

The Power of Blockplay:

A language of construction, imagination and ideas

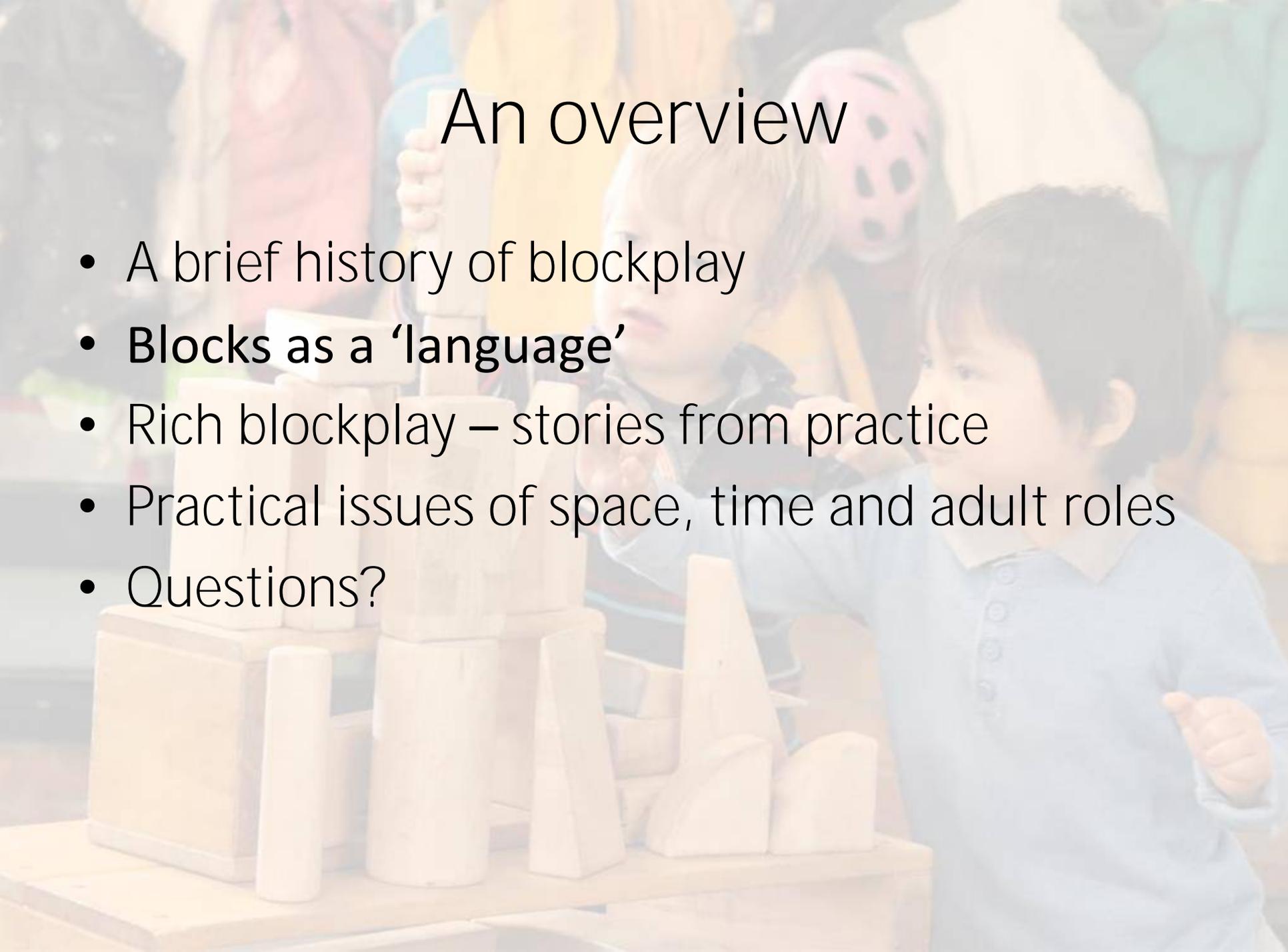
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An overview

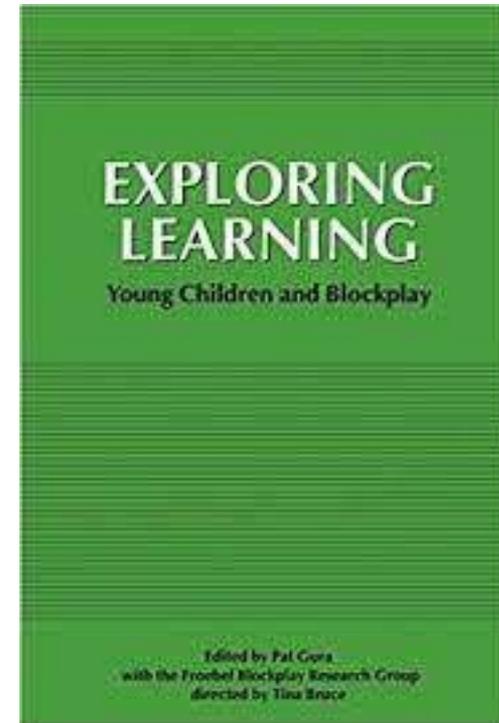
- A brief history of blockplay
- **Blocks as a 'language'**
- Rich blockplay – stories from practice
- Practical issues of space, time and adult roles
- Questions?



We draw our inspiration from -



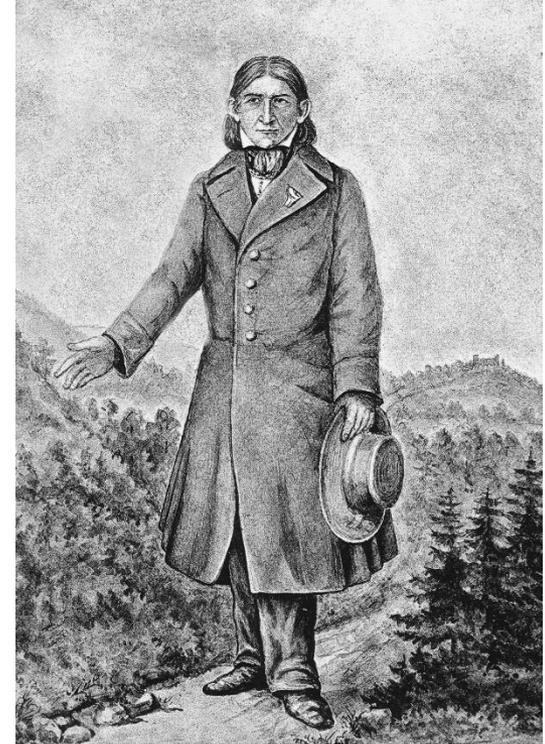
The thoughts and writings of
Pat Gura (1935-2020)



The Froebel blockplay project
(1987-90) directed by Tina
Bruce

Blocks have a long history as children's playthings...

- But educator Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) founder of the kindergarten was the first to research and devise sets of blocks as tools for learning.
- **Simple playthings for children to 'feel and experience, to act and represent, to think and recognise'** (Froebel cited in Brosterman 1997:51)



Froebel's 'gifts'

- Sets of mathematically precise small wooden blocks
- Designed for children to explore and create.
- Each set based on a cube cut in different sections
- **The relationship between the 'parts' and the 'whole' was crucial – this underpinned the 'language of blocks'.**



Blocks were used to represent-

- Forms of life – representations of everyday **experience in child's own life**
- Forms of knowledge – explorations of mathematical, scientific, engineering, architectural concepts
- Forms of beauty – patterns, design and abstract forms

Talk and story-telling were also key



Some key Froebelian principles

- Play as the **'highest form of development'** - the essence of being human
- Connectedness – everything links.
- Creativity and the power of symbols – **'ideas given visible form'**
- Freedom and guidance – children have free choice in their blockplay. Adults observe and support, not interfere or direct

