



The price of beauty and usefulness in learning

A study of value for money in nursery settings

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Research summary

Community Playthings is a well-established company that has been making furniture for nurseries in Robertsbridge, East Sussex since the 1970s. They also provide a free design and training service for teachers who can visit the community in Robertsbridge as well as a variety of free design guides and educational resources that cover the philosophical and pedagogical approaches that underpin the furniture design.

The company has a reputation for listening to their customers, and the products and their variations are a direct result of feedback. However, the quality of the wood and the exacting design and production processes makes Community Playthings furniture more expensive than other products in this field. Ever keen to listen to customers the company commissioned research to investigate what customers thought about the value for money issues.

The sample

In collaboration with the Community Playthings team I designed a research programme that focused on a qualitative interview approach rather than a statistical survey because it was agreed that the results would provide a deeper picture of the value of the furniture in terms of learning. In the first stage I visited five nurseries to learn how the furniture was used. In the second stage sixteen interviews were conducted with a range of educators who have bought Community Playthings furniture and blocks or advised teachers to buy them: heads, teachers and assistants in nurseries; purchasers for nursery chains placed in England and internationally; an adviser in a local authority; a design consultant; as well as an academic who take a theoretical perspective on the value of the furniture settings and blocks in learning. Some had bought suites costing from £10,000, whereas others had only a few pieces and were saving up to buy more. Of the second group most were replacing cheaper equipment when it was no longer useable. I also interviewed four nursery heads who had considered buying this furniture but had decided against it. This represented 20% of the sample and was included to provide a balanced result.

This summary offers some of the key findings from the research. In the third stage I analysed the interview transcripts to extract the themes that emerged. The full report provides more detail about each of the categories summarised here.

The findings

Academic validation

Overall it was the ethos of calm and of independent learning behind the Community Playthings design that was admired by the educators who engaged in this study. Several of the purchasers of suites followed established approaches to nursery learning like Montessori, Reggio Emilia and the Forest Schools movement. Helen Tovey¹, a specialist in nursery education at Roehampton University, explained that Community Playthings also provide an excellent support for the design of a Froebelian environment which is creative, open-ended and includes a balance of bought and found materials, made and natural. The environment is based on respect, trust and warm responsive relationships providing rich first-hand play experience. The environment is seen as flexible, transformable and responsive to children's changing interests and preoccupations.

Design factors

Overall respondents agreed that the furniture was visually inviting, restful and durable. The products inspired imaginative play because they were not too prescriptive. A head who had been closely involved in the design process was convinced that there is significant impact on learning based on how a room is designed: 'children are inspired to big active play or more concentrated activity by the area's design, but the biggest impact is how the areas are linked together. These links help the children make connections between different kinds of activity'.

¹ Tovey, H (2012) Bringing the Froebel Approach to your Early Years Practice, London: Routledge.



A word cloud of the interview scripts analysing the frequency of words and phrases expressed by the interviewees

Many of the respondents had praised the Community Playthings team for their consistency of colour and scale, which means that items match and fit together whenever they are added. Purchasers found the unpacking service valuable, whereas others had included their staff team in the planning, and some the children as well.

Designs were well thought out and respondents were able to describe the quality of the design of the furniture in great detail. The word-cloud in the first diagram provides a visual analysis of the sixteen interview scripts.

The sample of teachers identified themselves pedagogically by their lack of attraction to ‘the shiny and brightly coloured newness’ of some other ranges of furniture. One commented that a child does not benefit from being blasted with primary colours. Several were critical of the feel of plastic, the way in which plastic shows wear and the fact that plastic does not age gracefully. Several teachers who are committed to the Community Playthings ethos also complained about the kind of toy labelled ‘educational’ that leaves nothing to the imagination.

In contrast, the educators were enthusiastic about the calmness of the Community Playthings fabric colours and the neutrality of the wood. One nursery also had evidence that the design of the furniture had a calming

effect on the children in a deprived catchment area in London with a mixed multicultural population.

The theme of giving deprived children the best environment that could be afforded ran throughout the interview responses. The phrase used by one head to describe the furniture was ‘beautiful and useful’. These words were quoted from William Morris, a 19th century English textile designer. He was an artist, writer, and libertarian socialist, associated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and English Arts and Crafts Movement who declared: ‘Have nothing in your home that is neither beautiful nor useful’.

In this spirit one head observed, ‘Sometimes we are providing them with an idea of how life could be when they come to us from deprived circumstances.’ Another head observed, ‘We offer them the peace and order they do not enjoy at home’. Probed about the aesthetics of the furniture another teacher said, ‘I do believe the environment makes a difference even for very young children. I’ve seen a troubled boy quietly swaying in a rocking chair stroking the wooden arms gently. He was at peace in those moments’.

Teachers’ favourite items in the range were varied - not always the most obvious as they seemed to be background items. For example, frequently mentioned was the shelving for equipment that one head had found ‘assists with the organisation of the classroom and contributes to a sense of order which is very important’. Another head praised the sense that ‘there is a place for everything and everything in its place’.

