

MOVING AROUND AND LEARNING

(from a paper by Anna Carrasco, teacher at Purple Circle Daycare in New York City.)

I currently teach in the Big Kids room at Purple Circle Daycare. Purple Circle is a language-enriched environment that has managed in the time span of thirty-five years to celebrate “childhood,” working to support the natural way in which individuals make meaning of their world.

Early childhood programs such as Purple Circle are in danger of extinction. The ultimate culprit in the decline of experience-based programs is society’s reliance on standardized assessment tools and IQ tests, which are currently undisputed indicators of knowledge. A recent article in The New York Times confirms this demand from policy makers to assess children’s knowledge through testing, regardless of age. “Head Start programs have been taking the lead in preschool screening in large part because low-income children have high rates of language delay; most of the children in the center here arrive more than a year behind.”ⁱ In order to challenge the tests, it is imperative to describe a learning environment that supports observations, documentation and reflection by teachers, the individuals who have unprecedented contact with learners on a daily basis.

The Big Kids room is one of four classrooms that belong to Purple Circle; it is a small and intimate school. At present there are twenty-two children ages four

to five years old who gather together in this space. There are four teachers who work alongside the children.

[At this point in her paper, Anna Carrasco takes the reader on a tour of the classroom setting. The excerpts that follow give some scenes from the tour.]

A Space Open to Loud Meetings and Quiet Mystery

If you turn to your left upon entering the classroom you will find yourself in an open space that has been designated for the unit blocks, wooden cubes, and wooden people and animals. The word “designated” is used in terms of how materials are organized, not how the space is utilized. There is one large shelf that holds writing materials such as paper, colored pencils, and tape. The children are encouraged to bring items found throughout the classroom into any of the areas as they deem necessary. In this area children erect structures that range from abstract, aesthetically pleasing to very specific architectural representations of buildings and sites that can be found in their neighborhood and throughout large cities, as well as fanciful places that emerge from the imagination. The children and the teachers come together in this space to do music and movement and hold meetings. In the past, this space has hosted numerous picnics. The children independently move in and out of this space. They work alone and in groups, creating and recreating settings that are of interest such as

train stations, farm settings, and beds for their babies.

Whether they enter the space with a preconceived mental image of what they want to create or get inspired as they begin to build, the completed structures often warrant further inspection by the teachers and the other children. There is a lot of talk that takes place in this space, children expressing their ideas, describing the use of a block, or problem solving. The noise level may fluctuate from boisterous and lively to calm and relaxed. The children may move around quickly or lie quietly on the floor as they build. The children are proud of the work that they have created and will at times eagerly explain the function of the structure or provide information on detailed attributes added to the structure. This space holds boundless opportunities and through the lens of the children, the walls within this space melt away and are transformed into a fanciful and mysterious setting where the possibilities are endless.

This is what occurred one quiet afternoon. Although it was time for outdoor play, a small group of children opted to stay in the classroom to work on individual unit block structures. Elizabeth had connected four unit blocks so as to make a square. She divided the middle of the square into two sections using one pillar. Elizabeth stopped working and approached the block shelf, stopping a few feet away from the shelves. She looked intently at all of the shelves before approaching the teacher who had been watching the children at work from a nearby table. "I can't find

the people." Without moving from her seated position, the teacher quickly scanned the shelves before saying, "Where can they be?" Elizabeth's eyes opened wide and said in a whispering voice, "Maybe they're in there?" She pointed to a small, rectangular shaped, enclosed wooden box; the top of the box had been assembled using primarily pillar blocks. The teacher started to respond to Elizabeth, who quickly shushed the teacher. This caught the attention of a friend who had been busily working on her own structure. The friend joined the conversation, whispering, "What is it?" Elizabeth then said with wide open eyes, "We can't find the block people. We think they're in there."

