communication, October 4, 2011) found a fit in the approach’s
guiding principles particularly that of social justice, which corresponded to her personal belief and purpose of serving the greater society.

Explorations Preschool, founded by Manahan together with Marian Araneta, Agnes Marcelo and Marga Tirona, started with 24 children and through the years, its population kept on growing up to the present time. As a result there was a need to establish an elementary school for the preschoolers to move on to hence Keys Grade School was founded in 2006 by Manahan together with Agnes Marcelo, Joe Sibayan, Leah See, Wena Soberano and Maricar de Ocampo as her new partners. Both schools have grown and are known to be institutions of progressive education particularly implementing the developmental-interaction approach in the Philippines. To date, Explorations Preschool has a total of 220 enrolled preschool children while Keys Grade School has an overall population of 209 students. According to Manahan (personal communication, October 4, 2011), the Bank Street approach emphasized interaction that made it easily adaptable to the Filipino setting whose culture is characterized by a pervading sense of community among its people.

COLF, Explorations Preschool and Keys Grade School has as one of its main goals the training of their own teachers and the country’s community of educators in a manner similar to that of Bank Street College. These schools utilize an integrated curriculum with themes that are relevant to the Filipino child (Bautista, personal communication, September 27, 2011; Manahan, personal communication, October 4, 2011). These schools, which have grown through the years through the efforts of its founders who have brought and believed in the developmental-interaction approach, have demonstrated a fruitful merger of philosophies and ideals between two unique cultures.
Other educators have followed suit by studying in Bank Street College and then returning to the Philippines to either establish their own school, resume their teaching practice, engage in consultancy work or conduct teacher-training seminars espousing the developmental-interaction approach and its principles in their individual endeavors.

The established schools in the Philippines inspired by the developmental-interaction approach correspondingly reflect its guiding principles through its classrooms, materials and curriculum. An atmosphere of exploration is encouraged through the presence of open-ended materials such as blocks which as will be discussed in the succeeding part is an essential component of any preschool classroom espousing the progressive philosophy of education.

**Play and Blocks**

Play is viewed in the developmental-interaction approach as both a source of delight and learning for a child. All facets of a child’s development are honed when he brings together his interests and partakes of the opportunities for exploration that the school environment provides (Franklin, 2000; Kieff & Casbergue, 2000). As mentioned, Dewey’s work has had a strong influence on the developmental-interaction approach. Dewey (1944) elaborated on the distinction between work and play. He asserted that both begin as initial forays to discover the unknown and in the process of doing so their difference arises. Play is the act itself of manipulating and exploring without the pressure of fulfilling an end while all efforts expended in pursuit of a goal is work (Dewey 1944). Play may be perceived as an inconsequential pursuit however, as a child explores using
his senses, new insights come to fore that engenders further inquiry on his part (Cuffaro, 1995).

A child’s heightened curiosity makes his play a personal activity. It is a medium of discovery he pursues either on his own or while interacting with others. Biber (1951) described the play of a child as something unique to him. It is an endeavor he controls, adding his own flair to suit himself. Through play, a child develops a keen awareness of himself and the world by making meaning of the various stimuli wanting his attention. At the same time, play is an opportunity for him to have dominion over the vast external environment he is still coping with (Biber, 1951). Play is a child’s refuge while in the process of coming to terms with life’s uncertainties for it empowers him to restore order in his own little world (Erikson, 1963). Franklin (2000) qualified play as an instrument a child employs to differently articulate his pressing anxieties. Play in essence unifies in a child the genuineness of his milieu and at the same time his personal sensitivity to life’s ambiguities (Cuffaro, 1995).

To obtain a grasp of a child’s insight of the world, it is necessary that adults lay the groundwork from where he can make sense and communicate his awareness (Cuffaro, 1995). A lot rests on the teacher to provide an environment that is conducive to unencumbered play. Aside from offering an encouraging atmosphere through the layout of the play areas and the resources available for the children to utilize, a teacher also guides the process as a facilitator (Franklin, 2000). Cuffaro (1995) posited that educators meet the child at his level of development and acknowledge where he is at the moment. As an observer and guide, a teacher carefully assesses when to stand back or facilitate the progress of the play at hand (Spodek, 1978).
Trawick-Smith (1994) qualified that a valid reason for a teacher to step in is to encourage child involvement. The value of social interaction through play is evident when ideas and thoughts are pooled together and in the process allows the realization of new challenges that both individual and group resolve (Wink & Putney, 2002). Play as a joint endeavor enhances not only a child’s concept of himself but also his social skills for it is in promoting the progress of the activity that children are tasked to relate harmoniously well with their peers (Franklin, 2000).

A classroom that espouses the progressive principles in education is arranged in such a way that children can both work on their own or with their peers. Most of the open-ended materials are to be shared such as the blocks which have an assortment of pieces in terms of shape and size. Blocks have been an integral element of progressive classrooms since the time that the early proponents of this new movement in education have laid the groundwork of what was to become a more child-centered method of cultivating young minds.

Block play as we see now in early childhood classrooms has evolved since the first educational blocks were produced towards the end of the seventeenth century (Cuffaro, 1986). Several reasons have been posited why blocks have not been in use prior to this time. One was perhaps due to its material being wood which rotted easily (Read, 1992). Another reason was that parents during the prior eras perceived play as unnecessary and aimless due to the early deaths of their babies, and centered more on disciplining them to be upright individuals (Wellhousen & Kieff, 2001). However, ancient philosophers such as Plato and Comenius have already described in their work the natural tendency of young children to explore and build as a form of discovery (Hewitt, 2001). The emergence of the first blocks as a tool for teaching, also referred to
as *alphabet blocks* since there were letters printed on all sides, was depicted in John Locke’s essay *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (Wellhousen & Kieff, 2001, p.4).

The middle of the nineteenth century saw the surge in production of a wide variety of blocks geared towards not only building but also mainly exposing young children to facets of literacy (Hewitt, 2001). It was during this period as well that a shift in the use of blocks from a purely teaching tool to a material children could delight in became apparent through the efforts of Friedrich Froebel (Wellhousen & Kieff, 2001). Froebel developed materials children can utilize on a table with adult support when needed (Read, 1992). Majority of these, referred to as “gifts,” were wooden blocks which did not have any imprints or embellishments in keeping with the trend at that time for the employment of blocks in creating structures that reflect a child’s understanding of the world (Hewitt, 2001; Wellhousen & Kieff, 2001). By this time, with the popularity of kindergartens, changes were made in the appearance of blocks as a result of the shift in view of early childhood education mainly spurred by John Dewey and other contemporary theorists (Cuffaro, 1986).

The large blocks designed by Patty Smith Hill compelled children to build on the floor and be a part themselves of their structures and by its sheer size, enhanced both their physical and social skills (Cuffaro, 1986; Hewitt, 2001; Wellhousen & Kieff, 2001). Soon after, Caroline Pratt, wanting to go beyond the limits of the blocks in existence at that time, developed the *unit blocks* which is the set currently in use in most early childhood classrooms today (Read, 1992; Wellhousen & Kieff, 2001). Cuffaro (1986) described the Pratt blocks as smaller in size than the Hill set and encouraged children to create structures uninhibited by weight and prescribed procedures. Furthermore, it
supported young children’s inherent desire to explore and discover for themselves the possibilities blocks can offer as a tool for understanding their world (Cuffaro, 1995).