Community Playthings blocks were seen as a unique response to Froebel’s invention in the 1850s and were valued as ‘the start of mathematics, geometry, aspects of science, gradients and architecture bringing in the notion of an integrated curriculum’. The hollow bricks were praised for the way they combine; ‘they are beautiful, weather well, have soft edges and smell of the wood’.

Professional development

Observation of others’ practice in their own nurseries clearly helped teachers to form their own ideas about learning informally and honestly. ‘It is all too easy to squash children’s ideas’, said one respondent, ‘and also to give them toys and equipment that do not stimulate their imagination’.

Two-thirds of the respondents had been to the workshops in Robertsbridge for professional development programmes linked to the installation of Community Playthings furniture in their nursery. Each said that the experience had been beneficial: an underlying theme in the answers was the growth of a sustained relationship with the Community Playthings advisers. Several remarked on the care and effort that goes into the making of the furniture. A better understanding of the design issues was valued and more specific hints and tips like the fact that the wheels on the mobile storage unit can be fixed for stability or changed to allow mobility. Most importantly visitors to Robertsbridge felt that the staff had listened to their comments and suggestions.

Value for money

This was the most contentious area of investigation, because Community Playthings is the most expensive furniture range in the nursery field. Although there was no direct evidence of value in obvious measures like occupancy rates and OFSTED results, in this sample many indicated there was a subliminal effect. Several practitioners commented on how appreciative the parents were of quality equipment for their children. ‘There is an unmistakeable ‘wow’ factor when parents walk into the room for the first time’. Another head explained that if a parent or a teacher commented that children preferred bright primary colours she encouraged them to question this assumption: ‘What kind of environment do you chose, if you want to relax? ’ she asks, ‘Why would children be any different from you?’

One school was thrilled with their ‘outstanding’ OFSTED judgment which is only awarded to 12% of nurseries. The head said she felt that the Community Playthings equipment helped her staff give of their best. Another head of a group of nurseries said, ‘There is no doubt that buying Community Playthings is an investment. After many years of building up our stocks I now enjoy a reduced rate of buying because the furniture wears so well and does not need replacing even with heavy use’.

In another thoughtful contribution to the discussion about value, one experienced head tried to present a balanced argument:

‘The price is a big stumbling block. Have we been lulled into a false sense of security about filling our nurseries? Fifteen years ago we

were all saving up for Community Playthings, and luxuriating in one piece. Then we could afford complete suites, which I do not think we will see again. Many managers will be going back to purchasing one piece at a time. So, as I said, it is expensive and there is some danger of conformity in design, but Community Playthings are still our preferred supplier in these straitened times: we have just bought 27 settings. We could get more for our money elsewhere but our parents and teachers like the Community Playthings ethos.'

The most important advice came from Helen Tovey who pointed out that:

'The furniture should be bought to underpin the learning theory promoted because this is where the real value is. I have seen a room that was never changed which goes against the underlying principles. Some people 'get it' and some do not. It is a pity if people buy without understanding about the learning that can be engendered. The settings should be capable of combining opposites. Equipment should be used flexibly but should provide also predictability. Children learn best when they are challenged and surprised but also when the routine is known. The Community Playthings furniture offers all these contrasts because children's play is not predictable. The settings must be transformable. A static environment or one that children cannot change themselves does not promote the best learning. Children are best supported in their learning by a framework uniting order and disorder. If the furniture is never moved then the main value of flexibility has not been exploited.'

The limitations to this research

The limitations to this research must be acknowledged. The sample is small and drawn from a Community Playthings list of clients and academics who have a close knowledge of the ethos and the products because they have purchased them. Normally a researcher aims to find a balance between what is good and what needs improving especially when the funder is keen to learn and improve. For this reason 20% of the sample had decided not to buy after some investigation this time round. Their reason, when I asked, was exclusively the high cost of the furniture, but they were all saving to buy one or two pieces when they could. In this context I found that my objectivity was

often compromised because the interview experience was akin to interviewing the owner of a much-loved vintage car, or an Apple computer, or even a parent talking about their children. I pressed respondents hard to offer suggestions they would make for improvements in the products and about whether the quality of the furniture justified the cost. The main report covers some important points, but in each case critical answers were couched in a tone of affection that only an exceptional product could engender.

Conclusion

All the respondents were asked to give advice to other teachers who might be thinking about buying Community Playthings. One manager of a nursery chain looked back to his childhood, 'When I was at pre-school over 35 years ago, we had the Community Playthings lofts and indoor climbing frame. Although they have moved on, at some level I am influenced by my early love of those products when I buy'.

Another customer was more forthright, 'Go for it', she said, 'you will never regret it. Integrity is rare in retail.'

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The full report

Introduction



At the end of the Second World War my father-in-law returned from India with a child-sized chair for his six-year-old son that was reputed to be more than two centuries old. The ornate carving on the back and the curled python legs have attracted concentrated interest from our children and our grandchildren as they have squatted beside it. But they have never tried to sit on the chair. Child-sized it might be but the octagonal seat, the wobbly legs and the deep carving of a couple of acrobats engaging in what I hope is gymnastics are not

inviting as a place of repose. This trophy seems to be more a conversation piece for adults than seating for a small child.