All three of us looked at the enclosed box. At this point the atmosphere in the room changed noticeably. The teacher became aware of the lighting in the room. The light in the meeting area had been turned off, softening the intensity of lighting throughout the rest of the room. All of the sudden the small group started to hear sharp thudding sounds that were coming from the back room. "What's that?" "I don't know!" The trio stood together, quietly listening to the sounds, when the creator of the box returned from the bathroom. Sensing a change in the classroom, he said, "What happened?" Elizabeth responded in a whispering voice, "The block people are not here." "We think they're in there." The friend looked at his box, and then looked at Elizabeth, smiling at her with a mischievous grin before saying, "In there?" Elizabeth nodded, moving away

from the group back towards the shelves. She stopped in front of a shelving unit, leaned forward and said in a loud voice, "I found them!" The entire scene must have lasted for about three minutes. In the blink of an eye, Elizabeth had injected the space with an air of mystery and suspense. She openly welcomed the teacher and her classmates into her magical world. Events such as the one described occur on a daily basis. No two are alike, the children playing out intricate scenes that interweave reality with wonderment. They create a world that is meaningful, a world where the possibilities are endless.

Rescue Center at the Window Sill

The large hollow blocks that cannot be stored in the shelves are situated underneath a window sill. Three friends placed chairs directly in front of the large hollow blocks. On top of these blocks are several computer keyboards, each containing a computer mouse. The boys added telephones, a small hollow block, credit cards, paper, and colored pencils. They set up a space ship that was headed into outer space. Somehow the play changed gears and their work space was transformed into a 911 switchboard operator booth. The children would call each other, one playing the role of a concerned citizen, the other the operator. This is what they said:

Aaron: A Y. I call you and you say, "Hello 911" okay.

Alex: Hello 911

Aaron: Emergency in New York!

Alex: Okay, there's an emergency at 100th Street and Broadway, goodbye.

Alex then swiped a credit card on the keyboard before typing in the information. The third child was quickly jotting down information on a piece of paper. As this scene was unfolding several of the children entered the space and added an array of hollow/unit blocks sectioning off the emergency operator booth. Their unit block structure closely resembled a historical ruin. Before we move on, I have to ask you to reflect on the meaningful knowledge that the boys verbally expressed as they engaged in this role play. They had some understanding of how emergency operators relay important information to emergency workers. One child was able to give the name of the city in which he lives; the other could narrow down this information by providing an actual street and avenue found in this city. Each of the boys had a designated job: a citizen, an operator, and a record keeper of incoming calls. There was a sense of organization to the play; the participants followed each others' verbal and nonverbal cues. What is so striking about this scene is the nonverbal gestures, such as the swiping of the credit card on the keyboard as if to activate an invisible computer. The child who was busy writing closely resembled a scribe, recording and documenting information. The markings on the paper that I referred to as writing followed the same flowing movements that resembled cursive writing. The child had written the letter A, and

there are two arrows pointing to two different scribbles. One interpretation made on the significance of the arrows was that they were pointing to important jottings. A second individual viewed the arrows as connecting one line of scribbles to another. The most important aspect of this observation is that the child immersed himself completely in the experience.

Writing a Sign to Barricade the Unit Block Area

One late afternoon Eric was busy creating a sign. The sign consisted of a plain white piece of paper. He carefully wrote the word stop in the middle of the paper. Aaron was working in the art area quietly observing his friend at work. Upon completing the sign, Eric then proceeded to block off the unit block area using masking tape, the edge of a shelf, a chair, and the wooden bench. Aaron watched his friend carefully from afar. Once Eric had successfully completed barricading the main entrance of the unit block area he attached the stop sign to the tape. Aaron approached his friend and said, "But where is my paper going to go?" He had completed a drawing of different colored lines, arches that closely resembled the letter C, and circles. Eric replied, "There!" as he pointed to the tape. Several of the children came to inspect the barricade. This brought on a heated discussion on closing off the area. Many of the children reminded Eric that he was not a teacher and therefore he could not close off the

area. All of the areas are maintained open and the children are aware of this fact. Eric listened quietly to children before responding. He assured them that he was not closing off the area and that he had made a "go-under bridge". The children seemed satisfied with his response and decided to test out the bridge. Aaron watched his friend with an amused smile on his face. This story does not end here; in fact it was continuously evolving for several days.