The unit blocks is a staple learning area of the developmental-interaction approach. As a material they can freely manipulate and build with, children’s use of blocks supports their physical, socio-emotional and cognitive development (Tokarz, 2008). Their gross and fine motor skills are enhanced as they hold, transport and situate block pieces to a desired location (Tokarz, 2008). Being an open-ended material, blocks expose the child to various concepts in the area of science, math, literacy and art among others (Tokarz, 2008). Wellhousen and Kieff (2001) accentuated the brain’s receptiveness and flexibility in responding to diverse stimulation while a child is still very young. Through block play, a child gets into contact with solid objects whose properties can make up a whole but in the process dilemmas arise which he has to unravel such as achieving stability and symmetry. Furthermore, exploring with blocks boosts a child’s speech since it represents and concretizes his predicaments, thoughts and ideas (Cuffaro, 1995). In a longitudinal study of 51 children, 22 of which had various disabilities, block play during their early childhood years boosted their literacy skills particularly in reading at the elementary level and their math proficiency in middle and high school (Hanline, Milton & Phelps, 2010).

As children get older, their block play progresses as well. Harriet Johnson, a contemporary of Pratt and Mitchell, studied children’s block structures and came up with stages of block play which continues to be referred to up to now by educators and researchers (Wellhousen & Kieff, 2001). Initially, children do not build yet but once familiar with the material, their structures begin from simple, being one-dimensional in
appearance, to complex characterized by height and breadth in form (Johnson, 1996). It is during the later stages that children describe and label their structures according to their understanding of the world and their aims for building (Cuffaro, 1986).

The first stage of block building is when children are familiarizing themselves with the physical qualities of the blocks. In this level, referred to as the carrying stage, children are not yet using the blocks for building and instead are most often seen transporting these from one place to another and scattering or putting them together in a bunch (Johnson, 1996; Wellhousen & Kieff, 2001, p. 41). By the age of two to three years old, children demonstrate a heightened awareness of not only the physical qualities of blocks but are also able to distinguish the various sizes, lengths and shapes of a set (Gura, 1992). It is in the second level, referred to as the stacking stage that children engage in continually placing one block on top of another or beside each other (Wellhousen & Kieff, 2001, p. 45). Constructing rows or towers becomes more complicated as children discover the possibilities and limitations of the blocks they are currently using (Wellhousen & Kieff, 2001). Eventually, their mastery of this stage becomes a tool they will incorporate in their more intricate structures later (Johnson, 1996).

Bridging as the third stage soon after follows stacking (Wellhousen & Kieff, 2001, p. 47). Attempting to connect two standing blocks with one block horizontally placed on top may seem perplexing to a novice builder however those who persevere in time are able to assemble high structures composed of piled up bridges (Johnson, 1996; Wellhousen & Kieff, 2001). As children get older, their spatial awareness also develops allowing them to form enclosed structures (Wellhousen & Kieff, 2001). The fourth level,
aptly called *enclosures*, is also a challenge but once mastered may generate various configurations in terms of shape and size (Wellhousen & Kieff, 2001, p. 49). The succeeding stage referred to as *patterns and symmetry* is a result of a compelling purpose to achieve equilibrium (Gura, 1992; Wellhousen & Kieff, 2001, p. 51). There is a regularity in a child’s movement as he puts a block on one side and correspondingly on the opposite end (Johnson, 1996). There seems to be a sequence and pace in his motions, attaining and maintaining balance in his work (Wellhousen & Kieff, 2001).

Labeling their work comprises the last stages of block building. The sixth stage referred to as *early representational* is when children have begun to demonstrate initial signs of intentionality in building with the blocks (Wellhousen & Kieff, 2001, p. 53). Johnson (1996) however reiterated that the labels children give may not correspond to what was constructed and that these spontaneous descriptions may be the result of hearing more verbal peers name their work or a persistent adult prodding to identify what they have built. Eventually, a child with an expanding vocabulary and a keen observation of his world declares beforehand what he will be building. Wellhousen & Kieff (2001) described this deliberateness on the part of a child as a result of block building being a significant element of his symbolic play. This last stage, referred to as *later representational* is when a child employs blocks as a medium of self-expression (Johnson, 1996; Wellhousen & Kieff, 2001, p. 54). Their structures are more elaborate and resemble the labels they have provided which are mostly reflections of their personal environment (Johnson, 1996; Wellhousen & Kieff, 2001). Gura (1992) added that renaming may come in handy at times as a result of changes children make when challenged by both the limitations of the blocks and their varying interests.
Wellhousen and Kieff (2001) asserted that these stages move in a progression that children go through as they discover with blocks. Acquired techniques from the early stages continue to be used in later phases of block work (Wellhousen & Kieff, 2001). Accordingly, block building development corresponds to a child’s cognitive growth particularly in the areas of logical reasoning, spatial awareness and symbolic representation (Wellhousen & Kieff, 2001). Adults are cautioned then not to prod children to progress along the stages for this will hamper their need to discover on their own the possibilities and limitations of the blocks as a material they can use to understand their environment (Wellhousen & Kieff, 2001).

There are various kinds of interactions that take place while children are exploring with blocks. Froebel advocated for children’s heightened understanding of their environment (Wellhousen & Kieff, 2001). Through block play, children get to know themselves and their capabilities with the help of their peers and the adults surrounding them. Erikson (1963) emphasized through his work with children in his clinic how a material such as blocks can be a medium through which a child may express his fears and anxieties. For instance, in one of his play sessions with a troubled 3-year-old girl, block play was instrumental in empowering her to overcome the inadequacies she has experienced early in life. She created a block structure that looked like a hand with six fingers which reinstated her excess digit that was amputated when she was still a baby. Her structure also demonstrated her desire to be shielded from the shaming she experienced during visits to the lavatory when she made an enclosure with a toy cow inside. Through block play, as described by Erikson (1963) in his work, hidden and
unexpressed issues come to fore setting the stage for a clearer understanding of a child’s apparent behavior.

Children flock to the block area for varying purposes hence coming together engenders communication either through negotiating for the use of pieces they individually need or cooperating to realize the goal of the group in building (Cuffaro, 1995). Tokarz (2008) highlighted the differences between boys and girls when engaged in block play. The nature of girls’ block play is characterized by harmoniously relating with their peers while boys are more driven in completing their structures. Aside from interacting with their peers, Vygotsky (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1994) emphasized the significance of the teacher as instrumental in making possible fruitful play experiences. A teacher though is cautioned not to be too disruptive as she fulfills her role as a facilitator.

A child who is in the process of discovery needs adult guidance along the way, the kind that supports and helps him process his new insights and gained sentiments. Blocks, given its versatility as a material, can be perplexing for a child to explore with and teachers need to help children swim through a range of feelings from frustration to confidence (Wellhousen & Kieff, 2001). Among the laissez-faire, didactic and interactionist approaches, it was the interactionist style that children in the Froebel Blockplay research project positively responded to since this offered the right level of adult intervention they needed (Buce, 1992). Children’s block play is enhanced with the presence of an adult who is nurturing, perceptive and knowledgeable (Buce, 1992; Cuffaro, 1995). Winsor (1996) asserted that it is the substance of teacher intervention that deepens children’s appreciation of block play. A teacher can support a child’s efforts
by valuing his present competencies and enriching these through methodical processing.

In a study of 85 preschool children from various socio-economic and cultural contexts, verbal scaffolding from adults encouraged them to build more intricate formations which also demonstrated the age-related progression of block play (Gregory, Kim & Whiren, 2003).

A teacher takes on a crucial and challenging role when working with children in the block area. The nature of her presence has implications on the development of their constructions (Hanline et al, 2010). Aside from providing ample space, time and devotion to block play, there should also be an opportunity for teachers to exchange ideas and collaborate on the essence of block play as a rich and viable learning area in an early childhood setting (Hewitt, 2001). Much is required from a teacher implementing the developmental-interaction approach to be well versed in supporting children’s block play since this is a rich area of discovery in the classroom.