In contrast, since 1948 generations of the same families have been crafting Community Playthings² furniture that is not only comfortable for children but also robust and beautiful. Built into the furniture is the palpable intention to inspire the imagination and promote learning. In the Community Playthings ethos stimulating children does not necessarily mean providing brightly coloured and noisy copies of household objects and weapons of war. Some of the best learning is expected to emanate from a calm and quiet environment where young children can think, reflect and consolidate what they know.

Community Playthings also provides a variety of educational resources that nursery teachers can use as a support in setting up inspiring learning settings. If nursery teachers do not have the good fortune to visit the furniture workshops in Robertsbridge, England, where seminars are given, they are also available as training packs on the Community Playthings website. These resources, including CDs, provide a comprehensive overview of the underlying philosophy about children's learning and how teachers can make best use of the equipment. One example is *Play and the revised EYFS* by Anne O'Connor. The free booklet and PowerPoint training detail how children's play naturally fulfils the revised EYFS, and cross-references that play to the statutory guidance. The guide is divided into sections based on the activity areas seen in most early years settings. Each section then gives sample observations, and tells how the play that takes place meets the seven areas of learning and development. The guide is easy to use and will give practitioners the confidence to demonstrate compliance to Ofsted.

Lighting the Fire is another resource demonstrating the benefits of hands-on investigation, play and outdoor learning. The general thrust is clear from the quotation on the front page from Yeats; *Education is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire*. There are many other free resources in a similar vein that are valuable to teachers, and many advisers use them to run courses.

² <http://www.communityplaythings.co.uk>

However, given how carefully Community Playthings products are crafted, the price is quite high compared with other kinds of classroom furniture. As a researcher I was set the task, therefore, of talking to existing customers about ways in which the Community Playthings team could improve their product and continue to provide value for money in straitened economic times.

The sample

The research strategy I adopted was to visit five of the settings and to analyse the content of sixteen interviews with respondents who reflected the views of a range of educators who have bought Community Playthings furniture and blocks or advised teachers to buy them: heads, teachers and assistants in nurseries; purchasers for nursery chains placed in England and internationally; an adviser in a local authority; a design consultant; and two academics who take a theoretical perspective on the value of the furniture and blocks in learning. Some who owned Community Playthings furniture had bought a complete layout costing from £10,000, whereas others only had a few pieces and were saving up to buy more. Of the second group most were replacing cheaper equipment when it was no longer useable.

Academic validation

Firstly, I discovered how much the ethos of calm and independent learning behind the Community Playthings design was admired by the educators who engaged in this study. At a systemic level, three of the interviewees point out that Montessori promotes an environmental design that is fundamental to the Community Playthings precepts:

- Construction in proportion to the child and his/her needs;
- Beauty and harmony, cleanliness of environment;
- Order;
- An arrangement that facilitates movement and activity;
- Limitation of materials, so that only material that supports the child's development is included; (Standing 1957)³

³ Standing, E. M. (1957). *Maria Montessori: Her Life and Work*. New York: Plume. pp. 263–280.

Other teachers observed how well the marriage between Montessori and Community Playthings works. Her motto, *Care of self, care for others and care for the environment* fits neatly into the design as well as the notion that children should have their own place for work and play.

Loris Malaguzzi, an Italian teacher who developed the Reggio Approach in the city of Reggio Emilia was also quoted. The Reggio Approach is a complex system for the education of small children that respects and puts into practice many of the fundamental aspects of the work of Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky and many others. It is a system that lends itself to: the role of collaboration among children, teachers and parent, the co-construction of knowledge, the interdependence of individual and social learning and the role of culture in understanding this interdependence (Baji Rankin 2004)⁴.

At the heart of this system is the powerful image of the child. Children are not seen as empty vessels that require filling with facts. Rather children are seen as full of potential, competent and capable of building their own theories. Children have the right to be recognized as subjects of individual, legal, civil, and social rights; as both source and constructors of their own experience and, thus, as active participants in the organization of their identities, abilities, and autonomy. They create their sense of self through relationships and interaction with their peers, with adults, with ideas, with objects, and with real and imaginary events of intercommunicating worlds. All this while establishing the fundamental premises for creating “better citizens of the world” and improving the quality of human interaction, also credits children, and each individual child, with an extraordinary wealth of inborn abilities and potential, strength and creativity. Powerfully, the Reggio Emilia adherents warn that irreversible suffering and impoverishment of the child is caused when this fact is not acknowledged.

Malaguzzi draws on Vygotskian notions of how children learn and Piaget's observations about the value of social learning before age six. Piaget also talks about the importance of outdoor learning. Even though Community Playthings do not make much in the way of outdoor equipment, teachers

⁴ http://www.reggiokids.com/about/about_approach.php

mentioned their products in relation to the Forest School⁵ movement that promotes an innovative educational approach to outdoor play and learning. The philosophy of Forest Schools is to encourage and inspire individuals of any age through positive outdoor experiences. By participating in engaging, motivating and achievable tasks and activities in a woodland environment each participant has an opportunity to develop intrinsic motivation, and sound emotional and social skills. These activities, through self-awareness, can be developed to reach personal potential. What Forest Schools promote outside, Community Playthings can promote indoors through play, giving nursery age children the opportunity to learn about the environment, how to handle risks and, most importantly, to use their own initiative to solve problems and co-operate with others.

