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The Froebel Blockplay Research Project

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The book *Exploring Learning: Young Children and Blockplay* was published in 1992 (Gura, 1992) and a VHS film was made (Bruce and Gura, 1991). The Froebel Blockplay Research Project on which it was based was of personal and professional importance to me and it seems timely to revisit the research now, 25 years after publication and nearly 30 years on from the project’s inception.

**The Project and my involvement**

At the time of the Project I worked in Danebury Primary School, which has long since been amalgamated to become a new school. Back then, I was a nursery nurse (NNEB) in the nursery class of that school, working alongside two teachers: Ann Bridges and Dorothy Wickson and another nursery nurse: Tracie Taylor.

The school’s proximity to Froebel College/Roehampton Institute (as it was then called) meant that I had formed some connection with the institution, such as attending some twilight lectures and being inspired by speakers such as Tina Bruce and Lilian Katz in the late 1980s. Engaging with the ideas of people such as this encouraged me to view ‘early childhood’ as something worthy of academic study as well as being significant in terms of the very practical task of educating and caring for young children.

When educators in my setting were asked whether we wanted to become part of the Froebel Blockplay Research Project, Ann Bridges was pivotal in encouraging me to be part of the project and attend the initial meetings at the College to set the project on track. Following this, I was a keen participant throughout the Project. Without Ann I doubt I would have become so involved: ‘research’ was something teachers, not nursery nurses, did. Or so I thought then.

At the time, of embarking on the Project, the blockplay area of our nursery classroom was sadly neglected and the same could be said of the classrooms of the other five early childhood settings which participated in the study and perhaps many others around the country. Blocks were equipment that many nurseries I knew seemed to have – a resource one would expect to see – but somehow their potential for learning had been forgotten. Reading Jane Read’s work in
"Exploring Learning: Young Children and Blockplay" (Gura, 1992) I later realised that wooden blocks have a long provenance, going back to the 'Gifts' designed by Froebel with children's learning through play in mind. Alongside the wooden blocks as a resource, our involvement as educators in supporting children in their learning in the blockplay area needed reinvigorating. Art activities, for example, were generally well-supported by educators where I worked, but the blockplay area, by way of comparison, was sadly neglected.

This changed dramatically in the course of the Project. As a nursery team we spent increasing time in the blockplay area, writing meticulous narrative observations of the children's activity. We had detailed discussions with children about what they were building and how they were approaching their constructing with the aim of supporting the play as best we could. This was characteristic of the research as a whole: exploring our role as educators and the kinds of interactions which supported and enhanced the children's blockplay. Bruce's (1991) notion of 'play-partnering' is indicative of the interactive position we came to as sometimes we stepped back to observe, sometimes we followed the children's lead and at other times – as educators – we took more of a lead in the blockplay ourselves. At the time I was unaware of Froebel's careful thinking about ideas of freedom and guidance in play (Liebschner, 1992), but reading of this now I see how our own deliberations on this issue in the Blockplay Research Project resonated strongly with debates from the past.

Digital cameras were a technology of the future and using a camera incurred costs, so we often had to draw the children's constructions ourselves and increasingly the children joined us in this endeavour. This, in turn, led to fascinating conversations about the challenge of trying to represent something three-dimensional on (two-dimensional) paper and prompted questions such as: what angle to draw from? This was just one example of adults (educators) problem-solving alongside the children, which was indicative of the project as a whole. To elaborate, there was a real sense of co-researching with children rather than on children right from the outset of the research project, which cannot be underestimated. More recently, such ideas about research have gathered pace, refreshed with the impetus derived from the idea of young children as capable commentators on their own lives and bolstered by understandings of children as bearers of rights (Schiller and Einarsdottir, 2009). Back then, we were exploring such ideas but perhaps not articulating them in such a way: the language of 'listening to children' was on the horizon but yet to enter common-usage in classroom practice and research.

Dorothy and Tracie were a little less involved in the actual study as they had young children at the time but their support was instrumental in enabling Ann and me to spend long periods of time in the blockplay area of the classroom through basing themselves in other areas of our provision, but they too observed children engaged in blockplay as part of the project. Typically modest, both were surprised to see themselves acknowledged at the front of the book Exploring Learning: Young Children and Blockplay which set out the Project's key findings, but I continue to view their involvement as a vital component in the research. Indeed in all classroom-based research I have done or read about since I am acutely aware of the people who enable research to happen, whose names do not always appear in written texts as 'researchers' or 'authors'.