This literature review narrated how the developmental-interaction approach reached the Philippines and eventually embraced by several institutions as its primary teaching method. Since block play is an essential part of the approach, it is imperative that a teacher be well informed of the significance of this material to a child’s development and how she can support individual explorations with the blocks. As a classroom teacher and now Curriculum Coordinator to novice and experienced educators, block play it seems has not been given the ample attention it requires in our classrooms. Hence for my independent study, I intend to design and implement a professional development program that will enhance the knowledge of the teachers under my wing about the developmental-interaction approach particularly in the area of block play and
how they can adequately support their students’ explorations in this area. Through this professional development program, the awareness of the teachers with regards to blocks as a medium of self-expression will hopefully be heightened. It is also a purpose of this study that the participants ably recognize individual variations in children’s block play in terms of the stages of block building and gender differences, and effectively scaffold each child’s own efforts in using the blocks.
Method

There are two teaching teams who will be appraising this professional development program for block play, both handling a class of nursery-aged (2 ½ - 3 ½ years old by June 1, 2011) children. Team A is composed of two head teachers each of whom has at least three years teaching experience implementing the developmental-interaction approach and one assistant teacher who is on her first year of exposure to the said approach. Team B is composed of one head teacher who has had experience implementing a different teaching method and on her first full year of practicing the developmental-interaction approach, and one assistant teacher who is also new to the Bank Street method.

In my capacity as each team’s Curriculum Coordinator, we get to meet every week to touch base with what is happening in their respective classes, present their theme-based plans and talk about each child’s progress. To give this professional development program the focus it requires, I will meet each team on another day for an hour apart from our weekly consultation conference. The professional development program for block play will run for four sessions with an interval of two weeks per session to provide enough time for the teachers to immerse themselves in the reading materials assigned, reflect on each and do their own research in their respective classrooms.

The objective of the professional development program is to heighten the awareness of each teacher about the importance of block play in the growth of every child. As an essential element of the developmental-interaction approach, this program seeks to encourage the teachers to be active learners themselves in the block area and
discover how they can be instrumental in engaging children to explore with blocks. Each session will be a collaboration of ideas covering various aspects of block play stimulated by relevant articles teachers will be reading and their reflections. They will reflect on their personal experiences with the blocks and as they explore with their students in the area. I will provide each teacher with a journal wherein they can write down their reflections. I will also visit each classroom during the intervening days as an observer of both children and teachers engaged in block play. The observations I will gather from these visits I will share with each team when we meet again as a group to support and enhance each teacher’s explorations and efforts in the block area. It will be made clear to the teachers at the start that they will not be evaluated for their involvement in this professional development program and instead stress that its main purpose is to support them in their endeavors to learn and become more effective advocates of block play in their respective classrooms.

For the first session, each teacher including myself will get to share our childhood play experiences and initial encounters with blocks. Each teacher will respond to the following questions: How did you play as a child? What is the meaning of play for you? What was your favorite toy and why? What about blocks is interesting for you? After this, the salient points discussed in this study’s literature review will then be briefly shared with the teachers through a slide presentation as an introduction to the professional development program that will transpire. Teachers will be given printed copies of the slide presentation as well. After the slide presentation, the teachers will get to explore and build with the blocks themselves. I will photograph them at work and their structures which will be part of their sharing in the next session.
Before the first session ends, each teacher will be given a copy of *Stages of Block Building* from the book *A Constructivist Approach to Block Play in Early Childhood* (Wellhousen & Kieff, 2001) for them to read and reflect upon through journal writing. They will also contemplate on their personal experience building with the blocks. All of these reflections they will be sharing in the succeeding session. In the intervening two weeks, the teachers will be asked to observe their students building in the block area and take pictures of the structures they assembled. These photographs they will show as well in the second session. They are to note the children who frequent the area, the nature of their block play based on the assigned article, the children’s descriptions of their work and the interactions taking place among others.

On the second team session, the previously assigned article will be talked about alongside their reflections on their own explorations with the blocks. I will show them the photographs I took of them while building and their structures which they can refer to as well. They will also share their observations of their students exploring in the block area and present the photographs they took. This session will center on having the teachers reflect on what they think facilitated children’s block play and obstacles that hindered some to explore or fully engage in this area. The teachers will be encouraged to explore on which aspects in the physical set-up of their classroom block area and their role as a teacher were helpful or distracting to their students.

Before the second session ends, teachers will be given copies of *Block Building: Practical Considerations for the Classroom Teacher* from *The Block Book* (Hirsch, 1996). They are to read and reflect on this article and share their thoughts about this on the succeeding session. They are encouraged to implement changes in their classroom
block area which they feel will be applicable and helpful to their students as mentioned in the article. All teachers will again note their observations and document children’s work in the intervening weeks, paying attention to the changes in the children’s structures. All of these are to be presented during the third team session. They are to also observe themselves in terms of the interactions they have with the children working in the block area.

On the third team session, the teachers will give their thoughts about the previously assigned article. They are encouraged to share ideas in the article which they have applied in their own classrooms and those which they would still like to try. They are also to share with the group changes in the way their children have been working in the block area and the kind of role they played while staying with them as they explored. Photographs of children’s work taken during the intervening days will again be presented as supporting material. The team as a whole will come up with interventions that worked and those that were not effective based on their observations of themselves. They will identify various approaches which have encouraged children to focus more and elaborate on their current work. The team will collaborate on coming up with other approaches which they think will assist the current block play of their students and encourage hesitant children to explore in this area. In the intervening days prior to the fourth session, the teachers will observe their interactions with the children at work in the block area and apply the appropriate interventions necessary to scaffold the discoveries of their engaged students and encourage reluctant builders.

Before the third session ends, the article *Block Play: It’s Not Just For Boys Anymore* (Tokarz, 2008) will be given to the teachers to read and reflect upon in their
journals. In the intervening days prior to the last session, the teachers will continue to note their observations of the children exploring in the block area and take photographs of their work. They are to be keen of the differences in the work of the boys and girls based on the ideas posed by the article, and share their thoughts about their observations during the succeeding session.

On the last team session, the teachers will share their reflections about the previously assigned article and relate these with their experiences while observing and interacting with their students in the block area during the past days. They will also share pictures of their children’s work and compare the structures of the boys and the girls. Since this is the final session of the program, previous pictures of children’s work they have taken during the early sessions will be compared with the most recent ones. The teachers will analyze the progress of their students in the block area throughout the implementation of the professional development program. This final session will also recap all the collaborative ideas the team has developed and applied with regards to block play.

To conclude, the teachers will be asked to write about their final reflections pertaining to the whole professional development program that transpired in the last two months or so. They are encouraged to share their thoughts and feelings about themselves while engaged in the program. They are also to reflect on how their children have developed in terms of exploring in the block area since the professional development program started. This is also an opportunity for them to mention the changes they have experienced in themselves as teachers implementing the developmental-interaction approach in a traditional culture like the Philippines. This is a chance for them to
express as well aspects of block play where they continue to need assistance. Their thoughts will serve as a core from where I will be making my own reflections about what transpired in this mentoring program as a change piece and my growth as a leader implementing the developmental-interaction approach.
Results and Analysis

Session 1: Introduction to Exploring with Blocks

The first session sought to introduce the focal point of this professional development program which was block play in the context of the developmental-interaction approach as implemented in the Philippine setting. The teachers were initially asked questions about their childhood play experiences, their view of play, what about blocks was interesting for them, then share their responses to the group. The teachers described their experiences in terms of solitary and social play. Three out of five teachers cited that when alone, they would play with their Barbie dolls, collect stuffed toys and practice their skill in group games such as jackstone and Chinese garter. On the other hand, all five teachers had play experiences which involved taking part in group games and dramatic play. Games such as shooting marbles, hide and seek, chasing one another, jackstone, playing house, pretending to be in school and board games such as Monopoly were among the social play experiences the teachers identified.

When asked the meaning of play for them, all were one in saying that it translated to having fun and strengthening ties with family and friends. When asked to share what their favorite toy was as a child, varied responses were given. Two out of five teachers revealed none in particular while the rest singled out the one they fondly remembered such as Chinese garter, “My Little Pony” and Monopoly. When it came to recalling their initial experience with blocks and what they found interesting about it, their responses were similar in nature. Though all of them did not get to play with unit blocks as a child, they had individual experiences with building through other toys such as Mahjong tiles.
and Lego blocks. They were all unanimous in saying that what made the blocks interesting for them was it being an open-ended material and that it tapped into one’s creativity endlessly.