Another recommendation that was made for Community Playthings purchasers to explore was Siren Films⁶ resources. Siren Films is a leading specialist in the production of child development films and have won a Nursery World award. They provide an invaluable visual insight into the behavioural and learning patterns of babies and young children. As one academic observed, 'Overall the learning principles of freedom, independence and autonomy that Community Playthings support provide a strong intellectual branding for work with nursery children that very few would dispute'.

In her new book⁷, Helen Tovey, draws attention to Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852), a nineteenth century German educator. He was arguably the most significant of the pioneers of early childhood education and care. He created the first kindergarten, a garden or nursery where young children could grow and develop at their own pace, nurtured by knowledgeable and supportive adults. This was at a time when there was almost no provision for young children. Froebel argued that the earliest years of a child's life are the most important in a child's education and lay the foundation for all later learning.

⁵ <http://www.forestschools.com/what-are-forest-schools.php>

⁶ <http://www.sirenfilms.co.uk/>

⁷ Tovey, H (2012) *Bringing the Froebel Approach to your Early Years Practice*, London: Routledge.

Young children, he argued, learn best through self-activity, talk and play. These ideas, although widely accepted today, were radical concepts in Froebel's time. Froebel devised a series of simple but carefully planned materials he called 'gifts' and 'occupations' for use in his kindergartens. These together with nature, stories, movement games, music, songs and rhymes were integral to his educational approach. However, it was not just the resources but the ideas underpinning them which were important to Froebel. Materials on their own were not enough. Adults had to engage with and understand the processes of development in the child.

This was particularly so, Tovey explains, when blocks were used. Froebel favoured 'Simple playthings that allow children to feel and experience, to act and represent, and to think and recognise.'. Because of this thinking, block play became an integral part of all Froebelian early years settings. The wooden modular 'unit' and 'hollow' blocks which are used today are larger versions of Froebel's 'gifts', boxed sets of blocks, divided in mathematically precise ways which Froebel designed for his kindergarten. Froebel intended the blocks to be used for children to represent:

- Forms of life: using the blocks to create and represent things and events in the world around them;
- Forms of beauty: where the focus is on aesthetic aspects of pattern, order, symmetry and harmony;
- Forms of knowledge, exploring mathematical forms and scientific concepts such as shape, size, area, stability and balance.

Community Playthings designs take account of Froebelian principles where environment reflects a view of children as active, creative, social learners. No two Froebelian environments will look the same, but they will be underpinned by the same guiding principles. A Froebelian environment is not excessively neat, ordered and quiet. Nor is it excessively messy, chaotic or noisy. Instead it unites elements of order and chaos, calmness and exuberance, predictability and surprise, flexibility and routine, planning and spontaneity. All, in their different ways contribute to a dynamic learning environment that can be shaped by children and adults.

Too often children are given a pre-packaged, 'out of a catalogue', plasticised, environment which can be bland, static and sterile. Routines can sometimes

be so rigid that children are hurried and harried from one event to the next. Learning in such environments becomes responsive and passive rather than creative and active.

A Froebelian environment, in contrast, is creative, open-ended and includes a balance of bought and found materials, made and natural. It is based on respect, trust, warm responsive relationships and rich first hand and play experience. The environment is seen as flexible, transformable and responsive to children's changing interests and preoccupations.



Below are some of the principles that underpin a Froebelian environment for young children:

- Indoors and outdoors;
- Rich first-hand experience;
- Free choice and movement;
- Connectedness;
- Independence and interdependence;
- Time for play;
- Warm, responsive, interesting, trusting relationships;
- A place where individuals feel significant in the whole community.

Beauty and usefulness

The beauty and usefulness of furniture is not so easily described although the aesthetic considerations are important in the design of furniture for children.

The phrase, ‘beauty and usefulness’, is quoted from an interviewee who explained that she had seen Community Playthings equipment at an exhibition and been drawn to the underlying aesthetic immediately. In her presentation to her team she had quoted William Morris, ‘Have nothing in your home that is neither beautiful nor useful’:

And why should a nursery be any different? Sometimes we are replicating the children’s homes and inspiring them: sometimes we are providing them with an idea of how life could be. When they come to us from deprived circumstances, we offer them the peace and order they do not enjoy at home.

She had had no trouble, she explained, gaining the approval of her staff to buy because they were agreed on the beauty and the usefulness of the furniture.

Another head said that the aim of her team is to immerse the children in an environment that resonates with quality:

In this context the Community Playthings furniture is unique because it becomes more beautiful with use – longevity is an important counter-concept in a throwaway culture.

One of the academics confessed that it was a gut feeling as well as research findings that convinced her that aesthetics were important to children:

Children deserve to have things that are aesthetically pleasing like wood– the deep grain of the wood is so pleasing to the touch- it is warm and soft - no hard and cold metal - we take great care of our own environment and we should do this for children too. In this natural product you have the variation in the tones, patterns, grains and the sense of warmth that plastic cannot provide...durability conveys itself to children.



