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# keshet CONNECTION

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## Block Building

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I was invited by Gan Aleph to build with the blocks. The class hadn't been working very effectively with them and this was an opportunity to jump-start the block area in the classroom. From the kindergarteners' perspective this was an invitation to play and being asked to play by five year olds is the ultimate honor. So I went to their class last week. We talked briefly about what we might build with the blocks and how it would be helpful if we could work together. Then I met with small groups to begin construction. In reality, I barely lifted a block. I just asked questions. Very quickly, a whole community began to emerge. There was a zoo and an airport and a whole network of roads. Of course, while the children played, I was learning a lot. Some of the students were truly builders, gathering blocks and creating structures. Others preferred to use the site as a setting for imaginative play, finding cars to speed down the roads or animals to move into the zoo. There was fascination and experimentation with balancing, particularly while creating trees. Some students thought that it would be important to place many blocks around the base of a tree or bridge to make it stronger. Spanning an inverted arch revealed much information about the children's understandings as well. It took awhile to realize that the distance required a block long enough to rest on either end of the arch, rather than two smaller blocks each precariously placed "off center" on each edge. There was also experimentation with an inclined plane as students sent cars down a road and through a tunnel—if the car was small enough to roll through. I was learning about the children and how their play was providing the experimentation necessary for developing spatial relations that will be important as students study physics and architecture. (One of the reasons that fewer women have pursued careers in architecture has been attributed to girls' tendency to stay away from the block area which makes it harder for them to develop key understandings. We make sure that our girls visit the block area, work with tangrams, Cuisenaire rods, and pattern blocks.) Of course, my thank you note from the children didn't focus on all of this, but simply read: "It was fun playing with you. It was such a pleasure."

During the course of the next week, I stopped in periodically to watch the building progress. Some days there were amazingly complex structures. One day, it looked as if an earthquake had struck the site. The students kept asking if I would come back. Being a teacher, I couldn't simply come to play. Before we went to the block area, I asked the students to describe what they'd constructed (This, of course, is not necessarily apparent to the

viewer.) Among the interesting creations was a sculpture garden near the airport "because they want to see something pretty when they go up in the air," and an etrog and myrtle tree. One quickly sees what the students are absorbing about the community in which they live as well as from lessons in their classroom. But, I had another goal. I asked the students to describe how they'd built their community. Here's what they said:

- We put a lot of blocks together.
- We thought before we built.
- We made a part of something like the petting zoo [implying that others added more].
- We had to work together.
- We had to work with each other and we had to work very hard.
- We thought about what we would build.

This activity, then, marked the beginning of the reflection process that is central to the work we do in developing our students' metacognitive skills, their ability to understand the processes they have experienced. Their success in the block area allowed these kindergarteners to see the value of cooperative play and planning. These are lessons we will repeat in many areas in the years ahead. While the experiences were important to what these five year olds need now, they are also a part of the process that will allow our students as fifth and sixth graders to participate successfully in Lego League competitions in which they'll use legos and computers to design robotic equipment.

The focus of my questions are also ones being asked each day by your children's teachers. As you come to conferences next week and review your child's portfolio, you might consider them as well: What do the portfolio samples of my child's work tell me about what my child knows and understands? How does reflection help my child understand the learning process? How is this work linked to long-term academic and social goals for my child?

I hope you enjoy the time spent with your child reviewing work as well as the conversations with the full range of your student's teachers who are helping to guide the fascinating process of learning.