A brief slide presentation was shown that detailed the highlights of the literature review done for this study which sought to enrich the awareness of the teachers about both the history of the developmental-interaction approach and early childhood education in the Philippines, and the cross-pollination of these two contexts. To immerse them in the focus of this mentoring program, the teachers were given an opportunity to play themselves with the unit blocks. Mixed feelings of eagerness and cluelessness sprouted initially as the teachers began getting the blocks they needed and laying these out on the floor. After the time has elapsed for them to build, the teachers were asked to talk about their individual creations.

One described her work as a highway with a tunnel, toll, and roads leading to another city where a church, house and buildings were standing. Another one said she realized she made a maze which was supposed to be initially a house with rooms. One teacher detailed her work as a make-up school with a driveway, entrance, hanging tree, receiving area, dormitory, studio lights per room and an outdoor area with a fountain for pictorials. Another one identified her creation as a playground complete with a seesaw, trees, cave and garage for a car. Lastly, the youngest teacher built a cultural art center which she specifically described as made up of glass like the Sydney Cultural Center surrounded by water.
Each teacher was asked to share with the group her experience while building with the unit blocks. Each one had a unique story to tell. Some did not have a plan while others already had an idea what to build. Those who did not have a plan found themselves being led by what the person beside them was doing. They shared that their output was a result of comparing their work in progress with that of their peers. Seeing that their peer’s structure was more complicated than their creation compelled them to keep on adding more blocks. Those who were driven to build a specific structure found themselves challenged by the limited number of blocks and the physical properties of the blocks themselves. Their creativity and problem-solving skills were put to the test given the limitations they encountered. Most teachers expressed a sense of enjoyment. They felt proud of their work and one even revealed her desire to be noticed for the hard work she invested. They found themselves in the shoes of their students through their experience of working with a limited number of blocks, figuring how to build high and preventing the pieces from falling, and feeling the pressure of concluding their work especially when it was time to pack away and transition to another activity.

To cap the session, the teachers were asked to continue reflecting on their own experience of building with the blocks and writing about this in their journals. One wrote about the experience being an eye-opener for her given her lack of initial knowledge and play opportunities with the unit blocks prior to becoming a teacher. She felt intimidated working with the blocks and found the need to deeply appreciate this material. At that time, she was glad that their theme in class was on blocks which enlightened her about its benefits to child development. Another one wrote about her fascination with play particularly through building. She expressed gladness about being appreciated for the
work she has done and assumed the same elation her students must be feeling when they are given due notice for their efforts.

This introductory session was very informative in terms of the level of awareness the teachers have at the moment about block play. Clearly, none of them had an opportunity to extensively play and build with the said material particularly the unit blocks which is a staple in every classroom that implemented the developmental-interaction approach. This just emphasized to me the sad reality that most Filipino children including myself do not have a variety of toys readily available that would enhance our physical, socio-emotional and cognitive development all at the same time. What we do have in number are the commercially inspired and produced toys which have limited educational value.

The teachers’ very own exploration during this session released their inhibitions and made them realize for themselves the challenges that the unit blocks pose for children as well. Being able to play with the blocks allowed the teachers to empathize with the children as they explore with the said material which I believe placed them in a better position as facilitators of their students’ block play. It was fascinating to observe the teachers build and later on show pride as they talked about their structures. Gaining insight about what it was like working with a limited number of blocks, needing to conclude their work after a given time and desiring to be recognized for the efforts they have invested were meaningful realizations for them as teachers. I was glad they were able to gather these on their own while immersing themselves in the block-building activity.
This first session has also made me realize the stark differences between the two groups of teachers. Team A composed of teachers who were new to the approach and the school gathered a lot of information from the slide presentation and was in the early stages of familiarity with the unit blocks. They allowed themselves to be carried away by the open-endedness of the material and compared each other’s work in progress. Both also did not write in their journals their reflections about what transpired during the first session. Clearly, they both were not that reflective yet of their practice and still more into properly implementing the approach in their classroom and delivering the requirements expected of teachers such as narratives and portfolios. On the other hand, Team B composed of experienced teachers were more purposeful building with the blocks and eagerly reflected on what happened during the first session. Their journal reflections were candid and full of insights about their appreciation of block play.

At the conclusion of the first session, I had a clearer picture of what each group required in terms of mentoring with regards to block play. Team A still needed a lot of guidance in terms of coming up with insights and measures that can facilitate the block play of their students. On the other hand, the eagerness and familiarity of Team B allowed me to listen to them more and observe them discover on their own the many ways they can still improve on their work with their students in the block area. Given these discoveries, I already knew what to expect in the succeeding sessions in terms of the level of mentoring that each group of teachers needed that would help me become a better facilitator of this professional development program.
Session 2: The Stages of Block Building

For the second session, all teachers were asked to read and reflect upon *Stages of Block Building* from the book *A Constructivist Approach to Block Play in Early Childhood* (Wellhousen & Kieff, 2001). They were also to observe again their students exploring in the block area and take photographs of the children’s work. In the process of observing, they were to be mindful of the physical set-up of their block area and their role as a facilitator of their students’ explorations.

When asked to share parts of the article that struck them, the teachers had varying responses. One saw the emphasis made by the article on the developmental progression of block building and that moving on to the next stage is achieved through experimentation and repetition. She went on to reflect on her role as a facilitator of her students’ block play and not as one who would compel them to build sophisticated structures. On the other hand, another teacher cited that children may jump between stages and that there is no standard age brackets per stage of block building. She went on to highlight that some of her students are now in the representational stages of block building, voluntarily identifying their structures as a bridge or house. As evident in her observations of her students at work in the block area, she discovered that their home environment such as the activities they do with their parents played out in the structures they build.

Two teachers found themselves agreeing with the occurrence of “stunt building” as a typical manner of exploring young children employ during their early foray into block building. One went on to appreciate blocks as concrete material children can easily
manipulate as a medium of self-expression compared to artistic pursuits which can be quite inexplicit in form such as paintings and scribbles. Another teacher appreciated the stages of block building as providing a framework from where she can determine the development of her students in terms of their block play. She cited a specific instance when her 3-year-olds had the chance to build with the blocks alongside 5-year-olds. It was an opportunity for her to confirm that children’s structures indeed become more complex as they get older. Similarly, another teacher said the article provided her the exposure she needed in enriching her awareness of block building which she was encountering for the first time in depth as a classroom teacher.

Each teacher had the opportunity to present pictures of her students’ work in the past two weeks. They talked about the children’s structures in terms of where they were at in the stages of block building. They also discussed their observations of their students in their journals. In both groups of children the teachers were handling, there were still some who were just in the early stages of stacking while there were those who were already purposeful and quick to describe their structures. One teacher observed that in their class, block play was no longer dominated by the boys and that the girls were gradually becoming confident builders as well. A teacher gathered from her observations the level of socio-emotional competence her students possessed through the interactions they had with their peers while working in the blocks. She elaborated in her journal that where her students were in terms of the stages of block building also gave her an insight into their personality and maturity.
Another point of reflection was for the teachers to look into the current set-up of their block area and the overall environment their children experienced while exploring in the said center. Most mentioned the lack of space which they deemed limited the number of children who would want to work in the area and in one child, perhaps limited the breadth of the structure she built. The furniture and the location of the block shelf in the context of the layout of the classroom affected the manner children built. For instance, one teacher cited that her students were aware that they should only build on the blue mat situated in front of the block shelf. Two teachers thought of enlarging their current space for block play by rearranging the layout of their respective classrooms. Furthermore, one teacher mentioned that exhibiting pictures of the children’s work on the walls surrounding the block area inspired them to spend more time and discover what else they can do with the said material.

