Article Review #6

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Article Review #6: “Bringing Building Blocks Back to the Kindergarten Classroom”

**Fundamental Question**

*What are the benefits of using blocks in Kindergarten?* Hansel’s (2015) article “Bringing Building Blocks Back to the Kindergarten Classroom” discusses the social, cognitive, and physical benefits of using blocks. This experimental learning method allows students to engage in a variety of learning opportunities. In the social-emotional domain, block play allows for dramatic play, role play, art and creative opportunities, and chances to develop sharing and prosocial behaviors with peers (Hansel, 2015) Students get an opportunity to work through what they see in their worlds and can represent their creations through drawing and discussions (Hansel, 2015). Within the cognitive domain, students get to apply their background knowledge and vocabulary, problem solve, create functional objects, count, classify, and tackle abstract concepts, such as balance, basic measurement, and visual-spatial orientation (Hansel, 2015). They get to compare 2- and 3-D shapes, among other geometry concepts (Hansel, 2015). In the physical domain, students get to work on fine and gross motor skills, as well as hand-eye coordination, as they manipulate the blocks (Hansel, 2015). In fact, Hansel (2015) points out that “Piaget would say that this is the only way to truly understand a concept” (p. 45). Furthermore, “constructing with blocks offers a unique opportunity for learning that has benefited engineers, designers, architects, and artists” (Hansel, 2015, p. 45). It is an engaging method to target a variety of important learning outcomes and skills for our young learners.

**Part-Whole Questions**

 *Why did the author write this article?* This author is based out of the United States where recent trends have Kindergarten rooms and curriculums being setup more like Grade One rooms. This includes a lack of play opportunities, increased time spent in desks, and independent work and worksheets. This is problematic based on the researched benefits of play and low evidence for worksheets (Hansel, 2015). This juxtaposes Kindergarten settings in New Zealand where play is at the forefront of instruction.

 *If you wanted to implement this in your classroom, what would be the best way to approach administration?* For those educators in divisions that do not supporting play-based learning, it may be tricky to advocate for this approach. However, there are countless, evidence-based research articles that support a play-based approach to learning. While play-based learning is a broad and often politicized topic, narrowing the focus on specific learning materials – such as this article does with blocks – may make for a more effective argument. Utilizing evidence-based research and approaching administration with a clear plan would be beneficial (Hansel, 2015). Since budgetary concerns can often be a deterrent, finding sets of blocks at garage sales or asking for donations may make this more probable (Hansel, 2015), especially if this is planned before presenting it to administration. Hansel (2015) recommends getting about 300 blocks for a three-person center but this can be developed over time and supplemented with additional materials. Finally, demonstrating the benefits to both parents and administration is key. This can be accomplished through videos, picture scrapbooks, and examples of students work (Hansel, 2015). In addition, getting students to discuss their learning journey with relevant parties at student led conferences and family events would be beneficial (triangulation of data through observations, products, and discussions).

**Hypothetical Question**

 *If this strategy occurred in schools, what would it look like and what would be different?* If a teacher were to implement this in their inclusive classroom, starting with preventative classroom management measures would be best. This may include scheduling block time into the day plan (Hansel, 2015). In addition, student-centered lessons on safety rules, appropriate block use, caring of materials, sharing, and cleanup procedures should occur (Hansel, 2015). Providing children with scripts for sharing and conflict resolution strategies is helpful; these instances should be viewed as learning opportunities within themselves, not as something to avoid altogether. Setting aside a designated area is the next step and it should be sizeable and conducive to building (Hansel, 2015). In addition, outdoor space can be used to add body movements and natural materials when building (Hansel, 2015). Adding various materials to the center will increase cross-curricular connections and allow students to build on what they know. Furthermore, students can create or select the items to be added, such as animal figurines, books, cars, marbles, and items from nature (Hansel, 2015). As the teacher gains competency, they can make cross-curricular lessons and activities connected to the block building such as drawing and orally presenting about a structure or measuring and comparing two structures in math. Then, documenting this learning to share with others and showcasing student work samples should occur (Hansel, 2015).

**Critical Questions**

*What are the strengths and weaknesses of this strategy?* This article did not have a research study that it focused on as it was more narrative and how-to in nature. However, it did draw from some research and offered a practical look into how building with blocks can be used in Kindergarten. The benefits highlighted are plentiful but not an exhaustive list. This article would be improved with additional research studies. However, for practical implementation the format is user-friendly.

*Do I agree or disagree and what should or should not happen?* I strongly believe in play-based learning, including using blocks, in our primary classrooms. I would argue that this can extend into the higher grades and can shift to game-based learning as students mature. The article points to the many benefits of using blocks to target a variety of skills and learning outcomes in Kindergarten. This research, juxtaposed with the unfavorable research on more independent, desk-work methods, makes it apparent to me which way our classrooms should lean towards. Furthermore, it is a more engaging approach that lends itself to high order thinking for students of all abilities. Adaptations can be made, such as nonstick grips (Hansel, 2015). Furthermore, the variety of materials and skills gleaned allows block building to target a variety of student needs and interests. For instance, with EAL learners, vocabulary can be scaffolded. Students can learn the language as they play and touch the physical objects. One student may be working on prepositional phrases, another on emotional language, another on concept words, and another on academic terms but this can occur in the same setting and at the same time through block play. Using blocks is an effective tool to target various skills in social, cognitive, and physical domains across many subjects and outcomes.

Works Referenced

Hansel, R. R. (2015). *National Association for the Education of Young Children,* *70*(1), 44-51.