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Observations Are Essential in Supporting Children's Play

by Gretchen Reynolds



It is midmorning during free play time. The blocks scattered around on the floor of the block building area are evidence that children played here earlier. Four quadruple unit blocks (Hirsch, 1984) or "quads" have been placed together in the shape of a large square. Checking out the block building area, four year olds Jennifer and Rosie notice it immediately. The girls help themselves to unit and half unit blocks and begin filling in the big, empty square.

Jennifer: Wanna make something in here?

Rosie: Yeah!

Jennifer: We're making roads. We're making roads for putting in everywhere.

As she passes by, a teacher calls: What are you girls building?

Rosie: A car road.

Jennifer: It's not for racing. It's not a racing road. It's a regular road.

Jennifer and Rosie systematically place unit blocks around the inside edge of the square to form a border all the way around. (Four unit blocks equal a quad.) Then, using units and half unit blocks, they fill in from all four sides toward the center. (Two half unit blocks equal one unit block, or eight half units equal a quad.) Because all the blocks they use are mathematical equivalents, the girls are creating a patterned mosaic floor

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inside the square. During this fill-the-square activity, a quad on one side is bumped, slightly distorting the square shape.

Now only one row, three units long, remains empty. Jennifer places a unit block in the middle of it, leaving space for a half unit on one side, and a small undefined hole on the other side. At this point she seems stuck: she pushes the unit block to the left and to the right in an attempt to figure out what will fill the space. But Jennifer does not notice that the square itself is slightly misshapen. Then Rosie hands Jennifer a small plastic car, and the girls begin "driving" the cars counterclockwise around the floor of the square.

Jennifer: This is a car one, and this is a car one.

Jennifer points out the oddly shaped hole to Rosie: That's where you park. Come this way and this way and come over and park.

Rosie: That's the jail.

Jennifer puts her car in the hole, and slides the unit block to fill up the space.

Then, almost as quickly as they came, the girls get up to leave the block building area.

Why Watch Play?

The observation of Jennifer's and Rosie's block building play comes from a recent video recording. Video cameras are useful in obtaining accurate records of classroom



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events that can be replayed any number of times. I try to be sensitive to children's reactions to the camera, and I turn it off if I get a message from a child that it feels intrusive.

Play-watching is essential; video cameras are not. A teacher may prefer to carry a small notebook in a pocket, or to keep paper and pencils handy. When a teacher pauses to watch play, she should record the action and children's language in detail, being careful to identify the players, the time of the day, and the place of the play.

The episode of Jennifer's and Rosie's block building play lasted just five minutes. To get a good observation, a teacher does not need to record a long time. The amount of time to record can be guided by the play itself, rather than by the clock. Episodes of play flow like a story, with a clear beginning, middle, and end. Just as the children do, play-watchers know when an episode of play is finished.

I am a committed watcher of children's play, and for me almost every observation evokes teaching questions — questions that usually do not have easy answers. Notes carefully jotted or video clips of incidental play contain the clues to a child's well-being and, when thoughtfully examined, the stimulus for effective teaching.

When I observed Jennifer's and Rosie's block building play, and viewed it again on the video recording, I was taken by the elaborate tessellation they conjured inside that large square shape. They were master builders! But I found myself wondering: Could their play be more satisfying if they had figured out how to fill in the empty row? Would a teacher disrupt their play if she intervened to point out the skewed quad that they did not seem to notice? When does a teacher's intervention interrupt play and when does it support sustained involvement?

Play is a developmental task of early childhood. Stretching their skills in construction play and dramatic play, "patterners" and "dramatists" (Wolf and Gardner, 1979) play to get better at it, and they play to learn.

Play is the child's natural way of learning; it provides the time and opportunities children need to construct their own knowledge. Play poses an appropriate cognitive challenge as children use it in shaping social and physical worlds still unpredictable for them. Young children represent their experiences and feelings through play, entering into the long human tradition of symbol-making in order to know. (Reynolds and Jones, 1997)

Early childhood programs that support the child's potential to engage her skills



in play are a good fit for young children. Teachers know if their interventions in children's play — and that includes deciding not to intervene — have been supportive of children's growth when they see competence, sustained involvement, and mastery of play.

Teachers as Theory-Builders

By watching children's play and reflecting on the roles of teachers in supporting master players, teachers' skills grow (Jones and Reynolds, 1992). Writing thoughts in a journal or keeping notes in a file on the computer are two private ways that effective teachers reflect on children's play and their teaching practice.

Reflective practice can also be collaborative: a team of teachers may find that fruitful discussions happen when observations are shared in a climate of trust. When reflecting on an observation of play, teachers sometimes invent their own questions.

Or — here are some suggestions:

- What is the child's (children's) agenda?
- Is this a valuable way for the child to be spending his time?
- Is this child a master player or master building? How do I know?
- What are the roles of the teacher in supporting this child's play?

Curious about how others would respond to Rosie's and Jennifer's block building play, and wanting to test the idea that teachers can learn from each other through collaborative reflection, I asked three colleagues to watch the videotape and discuss it.

Here is a condensed version of their dialogue.

Leigh: They were really taking turns, and sharing the blocks, and working together. And I thought it was really neat the way they took the blocks and fitted them all the way around 'til everything fit right in like a puzzle, without changing the shape of the outside. It would be interesting to see if Jennifer likes puzzles or working with tangrams.