The teachers also looked into their interactions with their students exploring in the block area. All realized the helpfulness of their presence while the children were building. Two teachers noticed an increased enthusiasm and confidence in their students to expand their work when they sit in the block area. More so when they took an interest in the efforts of their students such as when they described what they saw and gave ideas on how to solve a dilemma or enhance their current work. A pertinent quandary brought up during the discussion was a tendency on their part to ask many questions compelling the children to label their work as against simply describing the work in progress of their students. Some shared they described more than they probed while others really asked their students what they built.
This second session made the teachers appreciate more the progress of their students in terms of block building. Based on their observations and photographs, they were able to have a firmer grasp of the developmental level each child was at through the framework that the stages of block building provided. Both teams have a handful of eager builders who never failed to impress them with every new or expanded structure they created. However, in each class, there were also reluctant builders who were just beginning to try their hand in working with the blocks. I saw joy in the faces of the teachers when they talked about the experimentations these budding builders were currently demonstrating in class.

Each team presented photographs of children’s individual and group work. Aside from the distinct progress of each child, the teachers took note of the value of cooperative play that occurred at different times. They were amazed by the stories the children put together when asked to describe their output with their peers. The teachers realized that block play was certainly an opportunity for children to enhance their social skills as they negotiate and collaborate with one another while in the process of constructing. They cited how a child who decided to join in a peer’s play supplemented the latter’s initial idea. In this second session, I was able to see how proud the teachers were with regards to the growth their students have so far achieved as reflected in their block play.

On the other hand, I also gleaned a hint of sadness from the teachers when it came to talking about the limited space and time they have allotted to this area. They knew they just had to find a way on how to widen the available space by rearranging the room layout and no longer expected that they be assigned a bigger room in the future due to property constraints. Furthermore, I sensed frustration on some teachers who felt they
did not have enough time to spend with the children in the blocks for there were other activities they had to attend to in the same period. One even hoped that Work Time could be extended just so that she can visit every learning center and interact with the children working therein.

For this session again, the teachers in Team A did not engage in journal writing and instead just jotted down bullet points they wanted to share about the assigned article and observations they have gathered in the intervening two weeks. On the other hand, members of the Team B wrote reflections expressing their observations, ideas and desires which indicated introspection on their part. I believe I was not lacking in telling the teachers that they should engage themselves in journal writing for the duration of this mentoring program and not just use the notebook to log in mere observations and bullet points. I felt the need to be more straightforward with Team A in terms of telling them to be reflective and consider the journal as a diary.

At this point, I cannot help but compare the two teams in terms of their level of thoroughness and appreciation for this professional development program. Team A teachers seemed to be skimming the surface while Team B teachers were immersing themselves in the opportunity to become better facilitators of their students’ block play. This second session deeply drove home the point that I have two very different sets of teams and that one needed more forthright mentoring than the other. It behooved me to employ a more probing style with Team A that would help them elicit valuable insights from the reading and their observations which they can apply in their classrooms and eventually use as reflection points in their journals. As for Team B, being in a supportive
role and challenging them at the same time to discover how else they can encourage their students exploring in the blocks area was a more appropriate mentoring style for them.

Session 3: Practical Considerations in Block Building

The third session focused on particular aspects of the block area and specific ways on how to enhance the block-building experiences of young children. To aid the teachers in this topic, they were to read *Block Building: Practical Considerations for the Classroom Teacher* from *The Block Book* (Hirsch, 1996). They were also advised to read it during the first few days of the intervening two weeks so that they can apply some measures suggested in the article that may improve the overall building experiences of their students and share the effectiveness of these with the group during the third session.

When asked to share points that struck them from the article, all teachers appreciated the many suggestions enumerated by the author especially those focused on the teacher’s role, block play rules and the area’s position in relation to the classroom layout. One teacher realized that the most important resource in the classroom was the teacher hence she felt guilty when she was unable to spend time in the block area. It dawned on her that simply sitting in the area was an attraction for children to work there and her mere presence was a validation for them whatever they were doing. Being new to the approach, she found several striking statements the article mentioned in the area of block play management. She cited those which encouraged children to respect the work of their peers such as not walking on blocks and knocking down the structures of their classmates. She also admitted not having enough time for cleanup that the article suggested should be an hour which she agreed with but their time was just really limited.
Another teacher appreciated the significance of the article to her for it explained the “how-tos” of block building. She even said that the article reminded her of me as their mentor for the many ideas it has discussed which I have already shared with them in the past. She found the article bordering on being “preachy” and found some suggestions helpful to her practice. According to her, though there were restrictions in the form of rules such as prohibiting children from stepping on blocks to ensure their safety and to give respect to the works of others, these should not hinder them from exploring freely in the area. It was in this aspect then that she felt the teacher’s role becomes instrumental in scaffolding children’s explorations through constructive questioning and problem solving. Furthermore, one tip the article suggested she found relevant was to keep calm and collected in the midst of the children’s play. She does not feel the need to rush them to finish their work and hasten cleanup time.

The same teacher agreed with the article that the block center should be a big place and located where children can move between areas such as the dramatic and manipulative centers. She found value in the article’s suggestion that the rug should not be situated very near the shelf. Furthermore, sticking tape to mark the boundary from where children can build away from the shelf was necessary both to limit crowding and ensure their safety moving around in the area. She actually gained insight as to why some of her students hesitated to explore in the area perhaps because the two boys who always built there occupied most of the space with their expansive structures thereby blocking the shelf from where others can obtain their own pieces. This teacher also found value in posting the work of the children on the wall for she believed that this
inspires reluctant builders to try their hand in the block area though she and her partner have not yet tried doing this in their classroom.

Allowing the blocks to topple over and encouraging children to build these again was one of the points that struck another teacher. She also agreed with the article that drawing children’s block structures gives them a sense of affirmation. Another teacher focused on her interactions with her students exploring in the block area particularly when asking them about their work. She remembered the article suggesting that describing children’s work was more constructive than asking them to label these. She cited a boy who often said to her that, “We’re just building” whenever she inquired about his work with his peers which made her realize that children indeed vary in their manner of discovery and that she should respect them for their individuality. She also mentioned how adding accessories was helpful in enriching the structures of the children.

When asked to share what changes they have instituted in the intervening two weeks and the effects of these on the work of the children, Team A solely focused on their interactions with their students exploring in the block area. One said she made it a point to be more mindful of the area and visit it often. She particularly cited that one student of hers was happier and more eager to talk about his work when she sat down in the area for a lengthier time. She admitted taking the block center for granted because the children working there seemed to be independent however, the encouraging behavior she noticed when she spent more time there was a wake-up call for her. She asserted that though the children in the block area seemed to be engaged and productive, they still needed to be processed and receive affirmation for the efforts they were investing in their work. Another teacher from the same team focused on her verbalizations and said she
limited herself from giving suggestions so as not to be too intervening. She noticed that the girls were more into talking about their work than the boys.

Team B, on the other hand, focused on specific measures suggested by the article that enriched their children’s block building experiences such as adding accessories, rearranging the layout of the room and organizing cleanup time. The class was moving on to their new theme about environmental signs after a theme on blocks hence it became relevant to add accessories such as wooden signs, people and vehicles to name a few.

The group shared that at first, the children did not know what to do with the accessories thus one of them had to pick out a vehicle as a starting idea from which they can build. For instance, she presented an ambulance and asked them where it will go which triggered their interest in constructing a hospital. As the days went by, the children became more purposeful with their structures and would build first then eventually add the appropriate accessories to their work. The team noticed that the boys used the accessories more than the girls perhaps because the boys build more expansively as a group with a specific idea in mind.