Early on in the project I can recall how stimulating it was to come together as educators working in six different settings at Froebel College. Preliminary discussions centred on issues such as the kinds of observation sheets we might use. Rather than imposing an observational structure on us, Tina Bruce (as Research Director) and Pat Gura (as Assistant Research Director) listened to our thoughts as a group of educators and, in the spirit of co-generative inquiry we co-constructed something that worked for us all. This idea of 'bottom-up' research, now vaunted as 'action research' or 'educator/practitioner research', coloured the entire Project. In the resulting book (Gura, 1992) there is scant discussion of this and I suspect that today there would be
more interest and expectation from such a book’s readership in the process of the research in order to scrutinise more thoroughly the way the research was conducted and to document the research-relationships which developed over time between children and families, educators and the Director and Assistant Director.

Pat Gura often visited the school where I worked and either played alongside the children in the blockplay area, freeing us to spend additional time there and she was generally on-hand for discussion. Taking a lead in writing-up the research (ibid), Pat ensured that all the educator-participants in the study were involved to come degree in the writing-up, sending us drafts and encouraging discussion on these. I probably did not take as full a role as I would now in this process but it is indicative of how valued we were as a group of educators working ‘on the ground’. Today, I suspect, more would be made of the collaborative nature of the project and the ways in which this was manifest throughout the research process, not least in the writing-up.

Not long after the research was completed I undertook a Diploma in Early Childhood Studies at the Roehampton Institute and soon after studied there for a BA (Hons) (1992–5). A year later, at the same institution, I studied for a PGCE (early years and primary) and became a teacher. My first post was in a new school in Hounslow and I was given a substantial budget to resource the new building. Unsurprisingly, sets of wooden blocks were high on my shopping list. Within two years I was on the Senior Management Team of the school and held leadership positions in subsequent settings too. I returned to study for an MA Early Childhood Studies at Roehampton in 2000–2003 as I missed the challenge of academic study. Throughout this time blockplay was a key feature in my practice and was an area of provision I never neglected again.

Moving into higher education

Not long after the Froebel Blockplay Research Project was completed, I recall Tina Bruce encouraging me to disseminate the project at the Institute of Education (now part of University College London). ‘There’ll only be a few people’, she said so I agreed with some trepidation. I did not think anyone would be interested in my thinking on the research and at the time doubted my ability to articulate those ideas for an academic and practitioner audience. Tina kindly offered to help with the media resources, which in those days was a now archaic looking carousel to house photographs of the children’s constructions. Seemingly small things such as support like this can be pivotal in empowering someone to disseminate their work I suggest. Tripp (1993) talks of ‘critical incidents’ and this, I would argue, was one such ‘critical incident’ as I suddenly found myself talking with confidence to an audience of around 40 people. The popularity of the research seminar meant we had to open up the space to accommodate the people. Amazingly, people were interested in what I was saying and not just the ideas of Tina Bruce!

Unbeknown to me at the time, Linda Pound was in the audience in her (then) guise as Early Years Inspector for Greenwich. Years later I met her when I came to work at London Metropolitan University, initially as a visiting lecturer and then as a permanent member of the Early Childhood team (2003–2016). She remembered my seminar and, when asked in interview to discuss how I had led practice in some way, I was able to use my experience of disseminating the Froebel Blockplay Research Project as an exemplar. One of the first modules I was asked to teach was ‘Investigation and Problem-Solving’, which seemed to have been written for me and was a delight to teach.

In 2016 I returned to what is now called the University of Roehampton as part of the Early Childhood Studies’ team and a member of the Early Childhood Research Centre. By now I had long-since completed a PhD and my area of ‘expertise’ is in the area of mealtimes in early
childhood settings, seemingly far removed from my blockplay days. However, interestingly, my research has focused on mealtimes as a lens through which to examine interactions between adults and children as well as children and their peers so there are synergies with some aspects of the Blockplay Research. This year (2017) I have been module convenor on a module called ‘Froebelian Perspectives’ and, unsurprisingly, the Froebel Gifts, forerunners of the blocks we often see used today, play an important role in the module content.

