

Nearly three decades ago, James Turner wrote in *The Yale Review* that history must be useful. As early educators we seek to understand the lessons in our own history. We must learn what has happened once upon a time in early childhood education. We need to recover our past, reflect on it, think about the differences and similarities of views about children's development, and put to use what we learn.

All teachers can consider the historical range of thinking, from the seventeenth-century's father of modern education, John Comenius, to John Dewey, Caroline Pratt, Maria Montessori, and many others. In studying their ideas and their lives, we learn and we shape our own roles as educators. Just as we learn family history to place ourselves in context, so it is with professional history. Mary Ruth Moore, a presenter at NAEYC's 2009 Annual Conference History Seminar, told how her research on Friedrich Froebel took her to his homeland: "If we are to understand our professional goals and practices of today, we need to understand their roots" (Moore 2002, 15).

There are many reasons for early childhood educators to explore the history of early childhood education. It can be an exciting, interesting discovery of early leaders and the concepts, practices, and methods that shaped the field and how and why they developed. This link to the past lets us reflect on and grow in our work with children, bring about creative change, and contribute to a continuing heritage. In this column, early childhood educators will share stories with readers and describe extraordinary examples of insight to guide and support teachers of young children.

—Edna Runnels Ranck

Blocks: A Versatile Learning Tool for Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

Charlotte Anderson

In today's standards-driven climate, some teachers feel that incorporating content standards in the curriculum leads to a non-developmentally appropriate approach to working with young children (Copple & Bredekamp 2008). In the work I do as a preschool teacher trainer, I show students how something as common as blocks can guide them through each of the curriculum content areas.

Children have played with blocks for centuries. In our own country, American mothers and teachers borrowed from German educator Friedrich Froebel's kindergarten methods (Beatty 1995), including Froebel's wooden ball, cylinder, cube, and

other building blocks (Lascarides & Hinitz 2000). Decades later, NAEYC's founder, Patty Smith Hill, enlarged Froebel's blocks, believing that bigger sets would better develop children's physical skills. Caroline Pratt, founder of New York's City and Country School

in 1914, soon designed unit blocks in standard sizes, accompanied by wooden figurines (Hewitt 2001).

These educators understood what we know today, that through hands-on play, children learn about spatial relationships and physical properties,

Our Proud Heritage, a new *Young Children* column, will appear regularly in the March, July, and November issues. The column is co-edited by Edna Runnels Ranck and Charlotte Anderson. Contributing writers will offer insights on past practice, knowledge, and leadership in early childhood education. For submission guidelines, go to www.naeyc.org/yc/columns/ourprouderitage or contact one of the co-editors: Edna Runnels Ranck at edna.ranck@verizon.net, or Charlotte Anderson at charli@charlottephd.com.

Edna Runnels Ranck, EdD, is director for the Accreditation Facilitation Project at the Washington Child Development Council, the child care resource and referral agency for the District of Columbia. She is moderator of the History Seminar at NAEYC's Annual Conference.



Courtesy of the University of Illinois Archives

develop social skills while building together and through requesting and sharing blocks, and use creativity as they construct their own unique works.

Elisabeth Hirsch's *The Block Book* presents many routes the early child-

Charlotte Anderson, PhD, leads preschool teacher training and parenting seminars in Texas and has owned and operated a child care facility and taught early childhood courses at Texas State University, San Marcos. She assists at the NAEYC History Seminar.

hood teacher may take to satisfy content standards. Cognitively, children learn math and science through experiences with block size, shape, and volume, and learn language through expressing their thoughts during block-building sessions (Hirsch 1996). Children learn to cooperate and see how social partnerships facilitate extensive construction projects. Self-regulation is required to remain part of the group. Physical skills are practiced as small muscles steady the final cube on the top of a tower, and creativity is part of each original construction.

Past educators like Pratt were drawn to the inherent value of chil-

dren's play, and scholars today are still acclaiming its worth. In his 2009 publication *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*, Stuart Brown shares his story of an aeronautics lab that hired top graduates from MIT and Stanford to replace retiring engineers. The younger new hires could manage tough theoretical and mathematical equations, but not practical problems requiring innovative solutions. Puzzled by this apparent discrepancy in problem-solving skills, lab interviewers eventually discovered that the older engineers grew up working with their hands—taking things apart, putting them back together again,

and building soapbox derby cars or stereos—well into their adolescent years. When this commonality was discovered, the aeronautics lab began including interview questions for younger engineers about whether they tinkered with their hands into their teen years (Brown 2009).

In observing children deeply absorbed in block play, Pratt noted, “In his play (he) was thinking, learning, setting down his understanding of the way things worked, the relationships of facts to each other . . . *educating himself*” (1948, 29). Blocks are just one way that we in the field of early childhood education can balance our rich play tradition with the current emphases on standards in order to show how helping children learn to think, through hands-on materials, is clearly serious business.

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What Teachers Can Do to Learn More

- Create a wall chart illustrating children’s successes: “When I’m Building, I Am Learning . . .”

“When I’m Building, I Am Learning . . .”

Math—volume, size, shape, spatial relationships

Science—cause and effect, weight properties

Language and literacy—words used to plan and build with friends; understanding symbols through signs

Social and emotional skills—how to share and request materials in positive ways

- Review chapter 8 of *The Block Book* to learn about the teacher’s role in block play and suggested rules for the block center. Read appendixes 1 and 2: “Stages of Block Building” and “Suggested Block Building Equipment.”
- Read the May 2008 *Teaching Young Children* article, “Block Off Time for Learning,” by Laura J. Colker, vol. 1, no. 3, at www.naeyc.org/tyc/pastissues.
- Read the January 2001 *Young Children* article, by Karen Hewitt, at www.naeyc.org/yc/pastissues.
- Consider how you might change your teaching practice based on these readings.
- Try something new, observe the children’s response, and reflect on how your actions have supported children’s learning.



Reprinted from *Young Children* • March 2010



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