Probed about the aesthetics of the furniture another teacher said, 'I am searching for answers because:

I am working in a very difficult area amongst the deprived. Beauty should soften and we try to create an environment that brings peace and tranquillity.

Another practitioner observed;

I do believe the environment makes a difference even for very young children. I've seen a troubled boy quietly swaying in a rocking chair stroking the wooden arms gently. He was at peace in those moments.

Design factors

Overall respondents agreed that the furniture was visually inviting, restful and durable. The products inspired imaginative play because they were not too prescriptive. Designs were well thought out and respondents were able to describe the quality of the design of the furniture in great detail. Adjectives that were frequently repeated included: tactile, hard-wearing, beautiful, calming, versatile and flexible. The word cloud in the diagram below provides a visual analysis of the words used by in sixteen interview scripts. The largest

words indicate those most frequently quoted in the sample led by: beautiful, investment, learning, strong, robust, quality, flexible, calming, clean and cosy.



A word cloud of the interview scripts analysing the frequency of words and phrased expressed by the interviewees.

One nursery teacher said:

The design helps us to provide a richness and variety of experience.

The children can keep going back to things they know and learn to consolidate their learning.

Several teachers who are committed to the ethos of high quality also complained about toys that are labelled 'educational' and yet leave nothing to the imagination:

Some products in the shops sport loud colours, very noisy effects, flaps and pockets and a preponderance of detail that stunts the imagination – not an accusation that can be levelled at Community Playthings.

In contrast, the educators were enthusiastic about the calmness of the Community Playthings fabric colours and the neutrality of wood. ' I find myself

running my hands over the furniture because the wood is so smooth and cool', one nursery teacher said.

The sample identified themselves pedagogically by their lack of attraction to 'the shiny and brightly coloured newness' of some other ranges of furniture. One adviser explained that a child does not benefit from being blasted with primary colours. Several were critical of the feel of plastic, the way in which plastic shows wear and the fact that plastic does not age gracefully:

Plastic needs to earn its place as an alternative to wood in the nursery classroom.

A sense of cosiness was valued and items of furniture that provided the child with a sense of independence and control. Teachers also valued the details of design that encouraged children to clean and maintain their own environment. Adjustable heights were also important as the height of children who are the same age varies significantly.

Not only was the child-scale seen to be a very important aspect of the furniture design but also the potential to use the furniture to define spaces: We can make, quickly, a flexible, curved, versatile, completely free-flow organised learning space where children can find everything.

The furniture was sufficiently anonymous to provide a good backdrop for activity as well. The placing of windows was important to the children's illusion of privacy and the teacher' opportunity to observe without interfering. The position of mirrors was considered important as was the intelligent use of corner shelves. 'The Velcro on the flannel boards is a simple idea that allows us to make new spaces,' one teacher commented.

Another described their setting with pride,

We have seven playrooms divided up to facilitate messy art work, role play, dressing up, small world play and puzzles, weaving and lacing and a book area enhanced by lovely settees. In the baby room we have the gliders that the parents also love.

A head who had been closely involved in the design process was convinced that there is significant impact on learning depending on how a room is designed:

Children are inspired to big active play or more concentrated activity by the area's design, but the biggest impact is how the areas are linked together. These links help the children make connections between different kinds of activity.



'Favourite things'

Teachers' favourite items in the range were varied, and not always the most obvious as they often seemed to be background items. A frequent mention was the shelving for equipment that one head had found 'assists with the organisation of the classroom and contributes to a sense of order which is very important. The wheels on the shelving makes organising the room easy. Coupled with natural colours and a few plants the shelving creates a background for play that is calm, peaceful and predictable'.

One head aimed for a place for everything and everything in its place. 'From this principle, children learn about boundaries and focus in their play – small, secure workshop spaces are vital where the adult can see but the child feels they have privacy. The Community Playthings product system 'Roomscapes' allows such small and secure space. The opportunity for independence was highly praised in the cloakroom furniture.'

The storage capacity was generally seen as outstanding. Underlying this commitment to storage was the teachers' conviction that the predictability of

finding resources was paramount for building children's confidence and independence. Translucent trays and easy access were highly prized because children could navigate this kind of storage area themselves, seeing at a glance where things were.

A nursery teacher explained:

Our storage pieces work well and remove all the hassle of finding things. This is an invaluable background support. Indeed one of our assistants described the storage furniture like another adult assistant in the room. For example you and the children can clearly see the level of the paper and judge whether it needs topping up. A messy store cupboard sends a completely different message and does not put the children in control. Getting small children to start to see the point of efficient storage is a major understanding to foster. They should learn early not to accept chaos.



More than one teacher mentioned the baby-changing area as a favourite item. Children can climb up the stairs themselves thus promoting independence: a comfortable place that creates independence not a cold, hard floor.

Community Playthings hollow blocks were seen as a unique response to Froebel's invention in 1850s and were valued as 'the start of mathematics, geometry, aspects of science, gradients and architecture bringing in the

notion of an integrated curriculum'. The hollow bricks were praised for: 'the way they combine. They are beautiful, weather well, have soft edges and smell of the wood.'