Team B rearranged their room such that the building area was enlarged to include the use of the Citiblocs, foam and table blocks together with the unit blocks. This enlarged area was situated on one side of the room with all the various blocks having their own shelves. Aside from the big rug placed in front of the unit blocks, another large rug was situated in front of the shelf where the other kinds of blocks were to let the children know that they can also build in this area. The teachers noticed that enlarging the area for building allowed more children to explore and enrich their work with the use of the various kinds of blocks and accessories. Traffic flow in the area was also smoother
after they placed a long black tape marking the boundary from the shelf to the rugs where no one should be building.

The team also implemented the suggestion of the article’s author to use baskets for easy cleanup. Team B marveled at how this method has made block work more organized and meaningful for the children. After modeling how a basket can be an easy way to transport blocks to and from the shelf, the children now get their own basket and only obtain the pieces they need at any given time which allowed for the smooth flow of traffic. With a basket in hand, children have become more purposeful with what they would like to build, getting only the pieces they need and leaving some for the others to use. The team noticed minimal incidences of grabbing and the children individually assuming responsibility for the pieces each has gathered. During cleanup time, the baskets became receptacles of specific block pieces to be shelved. For instance, one child was in-charge of collecting all the half-units in his basket until all of these have been packed away. With this system, cooperation was realized, children’s familiarity with the block names was enhanced and a neater block shelf was seen everyday. One teacher shared that with these measures, the children demonstrated a growing sense of care for the blocks and concern for their own safety as well.

When asked to share about the kind of interactions they have with their children working in the blocks, one teacher admitted still wanting to improve on the quantity of time she spends in the said area. She lamented that all she mainly sees were their finished structures and she would have wanted to observe them in the act of building for this was where significant thought processes took place. She added that she wanted to know the story behind each creation. She was also more of an observer than a prober and
saw the instrumentality of constant documentation through photographs as a way of charting every child’s progress in the block area. Another teacher said she was also more of an observer but was able to adjust her style to the needs of each child. If the child was just starting to explore, she related more through words of encouragement and guidance while if the child was a frequent builder, she would just stand back and simply describe what she saw.

On the other hand, three teachers were similar in their experiences. They all started as active players, either initiating the act of building or verbalizing words of encouragement to explore with the blocks. Once the children demonstrated independence and initiative, they retreated to observe and describe once in a while the work in progress at hand and the efforts of the children while building. One cheerfully shared that there were times when she wanted to join in a harmonious group play. She also shared that she was often in awe whenever children discovered for themselves solutions to their dilemmas with or without her help. Another one asserted that she would only mediate when conflicts arose.

This third session proved to be very insightful to the teachers in terms of how they attended to their students in the block area. One teacher conjured that knowing the individual interests of her students was key to their increased participation in the block area. For instance, she found it easy to invite children to work in the blocks if they knew they could build an airplane or rainbow. Moreover, I gathered a strong sense of dissatisfaction in Team A when both teachers stressed their lack of time and attention for their students working in the said center. One of them found spending too much time in the art center and made it a conscious effort to dwell in the block area as well. Another
one wished the mentoring program occurred earlier in the school year to give her the heightened awareness that she was experiencing now pertaining to the significance of block play to a child’s overall development. She wished she were able to spread herself more among the different learning centers and apportion a sizable amount of time in the block area. Given that both were new to the school and the developmental-interaction approach, it was evident that they struggled with adjusting to their new environment hence their priorities were also misdirected in the classroom. Both seemed lost in the myriad of responsibilities they had to do which overwhelmed them thereby losing their focus on the things that mattered especially when class was in session.

On the other hand, Team B found their interactions meaningful and instrumental to the children’s block play experiences. Perhaps because the class had a theme on blocks a month ago, the teachers observed the children apply their previously-acquired knowledge about blocks, explore on their own, and trust in their capabilities. Also, since this team was made up of two teachers who were already familiar with the approach and no longer new to the school, they were easy on themselves and focused on how to provide more substantial learning experiences for their students.

Furthermore, this session enriched the knowledge of all teachers on how to facilitate the block play of their students by implementing constructive changes in terms of layout, rules and accessories as guided by the assigned article. When it came to space, one teacher found herself flexible with allowing children to build outside the block area. Some of her students would build on the tables and add accessories to their work in the form of other manipulatives such as unifix cubes, screws and gears. At first, she was not sure if she should prohibit this but later on respected their initiative to do so and was
proud of their creativity. Given her children’s propensity to be imaginative, she regretted pasting pictures of car parts on some of the block pieces which she initially deemed would entice her students to explore in the area. Furthermore, so as not to make packing away a chore and enjoyable for the children, this same teacher made it into a sorting activity such as asking them to return all the half units first and so on. She went on to share that this sorting activity appealed to the reluctant builders as an interesting game which sparked their interest in the block area.

Another teacher recognized packing away as a joint effort between the teacher and students. She found the delivery system suggested by the article helpful in facilitating the process and cited that this was an opportunity for her to see her students’ familiarity with the block pieces. She mentioned a student of hers who had a tendency to show off by being in command of shelving the blocks. Lastly, Team B teachers were glad to share about the positive effects that introducing accessories, situating all kinds of blocks in one area of the room, enlarging the building space and using baskets to transport blocks has brought to their children’s work.

I observed that the teachers reflected more this time about their experiences with their students in the block area. As they engaged in introspection, they were able to come up with realizations about the development of their children at this time and what they can do to facilitate their growth through the use of blocks. One teacher discovered the value of giving suggestions to scaffold children’s experimentations but careful not to discourage them in the end. She realized that children should discover solutions to dilemmas on their own but teachers should still propound the right questions. She recognized that cues should always come from the children. Based on her observations
of her students exploring in the block area, this same teacher arrived at the conclusion that block building indeed was a form of self-expression and focusing on the process than the product was imperative in understanding children’s development. She looked back at the stages of block building as a reference where children at first randomly carried blocks with no intention of construction yet and then eventually would obtain individual pieces from the shelf for the purpose of concretizing an idea they have in mind.

Another teacher pointed out the differences between beginning and experienced builders in her class. The beginners, usually girls, would opt to use the colorful foam blocks while the experienced ones, predominantly boys, would fully utilize the unit blocks. She went on to say that perhaps this was so because the former group found that color and design facilitated their initial explorations while the latter embraced the open-endedness of the unit blocks as offering them the freedom to build whatever they want without the boundaries of aesthetic properties. In her journal, she wondered if a material’s open-endedness could actually be a hindrance to children who were still in the early stages of familiarizing themselves with its usage. She went on to write that especially for those whose creativity has yet to blossom, not having a model from which to refer to and just encouraged to build anything might be an intimidating endeavor. This then compels them to initially shy away from a boundless material such as the unit blocks and gravitate towards another form like colored or pattern blocks which have more predictability in appearance.
I have gathered from this session the vast receptiveness of the teachers to any form of mentoring that may help them become better educators. Be it through reading a supplemental article about blocks, trying out constructive measures to see their effectiveness in aiding the block building experiences of their students or group sharing about their reflections and observations, all these were opportunities they maximized for their benefit. They were appreciative of how the mentoring program has been instrumental in heightening their awareness of both their roles as keen observers and facilitators of children’s block play. It was pleasing to know that the mentoring program has been helpful to the teachers and as a leader this has inspired me to continue responding to their needs for professional development. I now look forward to our fourth session and their final reflections to give me a clearer picture of how much this program has impacted their teaching experience through block play.

Session 4: Block Building Differences

For the fourth and final session, the teachers were assigned to read Block Play: It’s Not Just For Boys Anymore (Tokarz, 2008). In the intervening two weeks, they were to observe again their students exploring in the block area and take photographs of their structures. They were also to be mindful of the gender differences occurring as the children build in relation to the assigned article and present side-by-side pictures of a boy and girl’s structures for discussion. They were also reminded to reflect on the article and their observations in their journals. Furthermore, they were also to present a series of photographs that would chart a child’s block play progression since the start of the school year. They were to share all their insights to the group during the fourth session.
When asked to share striking elements of the article, all teachers focused on the gender differences they observed in their own classrooms that the article pointed out emerged when children were at work in the block area. The article mentioned girls engaging in socializing behavior more than the boys (Tokarz, 2008). One teacher found this true in her class when she observed that the boys immediately dove into block play after fulfilling their filter-in tasks while girls took their time talking with their peers before approaching the block area. Another teacher corroborated this observation when she said that the boys in her class often got ahead of the girls in the block area because most of the girls arrived late as well.

