

# Writing Around the Room

## Building Better Writers

by Rebecca McMahon Giles

Block play is a natural activity for promoting such foundational literacy skills as visual discrimination, eye-hand coordination, fine motor development and oral language. A recent study found that children, both with and without disabilities, who were better block builders during preschool had higher reading abilities in elementary school (Hanline, Milton, & Phelps, 2010). The innate benefits of block play in promoting children's reading and writing abilities are greatly increased when teachers intentionally prepare the block center for literacy learning. A print-rich block center provides authentic opportunities for children to become authors, which are further facilitated through adult modeling and encouragement.

### Spontaneous Opportunities for Writing

Children learn a lot about the purpose of print and how it works from the

labels, signs and other kinds of print they see around them. If we want children to engage in literacy activity during play, then play settings should contain materials that create a compelling environment for play-related reading and writing activities (Roskos and Christie, 2001).

A print-rich block center results from the presence of three types of print:

- Purposeful print—text that communicates useful information Examples: signs, directions, and labels
- Environmental print—any text that is naturally occurring within the child's surroundings, such as product names and logos on packages. Examples: road signs, cereal box blocks, and business logos
- Books and other reading materials such as children's literature, magazines and child-authored text

1. to show ownership,
2. to identify the type of building created, and
3. to prevent the buildings from being destroyed.

Additionally, children may use writing to plan the structures they intend to build or to document completed structures before they are dismantled.

To assist children in all their writing activities, the block center should contain materials that support such tasks. These materials include different kinds and sizes of paper, a variety of self-adhesive notes, index cards, pencils, markers and crayons along with items for attaching signs and notes to structures, such as masking tape or string.

Adding realistic literacy materials resembling those used by carpenters, engineers and architects encourages the use of writing in all stages of construction. With such realistic props available, children's engagement in literacy for real-life purposes increases and the recreation of adult literacy behaviors is

### Writing Materials

Stroud (1995) identified three reasons that children usually write in the block center. They are:



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encouraged (Lysaker, Wheat, & Benson, 2010). The presence of blueprints, clipboards and architectural magazines inspires children to mimic the writing behaviors observed by individuals in these roles. For example, children might sketch and label the floorplan of the house they intend to build, draft a press release for the grand opening of their waterpark, map the route for their super highway or write an invoice for the city's newest skyscraper. Materials should be rotated periodically to generate interest and offer opportunities to write in diverse ways for various purposes. Continuously adding different interesting writing materials, perhaps coordinated with a current theme of study, provides ideas and information for building while also inspiring the use of print in children's play.

Street signs incorporate environmental print into block play while serving as the impetus for stories of a family's driving adventures or a bus driver's record of his cross-county trip.

## Build a Word Wall

A word wall is an organized collection of words that are displayed for children to use. To create a word wall in the

block center, words can be displayed in a pocket chart, with magnets on a metal surface, clipped to a clothesline, or simply attached to a nearby wall, shelf back or other vertical surface. Regardless of form, the words need to be large enough and posted low enough to be easily seen by children. To increase effectiveness, consider adding pictures next to the words and/or making the words so that they can be manipulated by children.

## Planned Writing Activities

Keep a block journal. A block journal provides a valuable opportunity for children to record their building experiences as they draw, write or dictate stories about their structures. Teachers can encourage children to reflect upon and discuss the building process used or provide a detailed description of the finished product. When block-related writing samples are bound together in a collection of dated entries, they chronicle various building activities while also documenting children's growing knowledge of print and their abilities as writers (Giles & Tunks, 2015). A single, community block journal or individual building journals for each child both provide a place for children