The horseshoe table was popular because members of staff can converse with the children in a more convivial way than is possible when high chairs are used. The latter tend to separate children from adult social intercourse.

The role-play corner and the Toddle Box were valued because the child can vary the uses of these objects. The cube was a favourite because the baby can crawl in towards a mirror on the back wall. This provides a den or a quiet retreat.

One assistant liked the adult arch in their setting because this works well between messy area and carpeted area. The little children's settee, the climbing activity centre and the rocking chair were all selected as well as the new product, the Dream Coracle.

One head referred to a trip hazard: a child tripped over the bottom of the slide in an activity centre; the school were happy the product allowed an easy change of configuration to avoid the problem happening again.

Adding to a setting

Many of the respondents had praised the Community Playthings team for their consistency of colour and scale that means that items match and fit together whenever they are added. The only area where this is not so is in the reintroduction of the beds and a request was made for access to the old mattress colour.

Several suggestions were made when they were asked what Community Playthings might add to their offering, although one adviser was not totally serious when she suggested the design team might now transfer their attentions to her house design.

Some suggestions were:

- Do a wooden equivalent for plastic crates to use in building - light weight- not the hollow blocks, but small crates.
- Smaller version of the 'truck' that is at a lower level and wide enough to push safely
- Box or a base plate on wheels for carrying bricks

- An interesting storage container like a small shed for the hollow blocks and pulling boxes
- A wall mirror with a bar across it so the baby can pull themselves up
- Taller shelving for the primary age

Three requests were for computer or tablet PC room furniture with a place for an overhead projector. These requests were accompanied by comments:

I think a Community Playthings approach to the limited introduction of learning with computers in the nursery would bring some exciting originality into an area that is dominated by steel and plastic. The design of a computer workstation with the benefit of being multipurpose would help teachers and parents to see how access from an early age can be contained in a co-constructive environment. Some attention to this area would also provide opportunities to evaluate the learning that is taking place in the digital universe and provide parents with helpful advice when it is challenging to keep faith with basic principles.

People also commented that they would like more outside furniture and an extension of the activity gym for older children. Most would buy if Community Playthings designed for Keystage One as well.

Delivering Equipment

One purchaser complained that only when £45,000 of equipment arrived at the gate all on one day in large cartons did she realise that she could have used the unpacking/carton removal service.

I would have used this service had I known. This needs to be more explicit. We needed two skips just to get rid of all the packaging. It took about 8 people a week and a half to put it together. In addition each room was not listed on the carton. It was a real strain. This teacher also suggested simplified instructions and found the visit to Robertsbridge a great help in this regard:

When I visited I was shown how multifunctional items can be turned into something else - if you buy this you can make this and so on. The hints and tips were so helpful. It was very important to see how much can be done. But I will not be able to remember this and hope the community will eventually pass it all on in a book.

The large majority of purchasers had worked with the Community Playthings Room Layout staff either at Robertsbridge or on the phone. Not all the nurseries who chose to spend Sure Start, Quality and Access and other government grants on Community Playthings equipment had used an architect for the new build, but they had all included their staff team in the planning, and some the children as well:

It fitted seamlessly into our environment. We were delighted that no toolbox was needed. We ordered ours ready-made so no flat packs. Our children have been involved in developing the setting.

Teachers' informal learning

Observation of others' practice clearly helped teachers to form their own ideas about learning and they were honest about their learning. One respondent said:

It is all too easy to squash children's ideas but also to give them toys that do not stimulate them. In an overseas classroom I saw a free play session where each four year old was given a brightly coloured box, with a monkey that pops out, to play with alone for half an hour! Not my idea of stimulation!

The interviewees often mentioned how they had used the furniture and blocks to develop children's learning and how much they had learnt from watching the children use the equipment.

Using the furniture to promote learning:

- Hollow Blocks were used to set up a Three Billy Goats Gruff scenario involving groups of children who built a bridge, made a swimming pool with buckets of water and worked out how to get rid of the water that had spilt - a rich focus for problem solving, social learning and language.

- The design of the bricks is important for the beginnings of physics and maths. Standing on the sand-tray children built towers to their own height as well as walls for Humpty Dumpty to fall from.
- In one setting the craft storage baskets were labelled from A-Z as part of a Post Office scenario where some children revealed some real letter-sorting talent. The sweep shelving made a counter. But the next day this was all rearranged to make a ship.

Learning from observing children

- ‘Curved panels help the imagination: the child goes into this secret space and they do not need to be taught how to use it...Lovely...’
- ‘When children use the blocks unsupervised I learn a lot about the schema of behaviour by watching their behaviour in different places: patterning, sorting, talking under the table’.

Professional development

Two thirds of the respondents had been to the workshops in Robertsbridge for professional development programmes. Each said that the experience had been beneficial: an underlying theme in the answers was the growth of a sustained relationship with the Community Playthings advisers.

Teachers remarked on the care and effort that goes into the making of the furniture. A better understanding of the design issues was valued and more specific hints and tips like the fact that the wheels on the mobile storage unit can be fixed for stability or changed to allow mobility.