When both genders were at work, noticeable differences arose in the manner each group built and the themes of their structures. Most teachers shared that the boys demonstrated more intentionality and motivation to build than the girls. One teacher asserted that the boys already have it in their head what they would like to construct while the girls seemed to be swayed by what was aesthetically attractive. She also noticed the boys in her class to be experimental while in the act of building citing the varying structures they constructed everyday. On the other hand, she observed the girls’ creations to be similar each day. Furthermore, the boys demonstrated more audacity in terms of stacking high while the girls expanded horizontally. All these differences were further evident when pictures of both genders’ structures were presented side-by-side. All teachers generally described a structure built by a girl as one that was simple, neat, organized, symmetrical and sometimes compact and flat. On the other hand, a work of a boy was often complex, towering in height, expansive, composed of a variety of block pieces and not necessarily symmetrical. One teacher added that the boys used more of
the wooden unit and hollow blocks while the girls utilized more of the colored foam blocks.

The teachers identified remarkable differences in the themes of each gender’s creations corroborating what the author highlighted in her article that the block play of girls were usually extensions of proverbial entities in their lives. When asked to describe their work, a common label the girls would give was “a house.” One teacher went on to say that girls often build to represent what they were familiar with such as a house or rainbow while boys build for a purpose such as a place for their superheroes. Another teacher elaborated on this when she claimed that the structures the girls build in her class were somehow dramatic in nature such as a “castle” for the “princesses.”

Moving on to sharing about a child’s progress exploring in the block area throughout the school year, each teacher denoted growth in the context of the seven stages of block building. Both members of Team A coincidentally chose the same child to talk about perhaps because he was the one who worked practically everyday in the area. They narrated that the work of this child varied each day depending on what interested him or something he recently remembered such as a movie he just saw. One participant described his structures as unpredictable and complicated thereby it was hard to assess whether he went through the stages sequentially or would vacillate between stages. Looking at the pictures she and partner has taken of this child’s work in the past, she went on to describe that he would add random pieces to his structures once in a while that made it difficult to tell if he was building with an initial idea in mind or just spontaneously expanding his current array. The team described his creations as exhibiting his knack for stacking and making enclosures with a hint of symmetry and
bridging every now and then. There were times when he would build horizontally or vertically but not so high. He would also label his work when asked such as saying it was a “ramp,” “road” or “tower.”

Team B, on the other hand, presented the unique progress of three children. The first was a girl who seemed to have gone through the stages of block building in sequence. Being one of the reluctant builders in class compared to the boys, she began her exploration with experimental stacking followed by a touch of bridging and a deep interest in constructing enclosures. Lately, her structures have been representational incorporating almost all the techniques of stacking horizontally or vertically, bridging and making enclosures in one project alone. One teacher characterized this child as more of a horizontal builder whose structures were sometimes compact, as she liked to fill up spaces with blocks. Another teacher admired this child’s keen interest in constructing enclosures since any block form did not hinder her to confine a given space on the mat. This same teacher went on to share that this child engaged in trial and error to figure out how she can make an enclosure and was in awe with the different shapes that emerged from the latter’s efforts. Another teacher highlighted this child’s appreciation of blocks through part-whole relations as evidenced in her creations which seemed to have risen from careful planning and meticulous construction.

The other two children were boys who frequented the block area during most part of the school year. One was a boy who from the start had a profound interest in building with the unit blocks. He went through almost all the seven stages of block building particularly stacking, bridging, enclosures, symmetry, early and later representational. One teacher described this boy as a builder who began with the end in mind. At the
onset, he already has figured out what he wanted to build and with a basket in hand, only obtained from the shelf the blocks he needed. Another teacher corroborated this boy’s competence in block building. She described this boy as a fast worker perhaps because he already knew what he wanted to create and demonstrated leadership qualities when building with his peers. He would invite his male classmates to help him build and seemed in control of the group undertaking. One teacher attributed his eagerness towards this activity to his exposure at home as well which perhaps explained his familiarity with the properties of blocks, knowing how to enhance the sturdiness of a high structure he has built. He also can ably identify every part of an erected structure when talking about his individual project or that with his peers.

Alternatively, the other boy’s growth was presented in terms of how his creations have changed from being simple to complex and his increasing purposefulness that developed with this progression. There were evidences of stacking, bridging and symmetry in this boy’s later representational structures. One teacher described his individual work as starting out flat then eventually increasing in height. Two teachers asserted he would only use a limited array of blocks particularly units and half-units thereby making his work appear compact. There were times when this boy’s work would be influenced by his peers thus following their lead while there were moments when he would build on his own usually objects that interested him such as weapons he invented.

This fourth session has demonstrated to me the depth of awareness the teachers have acquired about block play since we began more than two months ago. Their observations, insights and reflections for this last session have incorporated their understanding of the stages of block building, how they can encourage a favorable block
building environment and their appreciation of gender differences. When the teachers presented various block play progressions of their students, they were able to identify the different stages their children went through and came up with realizations about each child’s growth. They have come to grasp that some children gradually went through each stage while others assimilated several stages in one structure. There were also those who vacillated from one stage to another in the process of their explorations with the blocks. The teachers also expanded their cognizance of a child’s progress to include possible factors such as personality and home exposure that may have contributed to their interest and eagerness to build.

The benefits of a rearranged block area, inclusion of accessories and presence of an adult continued to be part of the teachers’ sharing during this fourth session. One teacher narrated in her journal how her initiative to explore with the blocks caught the interest of one girl and eventually another female child. Then two boys joined in after which she decided to step back and allowed the children to cooperatively work as group. When the structure collapsed, one boy assured her that they could help rebuild what she has started. She was happy to hear a child mirror back to her what she herself would often say to them when they needed comfort especially when their work crumbles down. This was a clear reflection to her how much children appreciated a teacher’s presence as they explored. This same teacher went on to share the continued positive effects of situating all kinds of blocks in one part of the room beside the dramatic play area. She observed that a cross-fertilization of play between these two centers has been more frequent allowing both girls and boys to explore immeasurably. She lamented though that the limited number of unit blocks continued to be a hindrance especially for the girls
to maximize the use of this material. Another teacher observed that her students now build first before adding accessories compared to before when they would initially get an accessory then constructed with it in mind.

Furthermore, a discussion on gender differences has shown me how opinionated the teachers were when it came to this sensible topic. One teacher said the assigned article was her least favorite among all those they have read because it was too concise and did not offer enough ideas to get the author’s message across. Contrary to the description of the author that usually boys build by themselves while girls worked in groups, this participant claimed that the boys in her class often engaged in cooperative block play while the girls build by themselves. She disagreed with the author when the latter recommended having an exclusive block time for girls that she believed isolated them more. She even went on to recall what a high school teacher of hers perceived about gender equality when he said that women become more empowered when they are given the same opportunities as men and not shielded from the latter’s encroachment. This view found corroboration in Team B’s class where a teacher observed how the boys and girls mingled while at work in the block area and that the females can be out-of-the-box thinkers like the males. For instance, one girl built a “castle” but allowed a boy peer to add masculine elements to her structure. In addition, one female student of hers can build an array of structures which resembled sometimes the complex creations of a typical boy.