A Family of Blocks



Unit Blocks



Mini Unit Blocks



Hollow Blocks

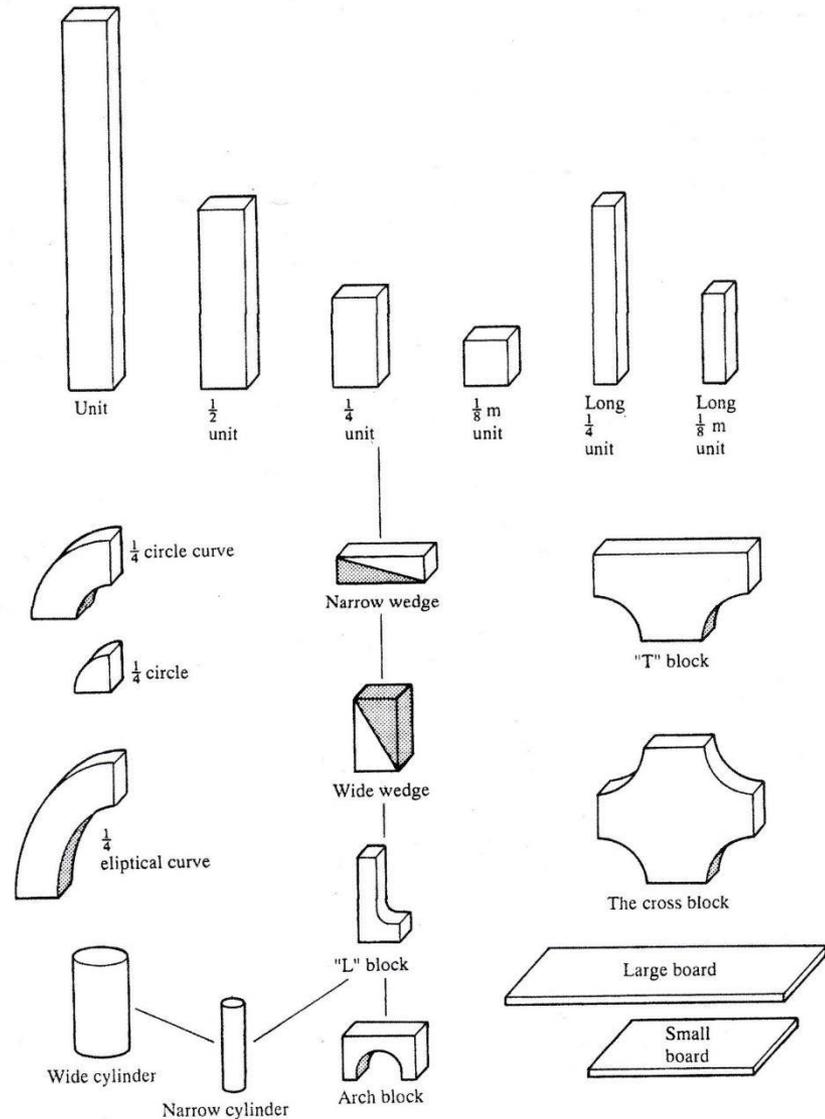


Mini Hollow Blocks

Blocks must be seen and understood as parts of a whole set & not as a collection of parts.

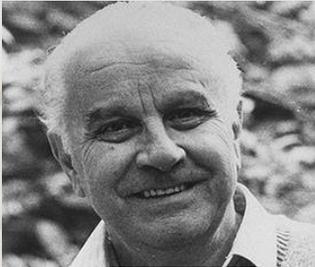
Each block is a potential partner to every other block.

Gura, P (1996:37-38)



From Gura, P (ed) 1992: 51

The Hundred Languages of Children



Loris Malaguzzi

' A child has a hundred languages.... A hundred ways of thinking of playing, of speaking.

The child has a hundred languages and a hundred hundred hundred **more...'**

Curious children, curious adults – researchers together

Questioning, hypothesising and exploring different perspectives and **possibilities...**

Curiosity about :

- lines
- shape
- size
- space (filled and empty)
- angles
- proportion
- perspective
- height
- relationships and connections

Curiosity about :

- buildings
- design
- the environment

Curiosity about:

- culture and heritage

and a time for dialogue, revisiting and reflection.

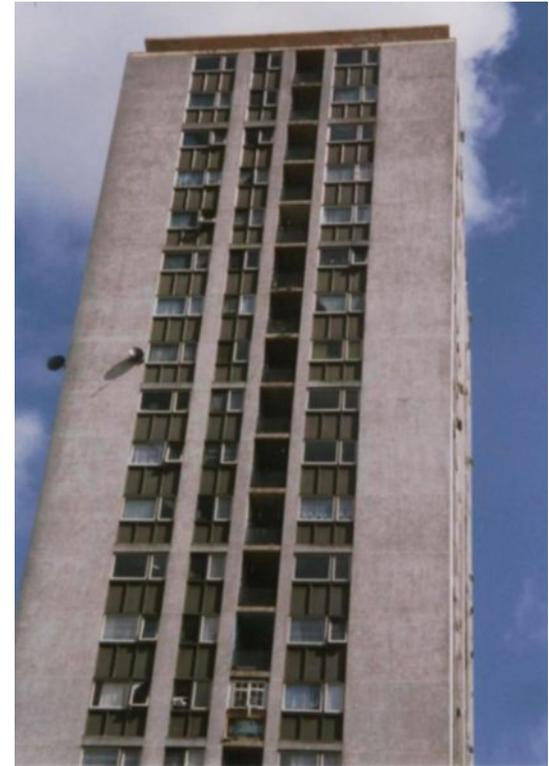
Curiosity about the environment

Mosque



Viaduct

Block of flats



Max: a 'blockie' in the making



Max: lining up apple slices

12 m.



Max: stacking drinks' cartons

18 m.

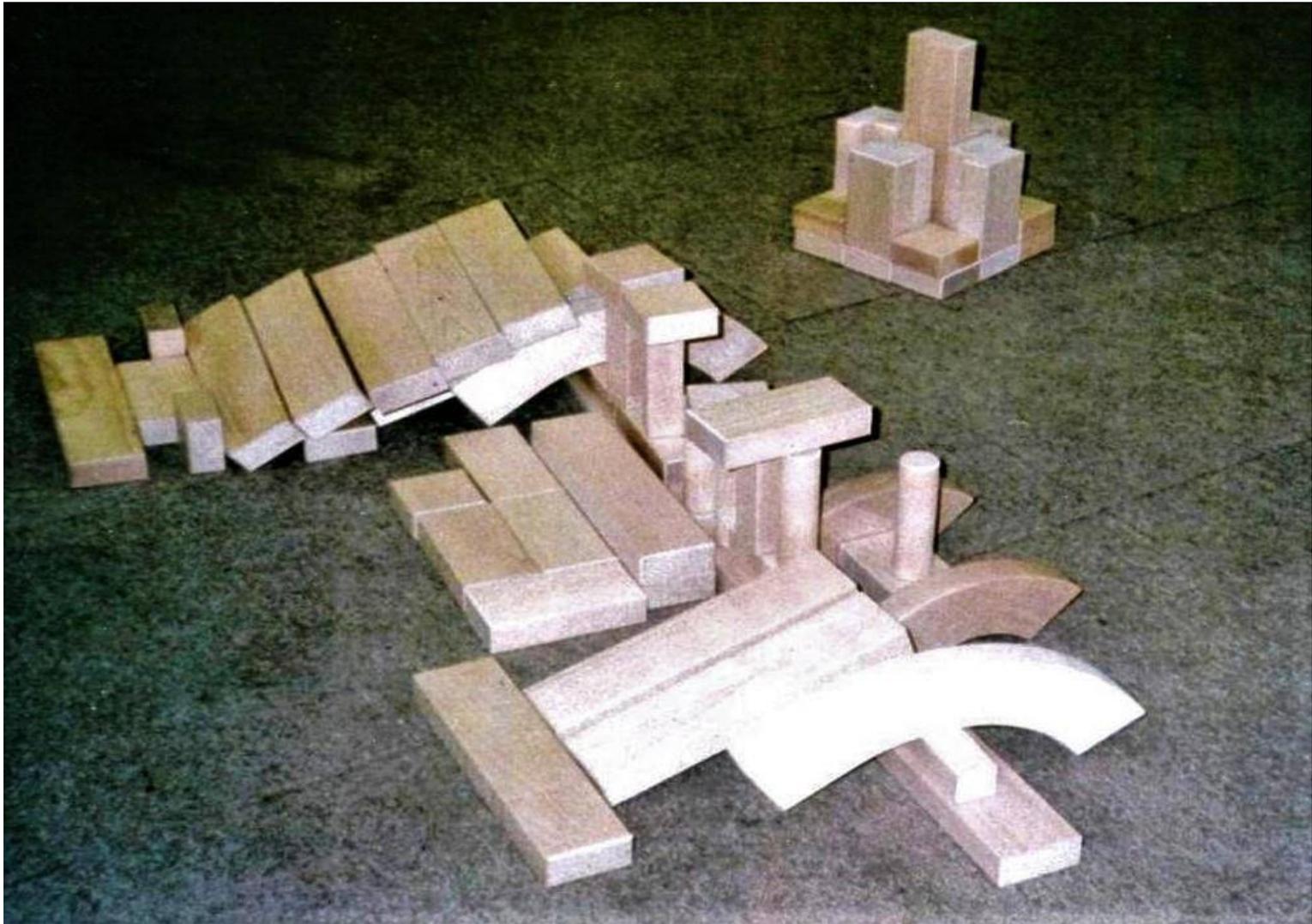


Max: constructing with Jenga

5 years

Blockplay : a language of construction and what children do in blockplay

- Explore properties and possibilities
- Show thinking (common patterns)
- Represent experiences
- Problem solve
- Develop their imagination (make narratives)
- Involve social-dramatic play (particularly shown with hollow blocks)
- Communicate
- Make connections
- Transform ideas
- Include all areas of the curriculum



Random stacking?