Those who had undertaken professional development programmes had gained new knowledge about nursery education. One observed:

After about 25 years' experience I was still going for bright colours, but through the influence of Community Playthings my understanding of the calming effect of natural hues became more apparent to me. I have now departed from my usual approach...this furniture has fitted in so well although totally different from what I had thought was appropriate before my seminar.

Teachers commented on the quality of the training materials and the knowledgeability of the staff. Most importantly visitors to Robertsbridge felt

that the staff had listened to their comments and suggestions. One example of the company's responses to their clients' suggestions was the reintroduction of the rest mats.

But even those who had not been to Robertsbridge felt they had a good relationship with the design team there and used extensively the training resources that are available.

In terms of planning their installation with Robertsbridge staff, one head teacher said that they enjoyed extended and patient consideration, 'even when we changed rooms we planned to use and had not followed exactly the suggestions of the Community Playthings designer'.

Value for money

In this section of the study I explored with the interviewees the impact of Community Playthings on their occupancy rates and OFSTED rating which might provide a measurement. I then investigated the other factors that contribute to the value of the investment.

Impact on occupancy rates

Although there was no actual evidence of an impact on occupancy rates when the Community Playthings settings were purchased, several practitioners commented on how the parents were appreciative of quality equipment for their children. One head remarked:

There is an unmistakeable 'wow' factor when parents walk into the room for the first time. The whole room looks wonderful because we have kept it pure by only using Community Playthings products. They all fit together even if you do not buy them at the same time and the colours and shapes blend.

Another head explained that if a parent or a teacher commented that children preferred bright primary colours she encouraged them to question this assumption: 'What kind of environment do you chose, if you want to relax? She asks, 'Why would children be any different from you?'

Another teacher commented that parents basically want 'access to lovely learning'. Her team had invested in quality across the whole site from the nursery to 11 years old ensuring consistency of provision:

The quality of the overall environment, the furniture and resources send a subliminal message to parents that children's welfare is taken very seriously – a sense that the nursery represents a learning environment, not a babysitting service.

Impact on OFSTED ratings

In this small sample there was no direct evidence that a Community Playthings setting affected OFSTED ratings although some evidence is available on request. However, two thirds of the respondents claimed that there was a subliminal effect. For example, one teacher said that Community Playthings have mapped their resources against the new EYFS scheme. She had found that this worked well in terms of evaluating learning. Another head commented that parents and inspectors could see that the nursery staff had chosen good furniture over the merely satisfactory. Another head said that she could not track any change because the original installation had been from Community Playthings and they had also had an outstanding OFSTED rating from the first. 'But maybe', she surmised, 'our choice of furniture is one element in the mix that shows that we were not prepared to compromise on vision or quality'.

Another head who had just received an outstanding OFSTED judgment was thrilled because this award is only given to 12% of nurseries. She felt that the equipment helped her staff give of their best. This nursery also had evidence that the design of the furniture had a calming effect on the children in this deprived catchment area with a mixed Asian, Pakistani, Polish and White British population.

Other value factors

Concerns were expressed that the grants for nurseries that have been available in the past will no longer exist. However, several educators emphasised that, even in the recession, quality matters. This comment sums this sentiment up:

I like the fact that the settings are in muted colours. Children bring their own colour in to the setting. The background should be natural and quiet...this does help in areas in where there is disadvantage. If any of the settings are in disadvantaged areas they should be given Community Playthings in my opinion.... Luckily there are still people in

the state system who are willing to spend money on quality. The last thing nursery teachers want is a situation where only the private sector can afford to raise the overall standards of nursery settings.

In another response to the question about value for money one head of a group of nurseries said, 'There is no doubt that buying Community Playthings is an investment. After many years of building up our stocks I now enjoy a reduced rate of buying because the furniture wears so well and does not need replacing even with heavy use'.

Some of the factors that were important to the buyers were:

- solid wood is easy to clean, durable;
- round edges so important for safety;
- the quality, they are so well made;
- everything is accessible for all children;
- all the pieces meld together: they do not clash and are in scale with all the other pieces;
- the furniture is ergonomic, versatile and adaptable;
- the equipment is visually pleasing;
- the design allows for flexible configurations;
- adjustable heights allow for the fact that children's sizes differ significantly;
- consistency over the years allows a nursery to build and grow their roomscapes;
- the company has a long history and obsolescence is not built in;
- working with the planners at Robertsbridge ensures that the settings work;
- a nursery's vision of learning can be built up slowly and adjusted for changing circumstances;
- a 10 year warranty includes replacement of any faulty goods.

In the context of value for money, the head of a nursery chain argued:

Price is a problem unless you look at it from a long-term 'cost per use' point of view. In this case price is not such an issue because this is an investment. You can add to it because it is modular type of range.

However, you do need to afford enough of it in the first place to make it work.

On the other hand, in a thoughtful contribution to the argument about value, one experienced head tried to present a balanced argument:

The price is a big stumbling block. Have we been lulled into a false sense of security about filling our nurseries? Fifteen years ago we were all saving up for Community Playthings, and luxuriating in one piece. Then the time we could afford complete layouts came, which I do not think we will see again. Many managers will be going back to purchasing one piece at a time.