Continuing reflections

Whilst the Project was many years ago now, I still feel its effect and continue to reflect on the issues it raises. As an example, in recent writing (Albon and Rosen, 2014) I reflected anew on being an educator-researcher in the Froebel Blockplay Research Project, not least examining thorny issues of consent when simultaneously occupying a position of being a researcher and educator through re-engaging with a memory of a child who enjoyed being an onlooker of other children’s constructing/constructions. In so doing, I re-examined ‘noticing’ and ‘capturing’ children’s play experiences through copious documentation in the contemporary context (Cederman, 2008) when documenting activity is increasingly reified over engaging with children’s present, embodied and relational selves (Albon and Rosen, 2014).

My present engagement with the writing of Mikhail Bakhtin (1993) and his notion of ‘unfinalisability’ is important here and I hope might act as enticement to continue to dialogue with research. Although the research ‘proper’ ended long ago, it continues to affect what I do and feel about early childhood education and research but this ‘thinking’ shifts over time through my on-going engagement with children and educators, students, research writings and reflection.

This sense of continuing to dialogue with research is also reflected in the way aspects of the research are articulated differently over time. In the late 1990s and early 2000s I was often asked to speak at local authority conferences about the Blockplay Research Project. During this time I was habitually asked to focus my presentations on problem-solving and blockplay or ideas about ‘risk’-management in the block area. These shifts in focus represent the way concerns about early childhood education and care change and so the findings of the Blockplay Research and my own practice in years after the Project were re-articulated for new times. I found myself having to ‘defend’ the risk-taking practices of ‘stunt-builders’ (a name we coined for those children who explored the boundaries of height and balance in their blockplay) in a pervasive climate of risk-averseness.

An oft-asked question at that time was just how high children should be permitted to build. I still recall one child building a construction with the aim to hit the ceiling during the Blockplay Research Project. It took her all afternoon, with two educators in close support as towards the end she was standing on a ladder on a table. Over the course of the afternoon most of the class of children had gathered to observe her endeavour (at a distance we felt was ‘safe’) and the sense of collective ‘eureka’ when the final block hit the ceiling was palpable. So it’s difficult to answer the ‘height question’ assuredly; indeed the worst accident I ever saw was when a very low block building fell on a child’s hand, right next to me, as I supported his play. Then and now, I don’t think there are ‘easy’ answers to such questions but recognise that the idea educators can/should ‘manage’ risk in entirety is a powerful contemporary narrative, which governs the work of early childhood educators (Albon and Rosen, 2014). I do, however, reflect that participation in the Project all those years ago gave me a confidence in articulating and justifying my practice in relation to ‘risk’ and indeed other early childhood education and care-related topics.
Conclusion

I don’t pretend that all those who participated in the Froebel Blockplay Research Project would have similar reflections to my own presented here in relation to its personal and professional impact. I have lost contact with some people long ago and Tracie, I know, has long-since died. But I suspect that we would all, in our different ways, reflect positively on what participation in such a research project can bring to one’s professional practice.

I hope in documenting my own involvement in the Project and its aftermath, I have shown how it left an indelible mark on me, not least in being pivotal in my career trajectory. I like to think it impacted on the children and families too. At Tracie’s funeral in 2008, I re-connected with a number of children (now adults) I had previously taught and their families at an event which was held in the school on the Alton Estate, Roehampton – an amalgamation of the school I had worked in with Tracie, Ann and Dorothy many years previously and where the Froebel Blockplay Research Project (with five other settings) had been conducted (Tracie had spent most of her career living and working in the same school.) A former child-participant in the project, now grown up, of course, came over recalling: ‘Do you remember when we used to play with wooden bricks?’ There will only ever be one answer to this: ‘Of course I do...’ but this does not mean my ideas have remained static or that I do not continue to dialogue with ideas from the Research Project today.

Acknowledgement

This chapter is dedicated to the memory of Tracie Taylor, my friend, former colleague and blockplay researcher/enthusiast, who died in 2008.