Common patterns



Vertical

Lining up



Enclosures and boundaries



Horizontal



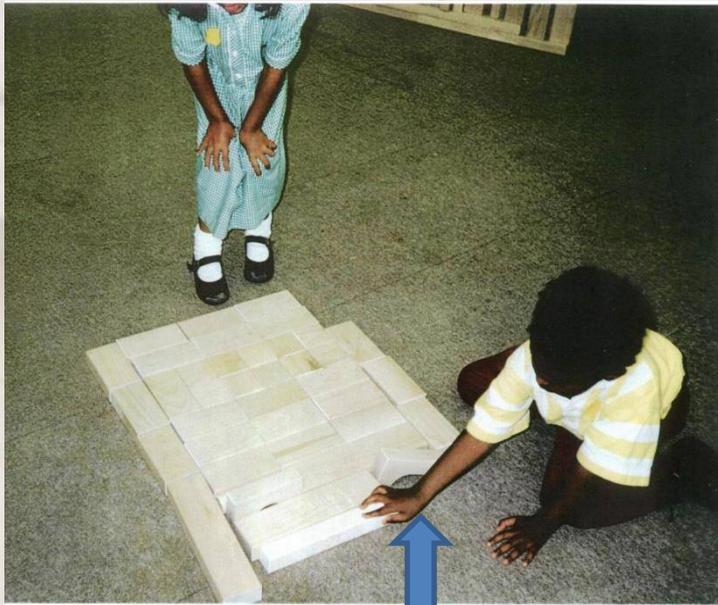
Bridging



More common patterns...

Edging and filling-in
Why the 'odd' blocks?

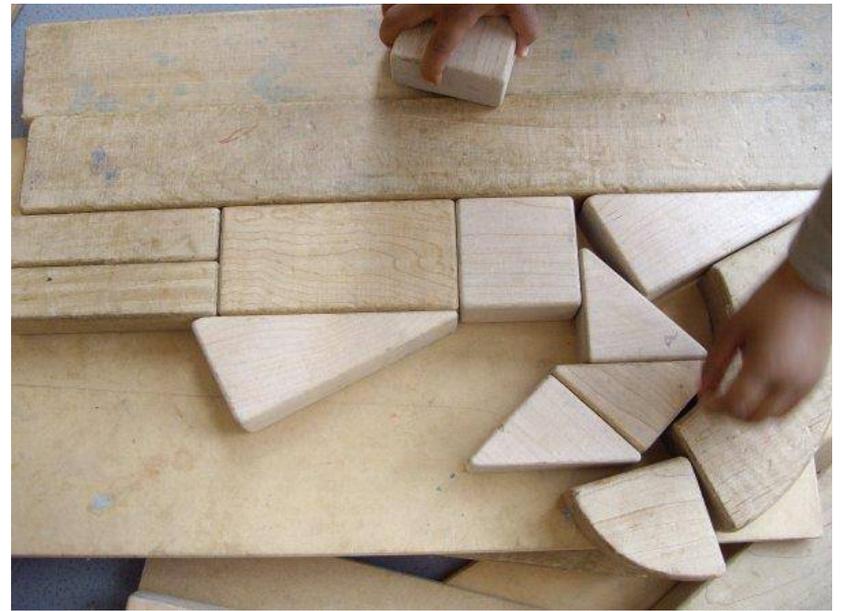
4 year olds



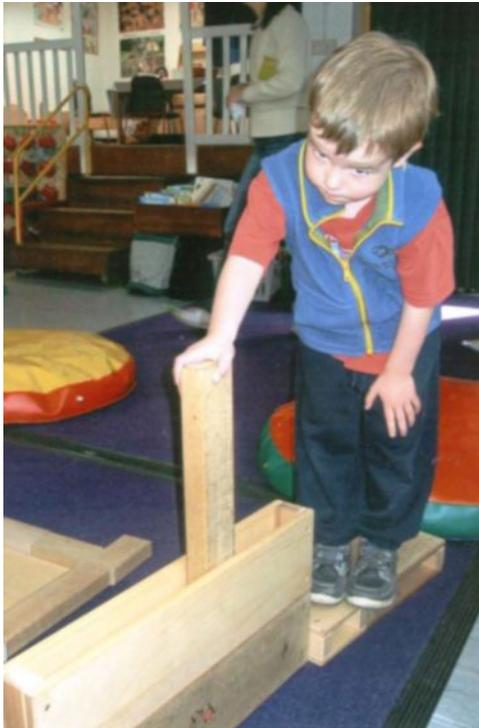
Filling-in between gaps



Problem solving and experimenting: fitting shapes together



Representing experiences



Joshua's 'digger'

**Imitating the
adult taking
photos**



**Katrina's mountain
She takes a 'photograph'
and records her model.**



4-year-olds

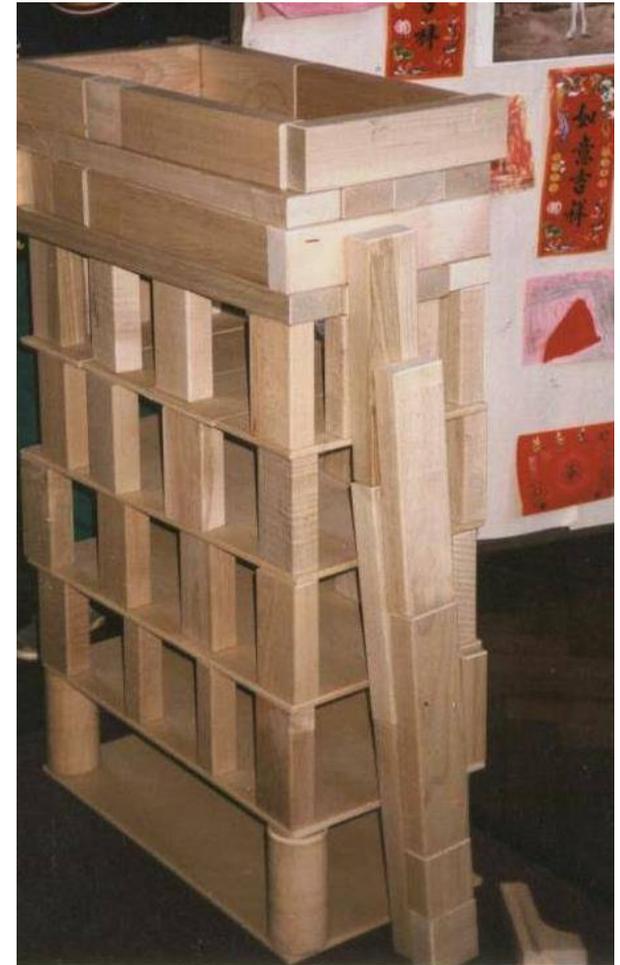


Representation by 4 year old

Southall municipal car park

Representation by 7 year old

Block of flats





Asda – the moving walkway

The car wash



Blockplay allows children to represent their experiences such as going to the supermarket or car wash.

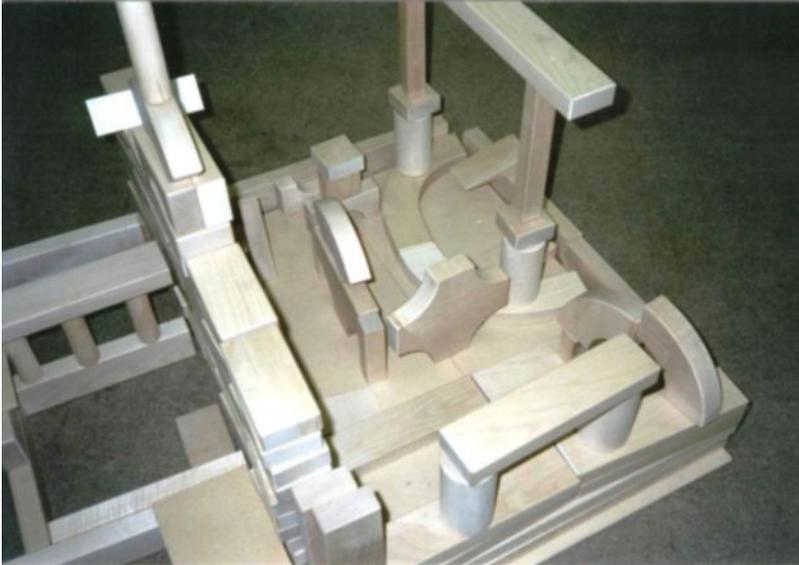
4-year-olds : collaboration by a group of 3 boys

Representation and more development

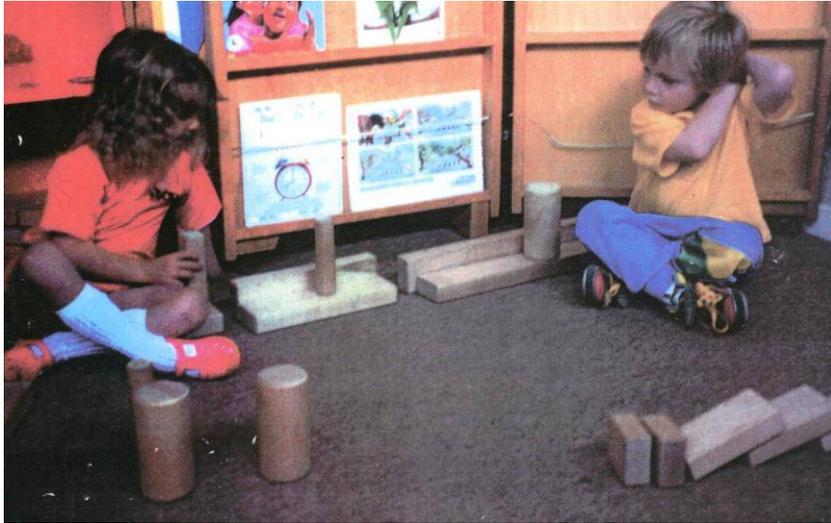
Later representation – block building becomes more sophisticated and complex.