Another teacher still noticed gender differences in block play which she felt was a reflection of how society continues to dictate what was apt for girls and boys. For her, the article spoke of empowering and encouraging girls against all odds. Another teacher asserted that in her opinion, stereotyping no longer occurs now and that more parents are
open to exposing their children to nonspecific toys whereas before when blocks did not count as a typical learning material for girls. However, she noticed that there were still some parents who persisted in handing down to their children age-old notions such as pink is for girls only and the like. For her, a child’s block play is influenced by his exposure to similar toys at home, current interests and family beliefs.

I appreciated the candidness of the teachers in verbalizing their agreement or opposition towards this session’s topic. It reflected how they have immersed themselves in the reading and validated its claims in their own classrooms. They did their own research so to speak, which brought them to a place full of realizations about their children’s development and their own personal beliefs. They have come to comprehend that there are norms, but these do not necessarily happen in all classrooms and that they as teachers can effect changes through the environment and atmosphere they have provided. This sense of great responsibility they have come to feel in themselves even more is I believe a valuable fruit of this mentoring program. I am glad they have taken this away with them during this concluding session.
Concluding Reflections

I have been implementing the developmental-interaction approach for quite some time now as a preschool teacher in the Philippines. There were times during my teaching experience that I wondered if the manner with which our school implemented it was as it should be given that we were operating in a predominantly traditional culture. As a Curriculum Coordinator, I sought to find out through working closely with teachers who were both new and experienced with the developmental-interaction approach. Implementing a mentoring program geared towards enhancing their role as facilitators of young children’s block play was meaningful for me because I myself wanted to hone my appreciation of the blocks as a staple and significant element of the developmental-interaction approach. My objectives were attained and at the end of the program’s implementation, the teachers and I not only have a deeper appreciation of the benefits of block play but also a greater confidence in ourselves as catalysts of consequential learning experiences for Filipino children.

All teachers including myself admitted to not playing with blocks during our early childhood years hence our lack of awareness regarding its benefits to child development. Working with the blocks now in our adult years and as teachers, we have come to admire how much it encourages physical growth, cooperative play and analytical thinking. I found it both interesting and helpful that for the first session of this mentoring program, the teachers got to build themselves, getting into the shoes of their students so to speak. Some of their structures were spontaneous forays while others were borne out of carefully planned ideas. Reflecting on their own constructing experience made them realize how significant this could be for a child. One teacher described her structure as
her “make-up school” given her interests in the same craft (see Figure 1). In her journal, she described her building experience as:

It was very personal, at least for me anyway. The funniest thing was, while I was building it, I could “see” the actual thing as if it really was a road, a tree, a building or a fountain. I forgot they were first wooden toys. My creation was alive!

Having the opportunity to build and internalize the act of creating something out of an open-ended material such as the unit blocks set the momentum for the teachers and sparked their interest more in acquiring new learning on how to be better guides to their students. A realization most of them shared was that now they know what it is like for their students when building with blocks. One teacher’s journal reflections summed it all after she built a “maze” (see Figure 2):

I was somewhat shy on what would be the outcome of my work, thinking that it would just be like the work of my kids and not like an adult. Playing with the blocks was really intimidating, but when I was on the process of building something the feeling slowly faded away. Later on I enjoyed making my maze, and I got a bit rattled when we only have five minutes left. Thus, I can empathize more with the kids when we rang the bell in class.
In the course of this professional development program, all teachers have expressed regret over the limitations they have encountered when working in the block area with their students. Insufficiencies in terms of classroom space, quantity and quality of blocks and their own time spent in the area were mainly those that they perceived hindered some children to explore. On the other hand, despite these inadequacies, the teachers rejoiced over the evocative interactions they have had with their students exploring with the blocks. They expressed pride over the growth of every child as evident in the progress of his or her block work. These interactions were a source of valuable insights for the teachers regarding their role as observers and facilitators of children’s block play.

All throughout this professional development program, I was both a mentor and observer of every teacher’s abilities and growth as an educator. All five teachers expressed a genuine interest in appreciating the blocks more as a learning material and how they can improve on supporting their students’ explorations. They all accomplished the requirements of each session and on their own, were able to share insights about their experiences in relation to the topic of each session.
Though the teachers may differ in terms of teaching experience, they all expressed appreciation for the heightened awareness they have obtained about block play and their significant role in scaffolding children’s explorations with this versatile material. One teacher wrote in her journal about the impact of her presence in the block area:

Since the seminar began, I’ve been more aware that I need to spend more time with the children in the blocks area, processing with them their play. By supplying words to them or asking the correct questions, the children are even more encouraged. Because of this, I’ve noticed that the children have shown great interest in the blocks and we’ve observed that our children have improved a lot based on their constructions.

On a more introspective stance, another teacher in her journal wrote about the fruits of her efforts:

Being actively involved in the blocks program has helped me realize two things: 1) that a child’s imagination reaches far beyond his or her environment and 2) that the presence of an adult can either help develop a child’s creativity or stunt it.

The teachers’ enhanced understanding of this material and its importance to every child’s development is already a notable accomplishment of this program. Seeing their eagerness to improve on their practice as teachers implementing the developmental-interaction approach in a country like the Philippines that does not have as much educational resources compared to other developed nations is an even more valuable feat for me. Furthermore, encouraging them to be more introspective of their practice is
another worthwhile result of this program which the school administration hopes to instill in all faculty members this new school year.

The school administration complimented the design and content of this mentoring program. It was similar to the format of teacher workshops that are conducted every year wherein teachers are given information through a slide presentation and handouts then asked to share their own classroom practices pertaining to the topic. The school administration considered the block center a valuable learning area as well together with the other classroom centers such as dramatic play and art which can be future topics of this same mentoring design. The school administration stressed thought that there is a need to provide a rationale as to the choice of the topic and its mentoring design before every program begins. In the case of this mentoring program on blocks, presenting the slide show that detailed the literature review would be helpful in laying the groundwork for the teachers. Furthermore, the school administration asserted that there was already a plan to do more teacher seminars this new school year and the design of this mentoring program could be replicated to cover other professional development topics such as classroom management and curriculum planning.

Reflecting on what has transpired and the fruits the teachers have taken from it, this mentoring program has motivated me even more to seek ways on how to help my co-educators be competent in their chosen career. As one who has started out inexperienced as well, I managed to learn through the years by immersing myself in research and hands-on practice. I had various Curriculum Coordinators mentor me and this experience helped me reach my full potential as a teacher. In the course of this program’s implementation, I was compelled to assume varying leadership styles which was
necessary to meet the needs of each team. I was more comfortable taking on a collaborative stance with both teams, however there was a need to be direct at times which made me more accepting of the reality that one’s mentoring style should be subject to change depending on the capabilities of the people we oversee. In the same way that as teachers we acknowledge a child’s current level of development when planning age-appropriate activities, mentors should also recognize the present competencies and inadequacies of the people they are assisting in order to effect change.

Through this professional development program, I have come to realize that mentoring is truly essential and unique for every teacher. As of this writing, I am now the Curriculum Coordinator of six teaching teams, compared to the previous years when the most that was given to me were two teams only. I am now working alongside a number of teachers, some old and some new to the profession. This mentoring program on blocks truly opened my eyes to the challenges that leaders often face especially when working with various kinds of learners. It has also made me appreciate how arduous mentoring is but its benefits are truly helpful and significant especially to its recipients. I intend to do several mentoring programs this year covering various topics guided by the design I used in this study. I may lengthen the period each program will last depending on the content and depth of each topic and the needs of the teachers. At the end of the school year, I hope to see my colleagues more confident and reflective of their practice as early childhood educators. As a final thought, I will always be guided by the inspiration that educators are lifelong learners no matter which country they are in and that mentors like me are instrumental in assisting them become competent facilitators of children’s growth.
References


day care workers. Quezon City: Kaiser Press.


Grinberg, J.A. (2002). “I had never been exposed to teaching like that:” Progressive teacher education at Bank Street during the 1930s. *Teachers College Record, 104*(7), 1422-1460.