Learning Letters in the Art Area

The next day Aaron walked over to a teacher and asked her to help him write his name. The teacher was in the middle of setting up an activity and there were several impatient artists waiting to start work on the activity. She asked Aaron to start working on writing his name and said that she would join him in the area as soon as possible. Aaron with a sad expression and pouting lips replied, "But I don't know how to draw the letters." The teacher glanced around the room and spotted the second teacher in the classroom setting out the clay and Eric, who was working in the art area. She then asked Aaron to seek out his friend for assistance. He walked over to the art area. Sometime after, the teacher saw Aaron holding onto a piece a paper and asked him if she could take a look at his work. On the bottom right hand portion of the paper there was an array of letters. There were several T's and I's and an A. Throughout

the entire paper there were several letter A's and L's. By comparing the letters on the bottom of the page with the surrounding letters the teacher was able to see that Aaron had written several of the letters. The letters that Aaron had written were considerably lighter in color and the lines were wavy. Other than that they were clear representations of letters. Through careful observation of a friend engaged in the writing process, Aaron had developed a natural interest in print. The question is, would Aaron have shown this level of enthusiasm for writing if he had been sitting at a desk following a teachers request that he learn to write his name? The answer would probably be yes. He would most likely follow the teacher's orders, but he would not be able to see the purpose of writing. It would be a task void of any meaningful experience.

Using the Masking Tape for Writing

All of the children in the Big Kids room have taken an interest in writing. There has been a progression from writing their own names to writing the names of their peers. They have also gone from writing on paper to writing on masking tape. I am now going to share two different observations based on the children's exploration in regards to print.

I walked into the classroom one morning and found three friends engaged in an art activity. This art activity was taking place on the water table. Casey was busy adding

glue, beads, and buttons onto a round plastic container lid. The second child, Mildred, was sitting quietly watching the first girl as she worked. The third child, Sandy, was in the process of writing her name on a section of the masking tape roll. When she had completed writing her name she went over to the woodworking table located directly behind the water table and retrieved her finished artwork. Sandy walked over to Casey, who was still adding materials to the plastic lid and stood silently next to her. Casey stopped working and took the artwork from her friend, holding it up above her head. Sandy attempted to rip the section of the tape that had her name. She then said an exasperated, "I can't even rip it" before she successfully managed to tear the name off the tape roll. Meanwhile Casey kept the artwork suspended high in the air as Sandy attached the name tag to the bottom of the lid. Mildred watched the two friends as they worked together. Casey finished her art work, ripped off a long piece of tape attached it onto the table and wrote her name. She then attached the tape onto her artwork. Casey placed the artwork on the woodworking table and quickly left the area. She stopped in front of the door and removed a friend's name tag. Casey then returned to the water table and started to write the friend's name using the name tag as reference. Sandy then did the same as Casey. Mildred got up from the chair, walked over to Casey and said, "I need to tell you something." She then whispered into Casey's ear. Casey listened

intently to Mildred before saying, "I'll show you." She ran over to the door and retrieved Mildred's name tag. She placed the name tag on the table and proceeded to write down Mildred's name. Mildred took hold of the name tag and said, "I can do it now." Before we move on I must ask you to stop and think about all of the observations given. Within all of the observations, you will find that there is a lot of movement by the participants. The children exhibit different strategies when problem solving, and most importantly, there is a lot of meaningful talk.

One day, Elizabeth entered the classroom right before lunchtime. She had a name tag attached to her shirt. She informed the teachers that she had visited a new school. The day went on as usual. Several days later she handed a teacher a piece of tape with the teacher's name written on it. She then asked the teacher to adhere the tape onto her shirt, "So that everyone knows who you are." The teacher replied, "I think everyone in the classroom already knows who I am." "But if you go to a new school they don't know your name." The teacher agreed to her request. Elizabeth smiled approvingly and walked away. The new school experience had been on Elizabeth's mind all along. By giving the teacher a name tag, Elizabeth was expressing her concerns about moving on to a new and strange school. The teacher quickly jotted down Elizabeth's words, "But if you go to a new school they don't know your name." This simple sentence spoke

volumes about her uncertainty with moving on to a new school where people did not know your name. Elizabeth found an expressive outlet in masking tape. One could write on it and it can adhere to clothing just like a name tag. She had also made a profound connection between a person's name and their identity. If you do not know a person's name then how could you possibly know who they are as an individual? This is a conversation that is not easily forgotten.

ⁱ Associated Press, "Early Repairs In Foundations For Reading: Testing and Bolstering Preschool Literacy Skills," New York Times, B. 7, October 4, 2006.