There is a concern about the ‘uniformity’. Under New Labour, when nursery managers had the money to spend, there was a tendency for every setting to look like a Community Playthings setting - even when it was not. Now I would hate people to stop thinking for themselves although there has been an advantage in the sense that the influence of Community Playthings has meant plastic is losing its hold.



But I do think we need to think about the vivacity of the environment as well. In our schools we try to add things from their homes including what the staff consider ‘tat’. Working class children should

see their treasured artefacts having as much relevance as this beautifully designed Community Playthings stuff....and we add cultural and religious references as well.

So as I said it is expensive and there is some danger of conformity but they are our preferred supplier and we have just bought twenty even settings. We could get more for our money elsewhere but our parents and teachers like the Community Playthings ethos.

Some purchasers had previously bought cheaper wooden playthings or supplemented the collection with other products. But they had all replaced the cheaper versions with Community Playthings as soon as they could afford it because cheaper products deteriorated without grace. The more they built up a collection of Community Playthings the less replacement they had to do in the long term. One teacher pointed out that Community Playthings offer a ten-year guarantee: a basket that unravelled and a wooden truck that split were replaced without question.

Adjustable heights were also important as the height of children who are the same age can vary considerably. This was also an important factor in costing because the same furniture can be used in different environments and for different ages.

Much advice was offered when the interviewees were asked what they would say to nursery teams who were thinking about buying Community Playthings settings:

- The maintenance and replenishment budget is minimal after 13 years. It wears very well. It is important to the overall impression. Parents know instantly this is clearly not a throwaway item.
- Go for a long-term plan as the investment is certainly worth it. Be very careful if you buy cheaper and louder...
- I am happy to pay the price of not dumbing down and compromising. This should be your vision- you will never regret it.
- Congratulations on making a good choice. You will get plenty of use because this is so flexible, easy to move around.
- Children should not be given a nasty mattress because it is cheap. Do not apologise for your purchase. This furniture is well designed and built to last.

- Do not think twice...the investment will pay off and be enjoyed and appreciated. The durability is established and the resources are unique. You can buy on line but help with the planning from Robertsbridge is invaluable. No one does this so well. But encourage the children to respect it as well....
- We have recommended it and teachers are sold on the idea when they see it...
- You get what you pay for...I've had other equipment that chips and breaks and is a safety hazard. The fact that this is so lovingly made is so important.

The most important advice, however, came from an academic who pointed out that:

It is so important that nursery furniture is bought to underpin the learning theory the school espouses because this is where the real value is. I have seen a room that was never changed which goes against the underlying principles. Some people get it and some do not. It is a pity if people buy without understanding about the learning that can be engendered. The settings should be capable of combining opposites. Equipment should be used flexibly but should also provide predictability. Children learn best when they are challenged and surprised but also when the routine is known. The Community Playthings furniture offers all these contrasts because children's play is not predictable. The settings must be transformable. A static environment or one that children cannot change themselves does not promote the best learning. Children are best supported in their learning by a framework uniting order and disorder. If the furniture is never moved then the main value of flexibility has not been exploited.

The limitations to this research

The limitations to this research must be acknowledged. The sample is small and drawn from a Community Playthings list of clients and academics that have a close knowledge of the ethos and the products because they have purchased them. Normally a researcher aims to find a balance between what is good and what needs improving especially when the funder is keen to learn and improve. In this context I found that my objectivity was often compromised

because the interview experience was akin to interviewing the owner of a much-loved vintage car, or an Apple computer, or even a parent talking about their children. I pressed respondents hard to offer suggestions they would make for improvements in the products and about whether the quality of the furniture justified the cost, but in each case critical answers were couched in a tone of affection that only an exceptional product could engender.

Conclusion

All the respondents were asked to give advice to other teachers who might be thinking about buying Community Playthings. One manager of a nursery chain looked back to his childhood:

When I was at preschool over 35 years ago, we had the Community Playthings lofts and indoor climbing frame. Although they have moved on, at some level I am influenced by my early love of those products when I buy.

Another customer was more forthright:

Go for it. You will never regret it. Integrity is rare in retail.



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Further ideas for research

One teacher remarked that it was typical of Community Playthings to set up an independent research project in order to learn: 'this is truly a listening company'.

All the interviewees would welcome more studies that relate the learning to the use of the furniture like Anne O'Connor's work on the revised EYFS. They all thought this would help with OFSTED ratings.

Suggestions for scales were:

- Early Childhood Education Rating (ECERS scale) started in the US and used more widely in the UK;
- A study of the barriers to learning?
- Mindlab- you can only have the concepts if you have the language;
- Schemas as learning agendas;
- Leuveen scales;
- Clark - the Mosaic approach.

Another suggestion was that a study might include the sequences of children 'getting involved' in play; and questions about children 'having a blank canvas and deciding what to change.'

One head said:

I would love to be involved in an evaluation of learning. The use of the blocks would be a good subject...what do the children create with one or the other item when we just stand back and watch... creating spaces within the playroom and getting cosy places...very important... Choosing, and how they make choices- do doors make a barrier and the clear see-through baskets help the children to be drawn to making something? The equipment, what impact does it have on choices...

Helen Tovey was particular that children should always be involved in the research and their views taken into account in any research on this topic.