


Where have all the Blocks Gone ?

A Case for Block Play in Early Childhood

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### Overview

- This qualitative and quantitative study examined block play in a culturally diverse suburban preschool classroom.
- Data from seventy-seven block structures were collected and analyzed.
- Three levels of symbolism was investigated
- Data sources consisted of audio-tapes of student interviews, digital photographs, and an observation form to code symbolism.

### Purpose of Research

- The experiences in early childhood classrooms have changed and many preschool and kindergarten classrooms have a more narrowly focused academic curriculum, with the elimination of blocks and dramatic play (Cohen & Uhry, 2007).
- This investigation of preschool students' symbolic representation of block play provides a rationale for maintaining a playful classroom to promote important oral language, literacy, and abstract thinking skills.

### Research Question

***What are the frequent use of various levels of symbolism in four-year-old children's block play?***

### Review of Literature

- Vygotsky (1978) believed play provides a transitional stage for representing real objects for pretend objects. He believed play can be defined as an imaginary situation bounded by rules.
- Scholars (Bailey, 1933; Guanella, 1934; Johnson, 1996) began to describe and identify stages of block play.

### Review of Literature

- Researchers (Reifel & Greenfield, 1982; Sluss, 2002; Sluss & Stremmel, 2004) devised a scale for evaluating symbolism and spatial complexity of block play.
- Symbolic representation is preparation for the development of abstract ideas and abstract thinking (Berk, 1994; Bodrova & Leong, 2007).

## Methodology

- Children play with blocks during free play time
- Children were asked to name, label, and describe block structures.
- Children's labels were tape recorded , transcribed and recorded on an observation sheet.
- Photographs of block structures were taken and numbered.

## Data Analysis

Coded 77 block constructions based on 3 levels of symbolic representation (Vygotsky, 1978; Sluss, 2002; Sluss & Stremmel, 2004).

1. *Presymbolism* – **Unable to label blocks**
2. *First level symbolism* – **Real world labels**
3. *Second level symbolism* – **Imaginary labels**

## Quantitative Findings

- **No respondents for presymbolism.**
- **Frequency of first level (real world objects) and second level symbolism (imaginary objects) were calculated for 77 block play structures.**
- **There were 57 observations of first level symbolism, and 20 observations of second level symbolism.**

## Quantitative Findings

- **The difference in the number of students in the first level symbolism group versus the second level symbolism was statistically significant.**  
 $\chi^2 (1, N = 77) = 17.78, p < .001$
- **Of the 74% of first level symbolism, 23% (N=13) were labeled homes for Webkinz.**

## Qualitative Findings

### Level One – A choo-choo train

Nicole: And this is, and this is Sasha's, and this is Sasha's bed, and this is Irene's bed, and this, and we all have toys in 'em because it's our toy box bed. And I build that window – me and Irene did it together ...me and Irene made these windows together.

Sasha: This is my house, this is uh, [] I'm starting all over again ...This is a train, and uh we all in this train and that's it.

### Level Two – A Castle

Halle: Well, this is the, the queen and the king sleeping and need be quiet because they're really sleeping.

Ali: We used, uh, blocks and we used the blocks that look like um, uh, bricks, and...

Halle: Um, well, you can't knock the thing down because they're scared of you if it's really loud they're scared.

## Implications

- Children need more opportunities to play with blocks to acquire representational abilities at level two symbolism.
- Researchers (Levin, 2003; Linn, 2008) are concerned that corporations producing electronic toys and computer related technology are limiting children's imaginative play.