These 6 and 7 year olds children knew that they wanted to build this swimming pool complex before the first block was placed.

The structure represented an experience and a common interest.



Stories represented



Using blocks, Jade's narrates and represents her own version story of 'The Three Bears' to an attentive audience.

4 year olds



Jack and the Beanstalk

5 year olds

Children have original ideas...

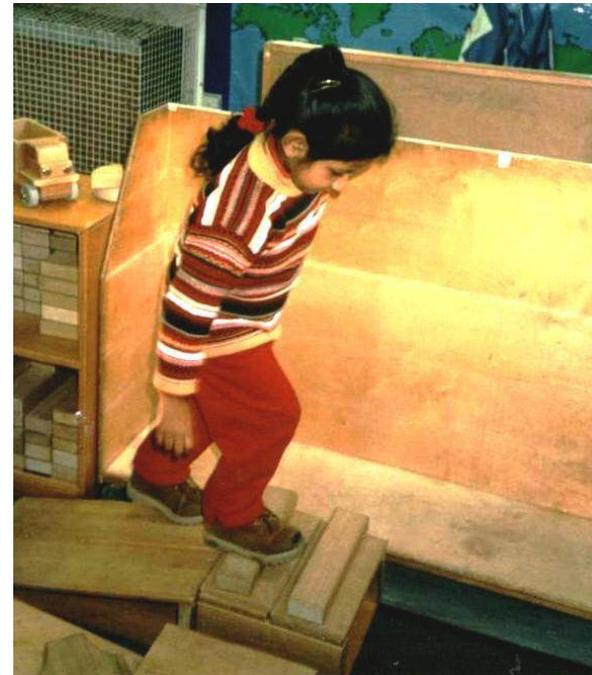
Hollow blocks : The Helmet Safe



Group of 4 year old boys led by the protagonist George who directed the operation.



Enclosures: different dens



**Stairs
into den**

The importance of documentation

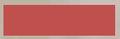
Penny Lawrence ref. EYE article 6th October 2010

- *‘ [Documentation]...helps to carry the continuities of thought of both child and adult.*
- *Documentation finds its value when it is interpreted, reflected upon, and when the significance is constructed between adults and **children.***

Documentation as a dialogue and process



Documentation placed at a level where children can see, allows them the opportunity to revisit and develop their ideas.



Blockplay stories



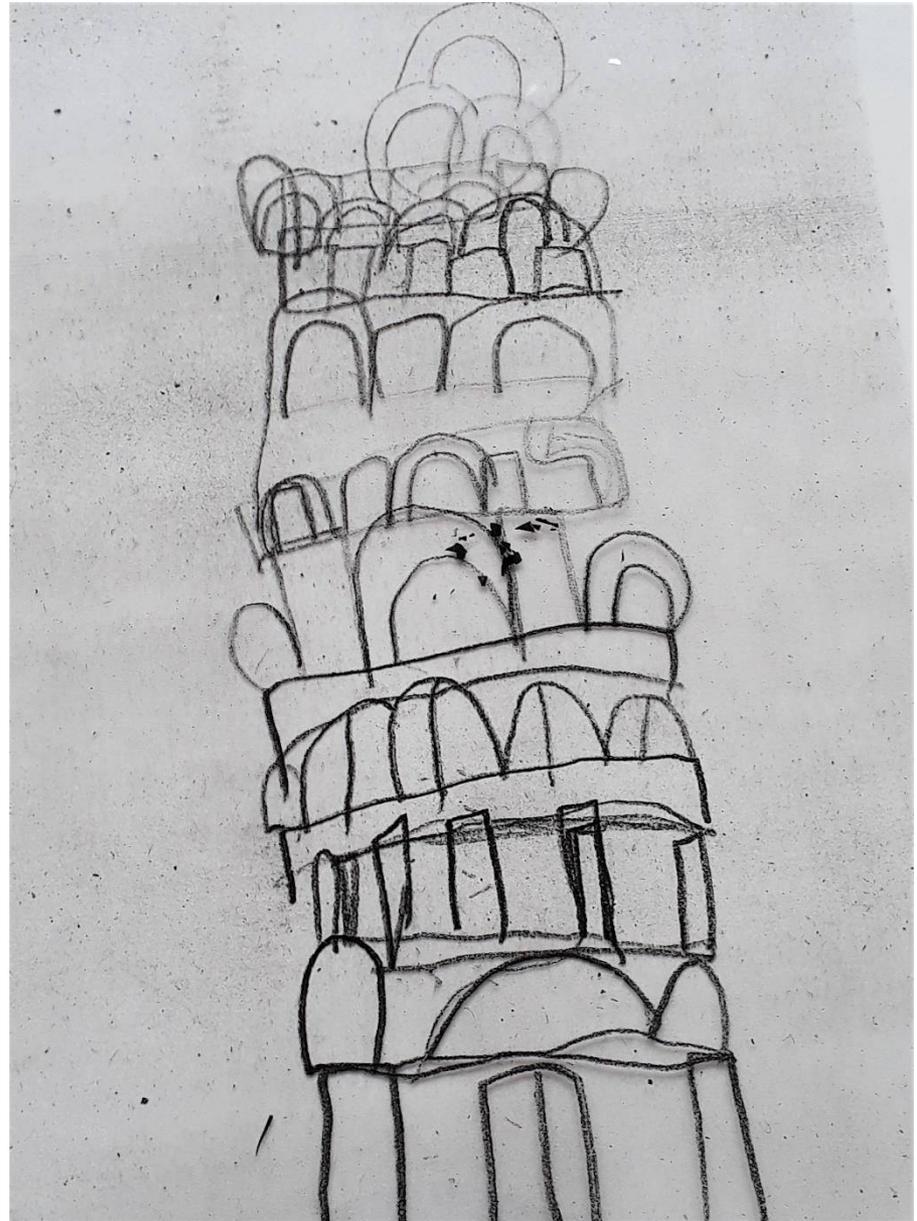
A snake
inspired by a
visit from
the 'Animal
Man'



