

Application Activity 4

Observation of a Young Child

I observed Little Bean learning through creative play with boxes in his home over a one month period. Four year old Little Bean lives with his parents and uncle in a two bedroom apartment. My husband and I lived together with them as guests for several months in 2006. The predominant language used in Little Bean's home was Chinese. I had only a rudimentary grasp of the language so my communication with Little Bean was largely through gesture, modeling, and single word utterances. After living with the family for several weeks, I still had not observed Little Bean engage in creative play. His waking hours at home were spent watching television, eating, talking with his parents, playing computer games with his father or reciting Chinese characters. When some furniture was delivered to the home, the leftover boxes presented a novel opportunity to learn through play.

Characteristics of the pre-operational stage of development include engagement in symbolic play, transductive reasoning, using language to think about something that is not present, and making logical connections rather than focusing on one aspect of an object while ignoring others. I observed Little Bean demonstrate capacity for all of these elements, planting him firmly in the pre-operational stage of development. Initially, Little Bean seemed to demonstrate only a beginning capacity for symbolic play, however, as the month progressed his play indicated otherwise. At the end of the observation period his creation of a totally new vehicle showed that he was doing more than just replicating models that I made for him. He had the capacity to imagine something new. Little Bean also demonstrated symbolic play and transductive reasoning through the learning strategies he used. He experienced the "essence" of his house, rehearsing the experience of his house by going in and out and looking out the windows. He used clustering and elaboration to extend his conception of a box to include a house, vehicles, and furnishings. And he used language to summarize and identify his latest creation. Little Bean used his growing experience with boxes and knowledge of vehicles he saw every day in his cosmopolitan environment to create an airplane. To do so, he had to solve the problem of how to create a pointed nose on the plane from a rectangular flap of cardboard. He makes a valiant effort by cutting a triangular section from the rectangle. This effort demonstrates his knowledge of what airplanes look like, a sense of spatial relationships and shape, and his ability to apply this knowledge in a new context for symbolic representation. Conceptually, this task was extremely complex.

Through observation, rehearsal, experimentation and play, Little Bean adapted his understanding of what a box is and what it can be. He also adapted his understanding of what to do with his time. At first he assimilated his understanding of boxes, houses and vehicles into his existing understanding for those things. Then he demonstrated that he had accommodated his assimilation

of the theory of using a box to represent another object by solving the problem of how to use a box to create something entirely new. Furthermore, previous to this experience, Little Bean was never observed engaging in self-directed, creative play. His experience with the boxes proved to be a significant first step in activating his latent capacity in such activity.

Appendix

Notes:

Observation Context:

Over the course of one month in early Feb of 2006 I observed 4 year old Little Bean in his home where I was living. At the time Little Bean, an only child, was sharing his apartment with his parents, an uncle, my husband and myself. He is monolingual in Chinese. I had only the most rudimentary grasp of his language at the time. Thus my engagement with him was largely through parallel play and modeling. My limited language abilities drew me to be more observant and reflective of what I was observing. The following observation notes are excerpts from a writer's notebook that I was keeping at the time. Leading up to these events, Small Boy spent much of his day, everyday, watching television. I never observed him engaged in play though he had good supply of cars, trucks, blocks etc. in his room.

Feb 24, 2006

" Auntie! Auntie! The house fell down! Come! Come!"

Two days ago we had furniture delivered & I asked if we could keep the boxes for Small Boy to play with. *"Did you do this with YOUR children?"* Mom asks in amazement. *"Oh yes. Big boxes were our children's favorite toys...especially at this age. We can make a house ... cars ... a bus"* *"Oh, you must teach me how,"* Mom replies appreciatively.

So I got out a roll of wide tape & scissors. Pointing to the largest box, I said, *"this is a house."* His return look was skeptical, but interested. Small Boy watched me without comment, focusing on every action I made. I cut a huge whole in the back of the box and backed the whole shebang up to the full length window of our apartment that looks over the city. This situation offered a full length view from one side of his little house. We clipped a spare towel over the "door" with clothespins to create a door. First I applied a clothespin, then Small Boy did the other. On the side of the box facing the rest of the room we cut another window flap... I commented through the process, *"this is a door"* *"this is a window"*.

When it was finished he crawled in and experimented with poking his head out the window, out the door, out of the "skylight" posing like a beaming jack-in-the-

box from the top of his house. He crawled in and out, in and out of the house again, experiencing the “essence” of his new abode. This went on for all of about 5 minutes.

“*Now the car!*” More tape, another box and a few strategic cuts of box flaps created a sports car that he could climb into. This time he anticipates when I need him to hold the tape so we can cut it together. He hands me the scissors again when it is time. He watches curiously as I cut out a flat round circle for the steering wheel. I don’t know the word for steering wheel, so I demonstrate by climbing into the car myself. He smiles appreciatively, grabs the steering wheel and then takes my place to try it out. Then he climbs out and pushes the contraption around the room two times before climbing in again, grabbing the TV remote & settling down in his car to watch Sponge Bob Square Pants blow up with excess gas.

