

A BRIEF HISTORY OF BLOCKS

Shared with you by Lisa Murphy, M.Ed.

It is said that when **Frederick Froebel** took the wooden spheres and cylinders traditionally used for drawing models, renamed them “gifts,” and placed them in the hands of his kindergartners he just might have *revolutionized* early childhood education. But the wooden, block-style materials developed by Froebel as well as **Maria Montessori** encouraged didactic instruction, required an ordered, sequential placing of said blocks, and were intentionally designed to be used in formal, systematic ways and this requirement led to yet another revolution; one of *opposition* between progressive and conservative kindergarten teachers. Progressives considered Froebel and Montessori’s “gifts” and “works” too strict and too small and accused them of encouraging sedentary activity. **John Dewey** responded to what was referred to as “Froebelolatry” by permitting students at his experimental school in Chicago to play freely with Froebel’s block gifts. **Patty Smith Hill** took the opposition revolution even further. She questioned the lack of free-play the smaller, structured Froebel and Montessori blocks permitted. The lack of free-play combined with her belief in the importance of gross-motor movement led to the creation of “Hill Blocks.” Hill Blocks completely overhauled the block corner; they were large, made of hardwood, and had interlocking grooves and steel rods. She intended the blocks to be dragged around in order to make large constructions to play in, around, and, *on*. The sheer size and weight of the materials required cooperation and collaboration as the children designed larger than life structures. Inspired by Hill, **Caroline Pratt**, also set out to design a system of blocks. Pratt started by developing big blocks intended for large construction play but continued on to develop what she called a “unit system of building blocks.” Now simply referred to as “unit blocks,” they are different shaped blocks with mathematically precise ratios (1:2:4), half as high as they are wide. Pratt wanted flexible, adaptable materials that children could use without adult control or guidance. In addition to unit blocks, she designed wooden figurines of vehicles, animals, and people that she called “do-withs.” In response to the structured and strict use of the materials that came previously, she referred to do-withs and unit blocks as “free materials.” Her unit blocks are the ones you have in your classroom today!

Taken from the “History of Blocks” section of my final action research project for my M.Ed. entitled, **GET A BIGGER CARPET! I’M MAKING A TRACK! Do Preschool Teachers Value Block Play?** By Lisa Murphy, Action Research Project II, Champlain College, Vermont, 2013. For more information feel free to email me at LTAC@ooeygoovey.com Visit my website www.ooeygoovey.com or call (800) 477-7977