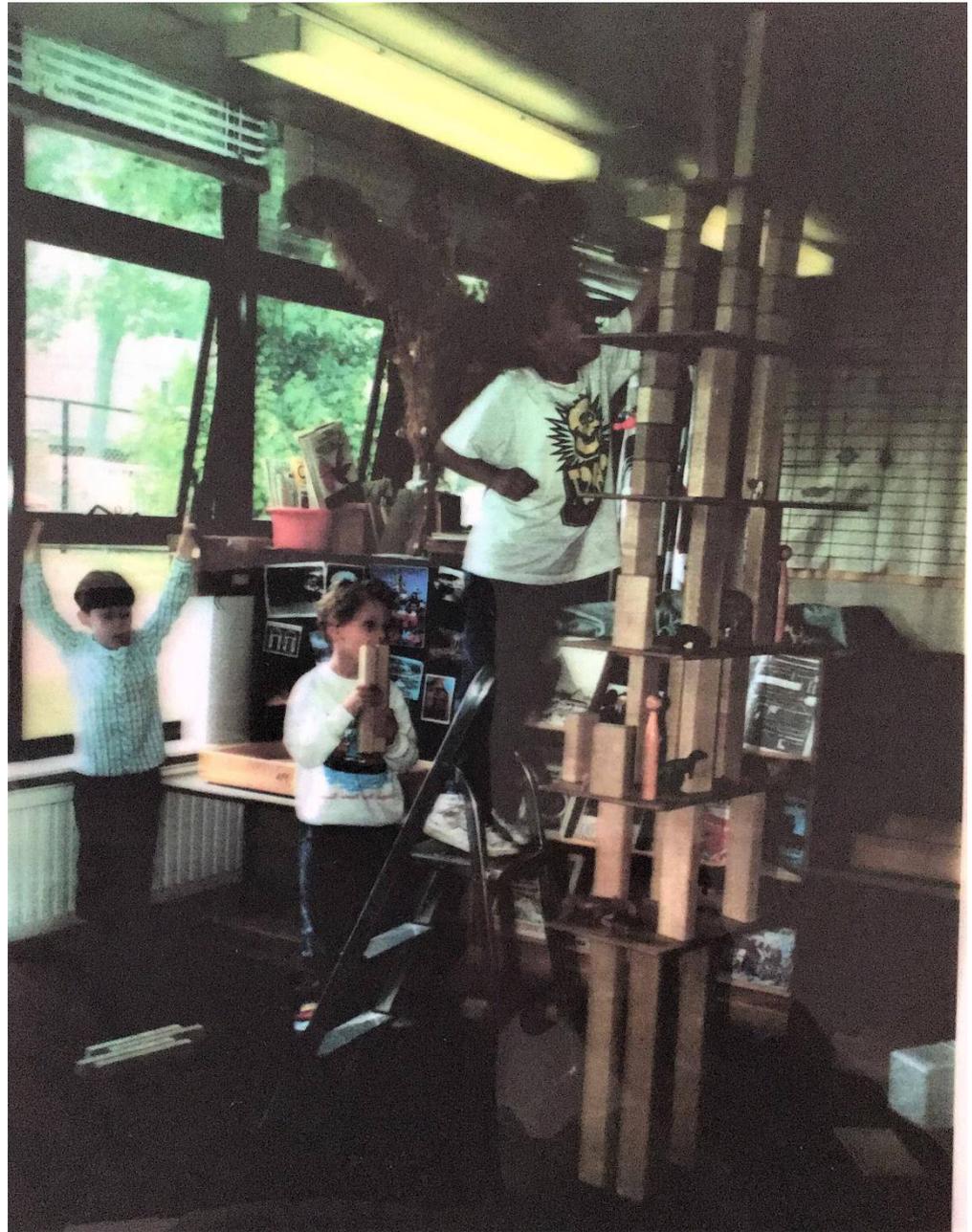
Playful
exploration
of height and
pattern,
balance and
stability



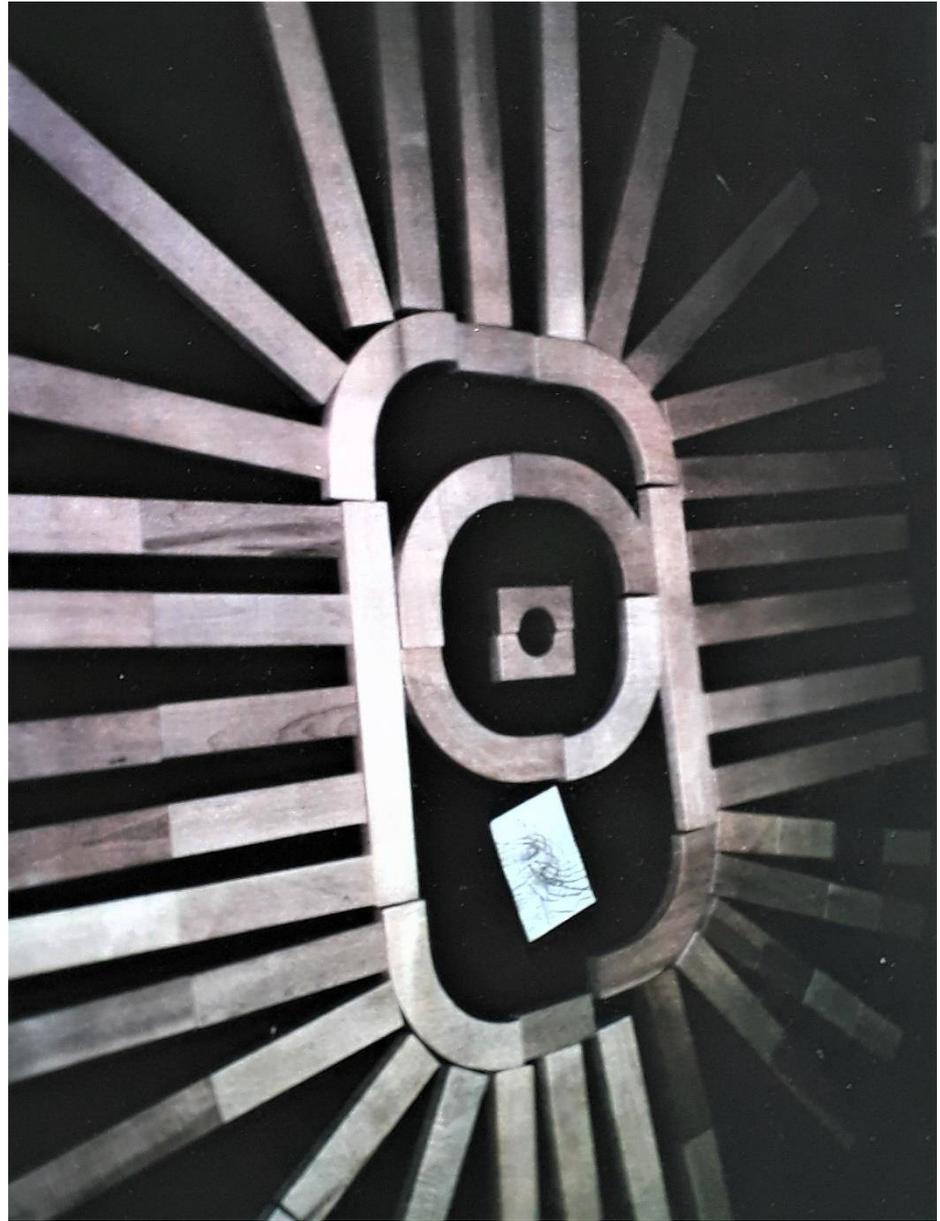
Representing
her own
structure
through
drawing



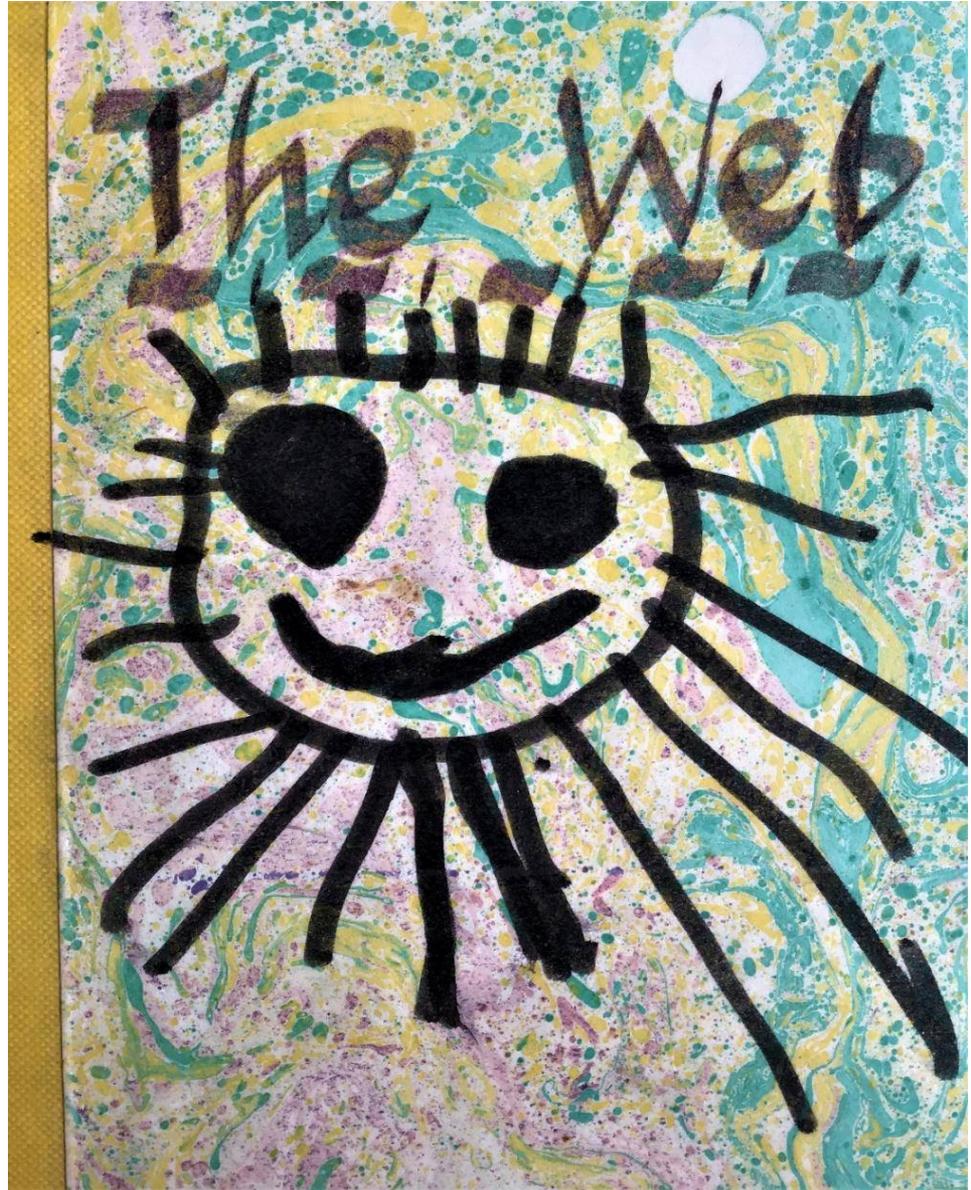
Declared aim –
'to build to the
ceiling'.