Kathy: What interested me was the way Jennifer kept fiddling with the space that was left in the center. She started to fill it in with a block, but because the shape they were filling was a little uneven to begin with, she saw that the block in her hand didn't quite fit. She put another block in her hand on side, but she kept trying to squish them

together different ways to fill that hole in. Then she started saying they were in jail.

Leigh: As a teacher, I would have gotten more involved.

Leslie: But do you think involvement by a teacher would have interfered with the play?

Kathy: A teacher might interfere, or she could extend what they're playing.

Leigh: I wonder why they were playing cars. They seemed like piddly little cars. They were the kind you get in the bottom of cereal boxes or at a fast food drive-in.

Leslie: The dramatic play with the cars wasn't all that fascinating anyway. But the girls were doing some of the math on their own, without having help from an adult. Right at the beginning, when Jennifer took a rectangular block, she realized the hole required a square. So she gave Rosie the square and showed her where to put it.

Kathy: If I were the teacher, I'd want to reinforce their block building in some way. Because that was some good play, but it did not hold their interest for very long.

Leigh: How many times do you look at a brick wall or cobblestone sidewalk, and you never notice the different patterns of the brick? What bothered me was there was an incredible amount of math going on inside that square, and nobody drew their attention to it. I wonder if a teacher could have asked some questions, at the risk of interrupting them, to get them to pay attention to the pattern they had created, and to see if they wanted to complete it. It reminded me of parquetry floor, but with a big hole in it! I had the feeling "it's not complete!" With that hole they left I had no sense of closure.

Leslie: But Jennifer was looking around for a block to fill it. Her good imagination made it into a jail, which is interesting.

Leigh: But not as interesting as a patterned floor. They really were more interested in building than in playing with cars. Their building was really quite lovely.

Kathy: So you think it was more construction play than dramatic play?

Leslie: Yes. And I think they would eventually have thought of a way to fill up that hole, but for the time being they saw some other interesting ways to use that hole.

Leigh: I thought the cars were way too small. I would have gotten some other props to encourage dramatic play, like road signs, you know the lovely wooden road signs that say "stop," and "railroad crossing," and "bike" path.





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Kathy: Do you think if they had more props they would have lost focus on the math aspects of their play? Because it's play, generally we don't even talk about math. We don't even ask "How many blocks are in here?" or "If you filled up this hole, what would you get?" or "Is there a way you could fill in this hole?"

Leslie: Do you need to direct them that much? Instead could you ask them some questions that might get them to start thinking about it?

Leigh: What would be a good question, if you don't want to interrupt their play?

Kathy: I think we use that as a crutch, that we don't want to "interrupt." And in the meantime a lot of good play goes unnoticed or gets no support because teachers believe in a hands-off approach.

Leslie: You can ask them to tell you about it, or comment that it's an interesting pattern, but don't make them count the blocks. That could stifle the play. They're into filling up that

space by pretending it's a jail, and now they've got to count the blocks?

Kathy: They can always ignore you!

Leigh: You could get paper, and trace over the top! Or even do a rubbing to see the pattern!

Kathy: Or extend the idea outdoors, to look at the brick designs in the walkways.

Leslie: Maybe they were interested in dramatic play, but those cars were just not right. A teacher could make a comment like, "They seem to be getting stuck in the cracks." Then maybe you could encourage some problem solving by asking, "Are there some cars that we could get that would work better on this car road?" They might have been interested in driving cars around in a spiral like the Indy 500.

Leigh: They weren't involved for very long. Maybe if a teacher did observe that block



building, she could even do something the next day to encourage more in-depth play.

Kathy: Also the block building area was way too small. How do you have "real" roads in such a small space?

Leigh: How about setting up that road the next day, and bringing out other props, and waiting to see what would happen? And fill in the hole, and see if anybody noticed? Or make a new pattern or some different shapes?

Kathy: It could also be a conversation piece at the lunch table that day, to talk about what you saw in the morning in block building. I wonder who put it away? Wouldn't it be neat to leave it there, not clean it up, and add on to it later, after nap?



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In this discussion, Leslie, Kathy, and Leigh did not resolve the question of whether the girls' agenda was construction play or dramatic play, or if intervention by a teacher would support it or interrupt. But by engaging in mutual reflection, they considered what the children were learning in their play and the different possibilities for action by a teacher to support more complex play.

If teachers were to have conversations like this in weekly team meetings, with the goal of reflecting on their teaching practice collaboratively, they could construct effective ways of supporting children's master play and develop their skills as teachers. Collaborative reflection like this empowers teachers as theory-builders.

Reality-Based Teaching

While teachers' different perspectives will generate lively dialogue about the play, and discussions can move in unpredictable ways, the goal is not necessarily convergence. Through dialogue, teachers will collaboratively construct understandings about the children's needs and interests and strategies for teaching interventions that effectively support children's play, growth, and learning. This teaching practice is reality-based, because it is grounded in the teachers' own observations of the children they care for.

Teaching is a challenging enterprise because children are always changing. Effective teachers also change. Teaching practice that is a good fit for the growing child is based on ongoing observations of play, reflection, hypothesis generation and testing, and evaluation. Teachers "... must accept and reject ideas on the basis of thoughtful inquiry and not just on the basis of superficial opinion, private belief, or standard practices. Teachers need to recognize that teaching is a complex, professional activity requiring constant effort on their part." (Bowman and Stott, 1994, p. 129)

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