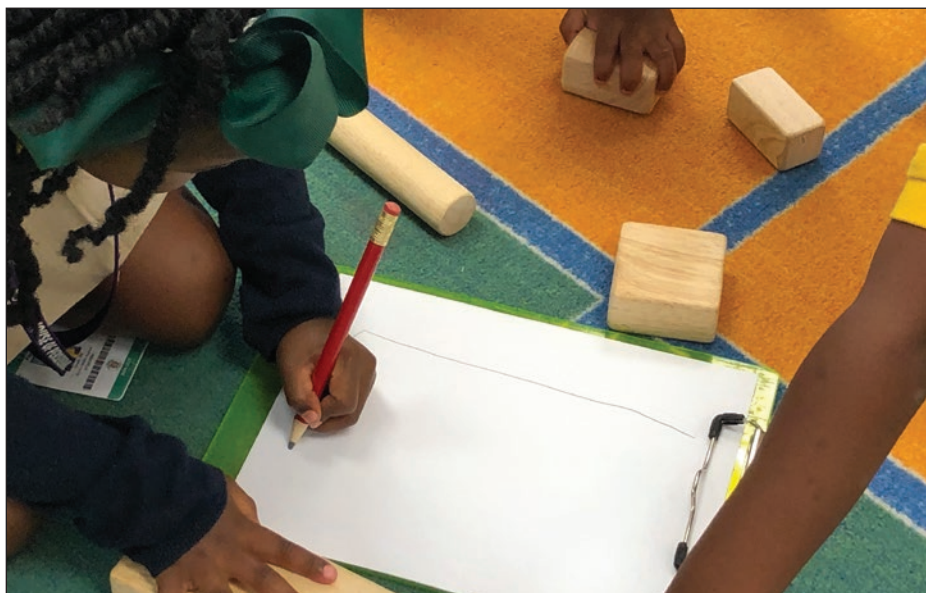
to record experiences related to their building. These journals, which contain photographs or illustrations along with child-produced or dictated text, provide a place to permanently record children's temporary creations. For more information about using a block journal read "A Block Journal: Building Young Authors through Construction Play" in the January/February 2015 issue of *Exchange*.

## Use Technology

An inexpensive digital camera and means of printing the pictures provides an enticing way to capture children's block play. When coupled with child-crafted captions, these pictures provide an excellent opportunity to challenge children's thinking and skill as authors. Digital cameras are particularly useful

### Motivational Materials for Building and Writing

- Blueprints and house plans
- Architectural magazines
- Calendars featuring famous buildings
- Graph paper
- Clip boards
- Flat carpenter pencils
- Maps and atlas
- Road signs
- Art books of bridges, buildings, and other structures
- Invoices, order forms, and envelopes
- Small note pads



Children plan their construction project before building begins.

for generating the following types of writing related to construction play:

- Before and after
- Sequence of events
- Series of steps
- Cause and effect

When these written products are sent home and shared with families, who rarely have the chance to admire block center accomplishments that occur at school, children's status as author is further affirmed.

## Literature Connection

Having books in the block center prompts children to read about topics

associated with their play. Both fictional stories and information books about houses, buildings, vehicles, heavy machinery, construction and demolition inspire variety in children's block play, challenging children to think beyond their own experiences as they create (see text box). Building books also introduce context-specific vocabulary with such fascinating new words as cottage, bungalow, mansion, skyscraper, villa, chalet, thatch, mortar, residence, and dwelling and serve as springboards for complex building projects.

Having both fictional stories and information books in the block center helps build vocabulary, inspire creative constructions, and develop literacy skills.

In addition to providing inspiring creative construction and motivation

for better building, literacy skills are developed through the introduction of books relevant to block play. "Alphabet City," (Johnson, 1999) "Alphabet under Construction," (Fleming, 2002) and "Bulldozer: A Construction ABC" (Sobel, 2003) strengthen children's alphabetic knowledge and can be coupled with alphabet blocks or wooden letters for practice building words. Other books, such as "How a House Is Built" by Gail Gibbons and "Cathedral: The Story of Its Construction" by David Macaulay, visually illustrate story sequence.