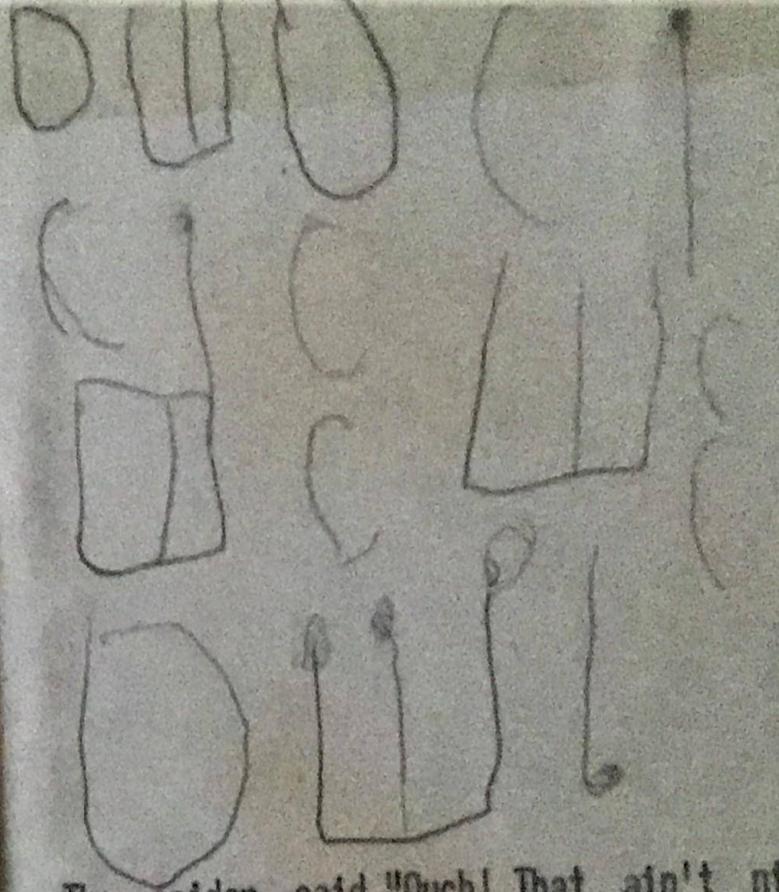
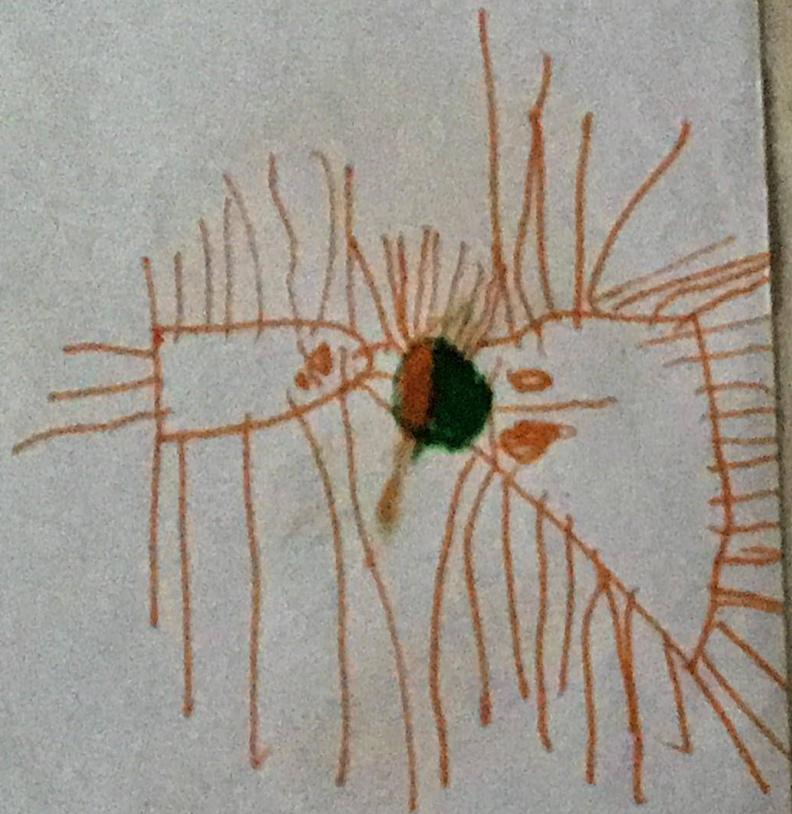


Using blocks to represent a captivating outdoor experience – finding a spider web

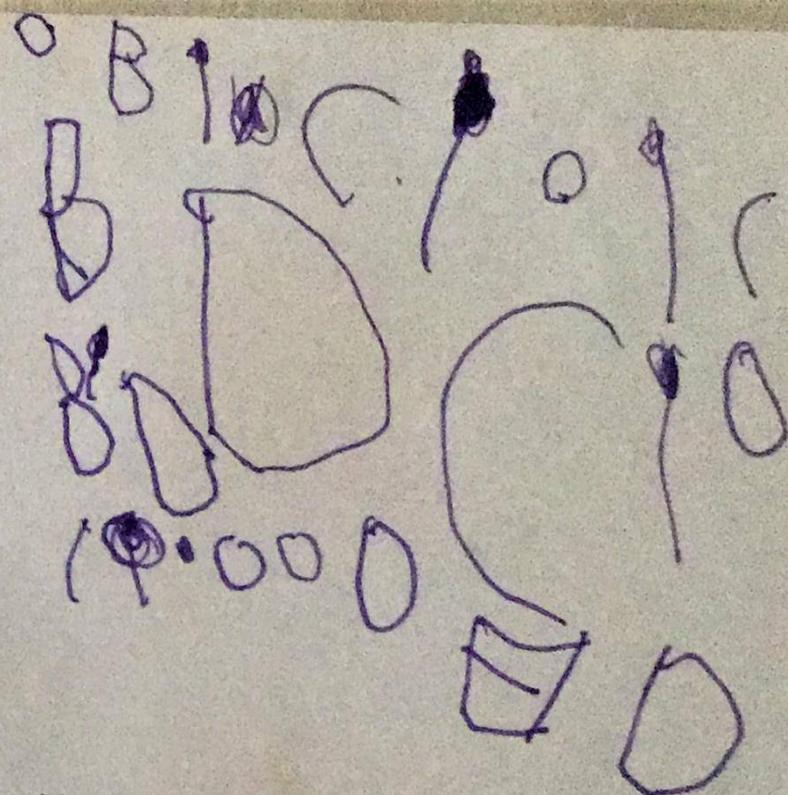
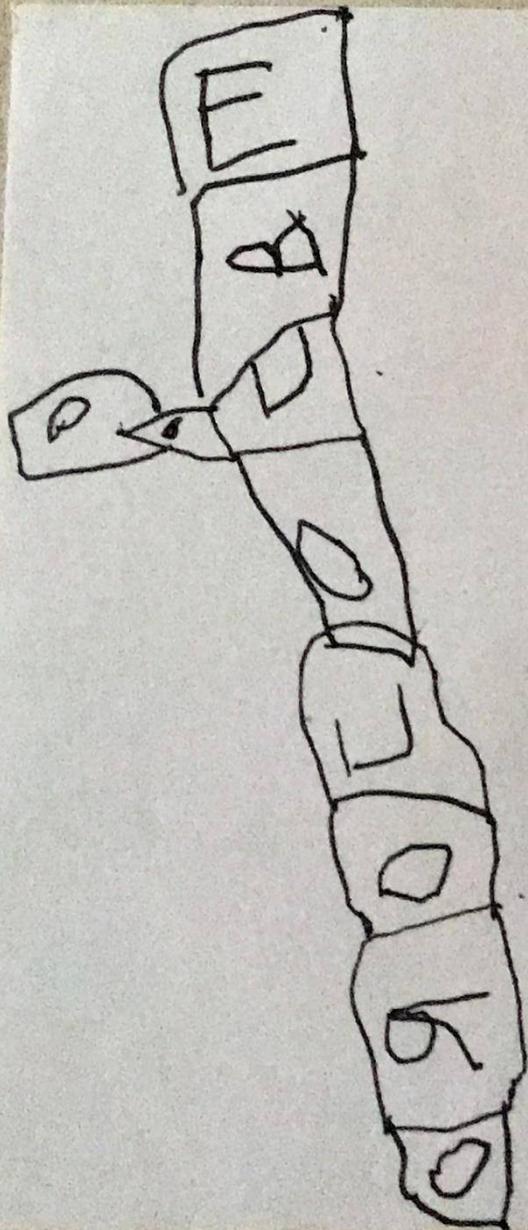