For the next 36 hours this was his favorite place to watch T.V...which he does every moment possible. I had hoped to give him a creative, cheap alternative to the mesmerizing machine, but he just managed to add it as an accessory to his regular viewing routine.

Yesterday morning he did burst into the room talking about the car again. Through his gestures & the scissors in his hand it was clear he wanted to make another car. I was actually on my way to an appointment, so I tried to engage him in something less time consuming: “*Do you have any ...* (I searched for the word) *... crayons?*” He looked at me strangely, totally uncomprehending despite my gestures & efforts to say “picture/draw” over & over again ... maybe he thought I was saying “flower” or “talk”...all three words have the same set of consonants and vowels but the tone is different.

I try an alternative strategy and point to a picture in a book ... “*What is this?*” “*Oh! Crayons! I have crayons! I have....I have!*” He runs to get them and presents me with a box of eight fat crayons in regulation colors. I choose the black one and draw in window panes ...door...and a wheel on the car we had made the day before. Then I draw another circle and offer the crayon to him to fill it in. We turn the box over and put two more wheels on the car. Then a red crayon for the rear brake lights ... and headlights ...we get a screwdriver & stick it into the “hood” for a gear shift.

I climb in, turning the steering wheel, working the gearshift & making the necessary noises: brrrrmm, brrrrr, brrroooooommm. He’s delighted, but uncle is more fascinated. He tries to tell him “*okay, now you get in. See, this is a gear shift. You can move the wheel and gears to drive!.... see....hey, LT.....see!*” Small boy is impressed but uninterested in imaginative play, apparently. At least for the moment.

He grabs the scissors & heads for the last remaining box out in the stairwell. It's a long one & I was planning to make it into a bus on another day when he'd gotten bored with what he already had in the small living room. But Small Boy is on a roll, and undeterred. By this time my husband & I have managed to pull on our jackets and gather our stuff to leave for a lunch appointment. We step into the elevator that opens onto the landing where Small Boy is working on his own creation in cardboard. My last image of him as the doors close for our descent to the first floor is a very focused young boy carving away at the box. Well. At least he's not watching the tube.

Feb 27, 2006

I see evidence that Small Boy has begun nesting in the box. He has carried in a pillow and blanket. His stuffed Teddy Bear is laying on the pillow.

March 1, 2006

Small boy has collected several smaller boxes that he sets up to hold various treasures he has carried into his house...scraps of scribbled paper, a miscellaneous collection of small toys. He sets one box propped up against the wall with the open side facing him and uses a cloth with clothespins to make a door for his "cupboard". He carries his lunch into the house to eat there. I note that television viewing time has been restricted this week.

March 10, 2006

For the last two days, the television has been turned off completely. Today, Small Boy salvaged a small box from the kitchen trash and attacked it with the scissors himself. The box is rectangular, approximately 10 x 16 x 4. He has cut out a large inverted triangle in the flap of one short end. The three other flaps are laying open and loose. When I come home from a walk he shows it to me proudly. "Look, Auntie! An airplane!" He makes the "wings flap". He points to the "nose". He tries to make the "tail" stand up. Looking up to make eye contact after each demonstration. He sits two stuffed animals inside of his plane to serve as a pilot/passengers, then jets around the room with the box held above his head making it swoop, glide, and bank.

March 30, 2006

Mother and child lug a huge box into the apartment that is taller than Small Boy and clearly big enough for him to sit inside of if he wished. She gives me a tired smile and says, "We bought this box from a vendor on the street. Small Boy wants to make a ... what do you call it?" She motions with her hand shooting it up toward the ceiling while making an explosion sound. "A rocket?" I ask. "Yes, a rocket. We had to bring it all the way from across town on the bus. But he likes this box. He says he needs a rocket."

Data Coding:

Evidence of Capacity

Small Boy watched my actions intently
Small boy remained at my side throughout
Small Boy held the tools to assist me
Small Boy used the crayons to color in shapes that I drew
Uses scissors to cut cardboard
Elaborates on accoutrements of his house
Makes an airplane out of box

Evidence of Strategies

- Rehearsal
Crawls in and out of house repeatedly
Peeps his head out of all orifices of the house
Requests to make the car right after we make the house
When car is complete tries to engage me in building the bus
- Clustering
Small Boy begins collecting boxes for new uses
Uses a small cloth and more clothespins to create a closing cupboard in his house.
- Elaboration
Adds his Teddy Bear, blanket & pillow to the house
Expands use of house to include eating and possibly writing activities
Creates an airplane
- Summarization
Exclaims, "Look, Auntie! An airplane!"

Evidence of Metacognition

Anticipates my need for tape and scissors.
Uses prior knowledge created by our experience together to create another mode of transportation.
Demonstrates the features of his airplane
Solves problem of how to represent nose of the plane by cutting out inverted triangle.
Identifies a large box on the street as a potential space ship