



Trains! - June 13th, 2013

After the Study Tour in Reggio Emilia, I (Kalei) have been motivated to connect myself & the children more deeply with the objects & materials that inhabit our classroom environment. As a way to begin this process of reexamination, I identified the trains & tracks as an area of play that is infrequently visited despite the fact that the children's interest in trains as a subject matter hasn't actually waned. Aside from transportation tending to manifest in 3 & 4 year olds as a way to relate to space & distance, we engaged with trains (& buses!) through regular experiences with MARTA over the past eight months. Thus, I felt the trains & tracks were a meaningful point of entry for this investigation into the many objects in our classroom.

I set out the trains, tracks, & cars alongside some floor samples (a long faux wood sample that was a discarded option for the new school's floor, small rectangular thick wood samples, & thinner wood & marble samples. Cars were ultimately included because I wanted to be sure there were enough vehicles to go around. In the interest of engagement, inspiration, & provocation, I also set up the projector to show scenes of steam engines, speed rails, & underground subways.

In the first few moments of observing & listening to the children play in the context, a few core themes emerged: bridges, tunnels, & darkness. Wheels & smoke were less commonly expressed but nonetheless important themes. I began to play alongside the children with these themes in mind.

Tunnels

The bulk of the group began by laying train tracks around the room while they casually observed the trains zooming by on the curtain. This collaborative use of tracks required the children to negotiate the space & make decisions about direction. Hank, a major protagonist in this venture, was driving his train right next to where I was sitting. Unbeknownst to him, I had deliberately blocked the upcoming tracks with the long floor sample in the hopes of observing his problem solving. When his train approached, he remarked on the blockage with frustration. "What could we do?" I asked. "We could drive over it?" he pondered. Thinking of all that talk of tunnels I heard, I suggested "What if we made a tunnel instead?" After some experimentation, we were able to arch the flooring so Hank could drive through the tunnel! I hope to relaunch this context with Hank soon to analyze & observe how his strategies change.

At the "Building Table," Helena, Violet, & Cyla explored the smaller floor samples. They quickly became focused on creating tunnel-type buildings with the chunkier samples. The group worked both collaboratively & individually on this difficult but highly motivated task. More on Helena's efforts in the "Ministry" on the bottom of page 2.

Smoke

At the end of the session, Adele gave her trains to Kahlan & sat on the couch to observe the projected trains more carefully.

I joined her on the couch to provoke & document her thinking.

Adele: "What are those [smoke from the smokestack]? ...Those cotton balls? It's going everywhere. Did that make a cloud?"

Kalei: "I wonder if the underground trains have the cloud? Do you remember from our MARTA trips?"

Adele: "No, they don't!"

Kalei: "You know, it kind of reminds me of the stuff that comes off of fire..."

Adele: "LOOK SMOKE"

Kalei: "What do you think is making that smoke?"

Adele: "Maybe one of the parts on the trains? Oh that part right there [the smokestack]. In the front!"



Ministry: Helena & the Wooden Tunnel

Helena was the most committed to building a tunnel with the chunky wooden floor samples. She began flanked by Violet & Cyla, who were engaged in similar & occasionally collaborative pursuits. She tried a number of different strategies: starting with the sides, starting with a corner, or starting with a floor. She achieved temporary success while starting with the sides & starting with a floor but her perseverance was repeatedly tested by the wobbliness of the table &/or structural instability. Many of the projected videos featured tunnels, & Helena would occasionally glance back at the screen for reference at leisure or when I mentioned there was a tunnel on the curtain.

Eventually, she became so frustrated that I intervened; I feared that if I did not support her in her trials she would abandon the venture with no confidence gained. I did not want to tell her how to build a tunnel (as if I actually knew the singular correct method) but I wanted to use my understandings of the children's relationships to support her difficult task. Thus, I encouraged Helena to ask Adele for help. I called upon this relationship as a resource because I felt Helena sees Adele as a role model, Adele is experienced with building, & Adele enjoys helping. Helena asked Adele without hesitation & Adele obliged. Helena described her goal & dilemma, & Adele set to work on her own rendition. Helena watched with rapt attention as Adele built. Adele advised: "if you put them closer together it makes it a little bit stabler." Adele seemed proud, even when it toppled. They rebuilt it together & Helena contributed a floor piece. Unfortunately morning playtime was coming to a close but the girls seemed satisfied for the time being with their collaborative forward motion. More explorations to come!