Representing
ideas through
drawing, writing
and story-
making

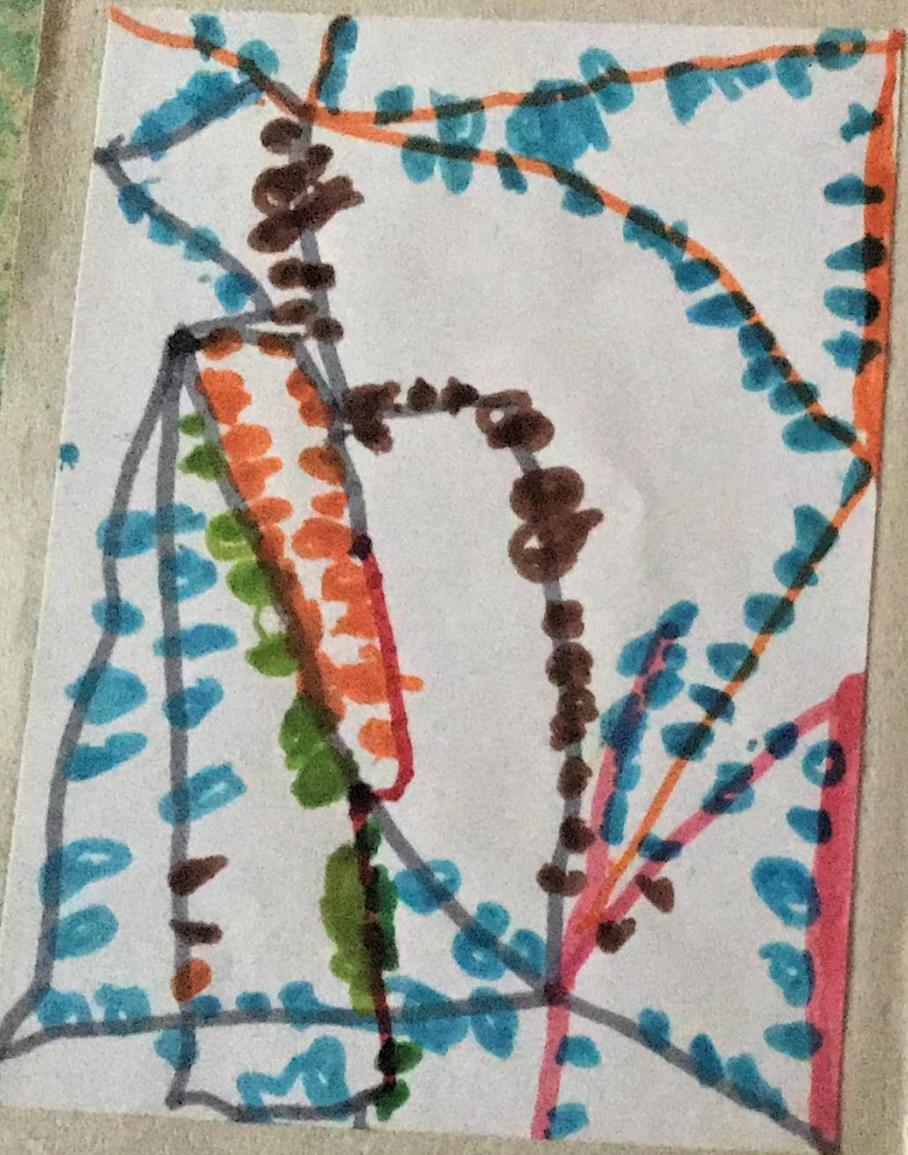




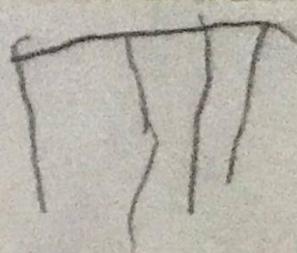
The spider said, "Ouch! That ain't nice."
But then it had a nice surprise. There
was a birthday cake with candles on
top and they had a spider party before
they went to bed. When they were asleep
some little spiders came out of the
rest of the cake and ate it all up.



It was still night time and the spider went out to play. It played hop scotch with it's friends. It was walking instead of jumping like the others. It was cheating. So, the others waited until it went to sleep again and then they jumped on it.



R



A spider decorated it's web because
it was it's birthday. It put all balls
round it with it's body.

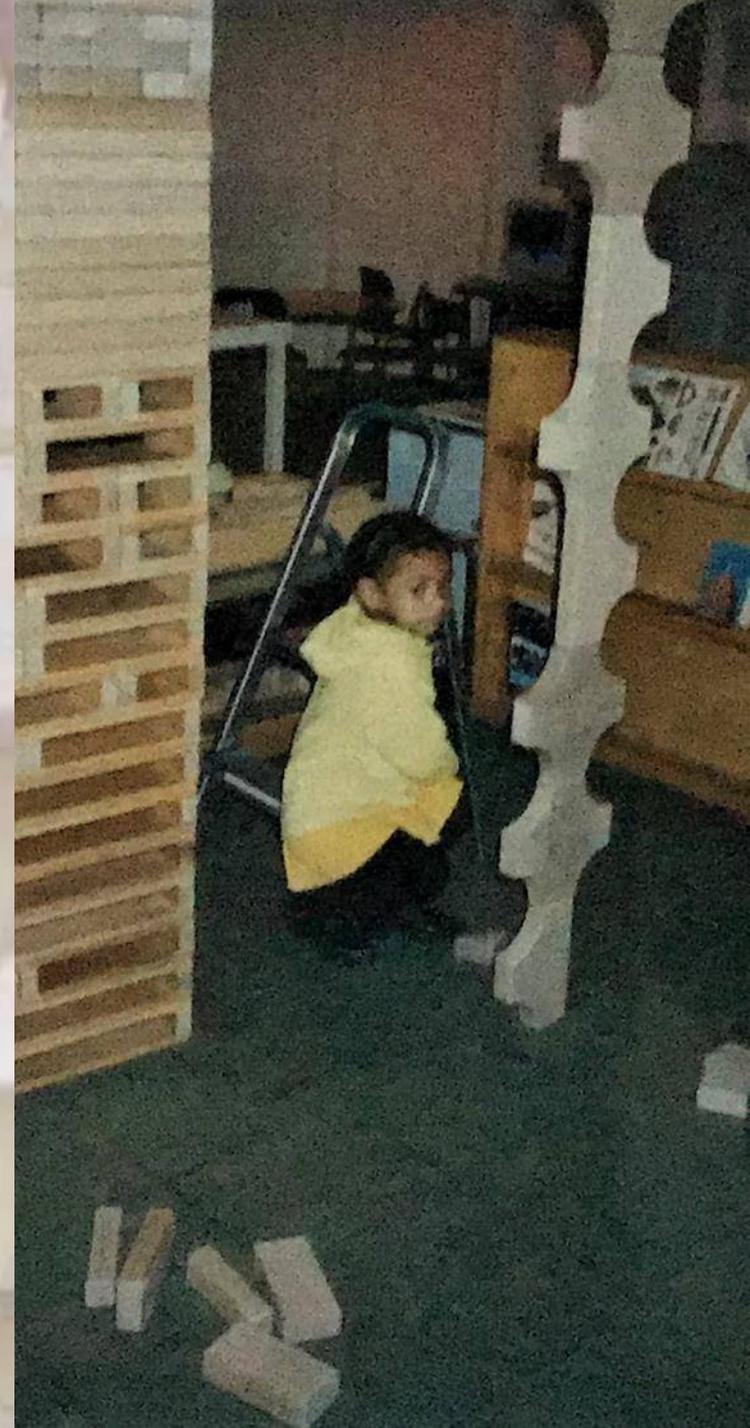
The Having of Wonderful Ideas -

‘The more we help children to have their wonderful ideas and to feel good about themselves for having them, the more likely it is that they will some day happen upon wonderful ideas that no one else has happened upon **before**’.