Block play books, ranging from the classic "Changes, Changes" (Hutchins, 1987) to more recent titles including "When I Build with Blocks" (Alling, 2012) and "Dreaming Up: A Celebration of Building" (Hale, 2012), are ideal for

### Books to Enhance Block Play

#### Houses and Homes

- "Building a House" by Byron Barton
- "Hammers, Nails, Planks, and Paint: How a House Is Built" by Thomas Campbell Jackson and Randy Chewing (Illustrator)
- "Houses and Homes" by Ann Morris and Ken Heyman (Illustrator)
- "A House for Hermit Crab" by Eric Carle
- "House Through the Ages" by Philip Steele and Andrew Howat and Gordon Davidson (Illustrators)
- "If I Built a House" by Chris Van Dusen
- "If You Lived Here: Houses of the World" by Giles Laroche
- "Raise the Roof" by Anastasia Suen and Elwood H. Smith (Illustrator)

#### Construction Machines

- "Big Machines! Big Buildings!" by Kevin Lewis and Reg Cartwright (Illustrator)
- "Good Morning, Digger" and "Big Wheels" by Ann Rockwell
- "The Little Excavator" by Anna Dewdney
- "Machines Go To Work" and "Machines Go to Work in the City" by William Low
- "Roadwork" by Sally Sutton and Brian Lovelock (Illustrator)

#### Builders

- "Block City" by Robbert Louis Stevenson and Ashley Wolff (Illustrator)
- "Iggy Peck Architect" by Andrea Beaty by David Roberts (Illustrator)
- "Jack the Builder" by Stuart Murphy
- "What Can Build?" by Patricia Whitehouse

#### Construction and Demolition

- "A Year at a Construction Site" by Nicholas Harris
- "Bam Bam Bam" by Eve Merriam and Dan Yaccarino (Illustrator)
- "Billions of Bricks: A Counting Book About Building" by Kurt Cyrus
- "The Busy Building Book" by Sue Tarsky and Alex Ayliffe (Illustrator)
- "Castles and Palaces" by Sally Lee
- "Demolition" by Sally Sutton and Brian Lovelock (Illustrator)
- "Goodnight, Goodnight, Construction Site" and "Mighty, Mighty, Construction Site" by Sherri Duskey Rinker and Tom Lichtenheld (Illustrator)
- "Pyramid and Castle" by David Macaulay
- "Up Goes the Skyscraper!" By Gail Gibbons

helping children relate to characters in the stories they read.

## Child-Authored Block Books

When children create books in the classroom, they better understand the role of authors and illustrators. Further, children who contribute to class-authored books feel a sense of ownership and pride that increases relevance and makes these books immediate favorites for repeated reading.

- Rewrite a familiar book such as “A House is a House for Me” by Mary Ann Hoberman (1979). Children’s vocabulary and creativity are challenged as they work collaboratively to compose and illustrate original versions to the repetitive text: “A \_\_\_\_\_ is a house for \_\_\_\_\_.” The finished product is sure to inspire the building of some unique homes.

- Make a book of world structures for your block center. Involve the children in searching for photos on the Internet (make sure to choose those that are permitted for personal/classroom use), in travel magazines or from old calendars showing such famous buildings as Big Ben, the Eiffel Tower, Blue Mosque, Great Wall of China, Taj Mahal, Stonehenge, Parthenon, Sydney Opera House and Leaning Tower of Pisa. Mount and label each picture. Then, laminate and bind pages together or place inside page protectors in a three-ring notebook. This inspirational book will stimulate an abundance of building along with opportunities to talk and write about different people and places.

The block center can and should play an important role in developing the skills and knowledge necessary for young children to become authors. The literacy learning

that inherently occurs during construction play can be further promoted when the block center is furnished with print and writing materials that support both spontaneous and planned writing activities.

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Community involvement can make a world of difference to a family facing insurmountable obstacles. The role of a child care center and its connections to the community are vital in the life of a family. An ECE company that shifts its business model to focus not only on the child in the classroom, but also the family foundations at home, will add immeasurable quality and benefits to the program. Building bridges in the community allows the ECE provider to offer services beyond child care, retain children in school longer, and build stability in family life at home. These practices help retain customers and ultimately strengthen the bottom line. More importantly, they fulfill our shared mission to nurture children, support families, and build communities.

Kelli Didomenico • Exchange Issue 223