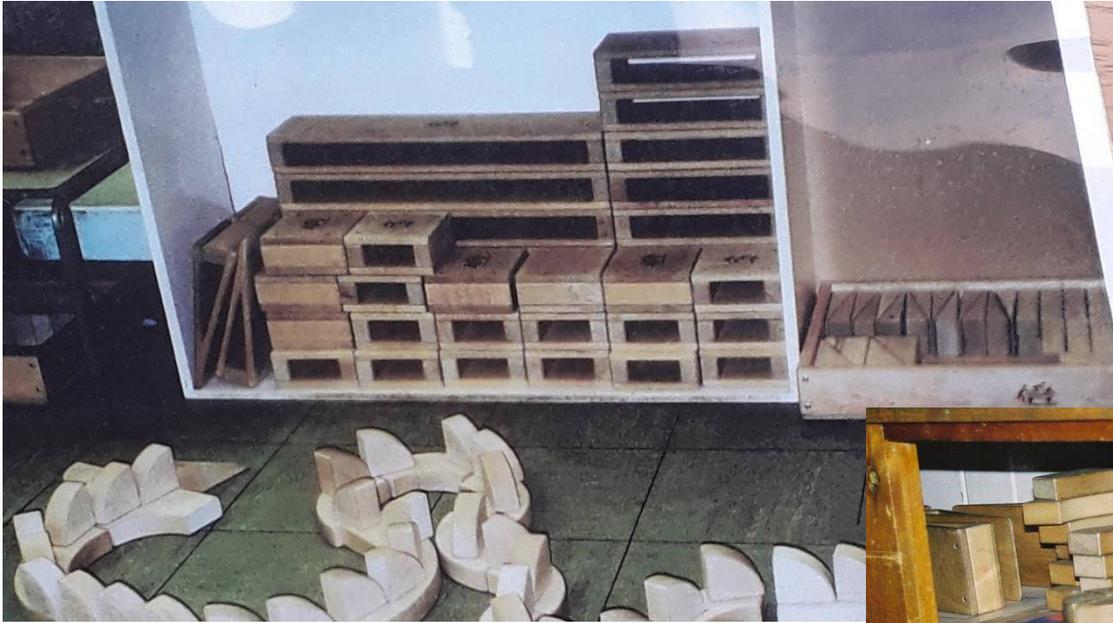
Eleanor Duckworth (1987 :14)

Practical issues

Presentation of blocks:
issues of space

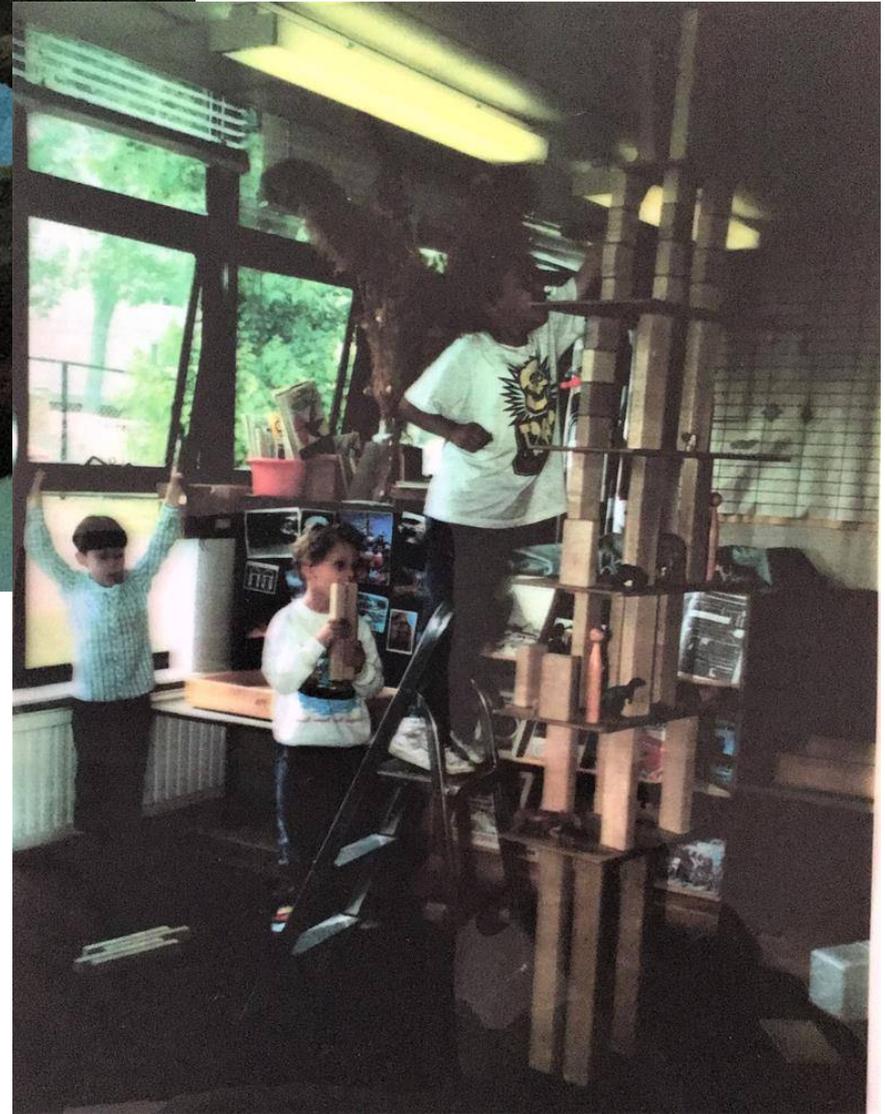


Children should be able to select the block of their choice (shape and size)



Children should be able to build at different heights, on a floor or carpet (or table or...?) and be able to use space flexibly.





Children may want to incorporate other elements into the area e.g. small world (but let this emerge from their own interests)



There should be material available to encourage children and adults to document blockplay



The area should include visual elements to stimulate ideas for blockplay



Presentation of blocks: Issues of time



- Children should have long periods of **‘uninterrupted’ time to play**
- Children should be able to leave and return to their constructions. This has implications:
 - Overnight or between sessions?
 - If a child has seemingly left the area and someone wants to use the blocks

Tidying up



- See tidying up as a time for learning
- See tidying as a way of instilling respect for each other and the environment
- Some tidying may need to happen *during* a session
- Allow time to tidy at the end of a session so the area is ready for the next session. BUT take note of any structures which may be mid-construction (does there need to be a note left?)
- Model how you expect the blocks to be tidied (**but incorporate children's ideas too**)

Adult role

- Be there! Our presence as educators speaks volumes about what we see as important
- **Be a 'play partner'** for children – sometimes taking more of a backseat role and at other times more of a lead
- Be a role model of respectful practice



Supporting peer group learning in blockplay

- Recognise that children learn from each other as much as they do from and with adults
- Allow children the time and space to work through issues in their blockplay, whilst being available as a resource for them to turn to



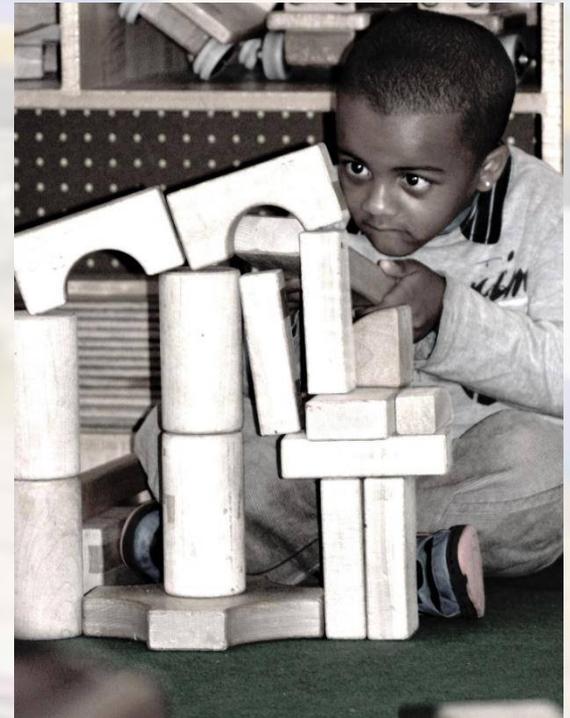
The power of blockplay ...

‘Children use stuff, including blocks as *tools* to think about the world of ideas, feelings, imaginings, events, people and places beyond the here and now.

As tools of thought blocks provide the means for giving external expression and form to their ideas.

They can then be looked at, **worked on and refined.**’

Adapted from Pat Gura (1996:54)



References and further reading

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Thank you to -

- Annan, the Froebel School – Sussex
- Danebury Primary School Early Years department, Wandsworth
- **Eastwood Nursery School and Children's Centre, Wandsworth**
- **Somerset Nursery School and Children's Centre, Wandsworth**
- London ReFocus members (a Regional network of Sightlines-Initiative).
- London Borough of Ealing – early years settings