Research Strategy Essay

For our Fall 2012 independent study, we investigated the effects of self-transformation on children’s executive functioning. To start, we were interested in a few broad areas such as pretense, motivation, and developmentally important skills such as delayed gratification, but we did not have a specific idea about what to study. Wellesley’s library resources first came to our rescue when we used the PsycINFO database to browse several psychological journals, such as Child Development, Journal of Cognition and Development, and Early Childhood Research Quarterly. We immersed ourselves in the online peer-reviewed journal articles relating to our interest in preschool children’s methods of learning and the advantages of pretend play.

With the help of InterLibrary Loan, we retrieved and became fascinated by an article written by Karniol et al. (2011). In this article, children who were given a cape and told about Superman’s special ability to wait, were able to wait longer on a delayed-gratification task (which required their patience), than children who were not given any information about Superman. Karniol et al. believed that with this process of self-transformation, children were able to adopt Superman’s special ability to wait, thereby using the self-transformation to employ a skill that they had not yet fully developed. The idea that self-transformation through pretend play could be used to assist children with skills that they have not fully developed, intrigued us, and we began to wonder if self-transformation could be used to assist children with other skills, such as executive functioning, and thus, our research question was born.

Taking copious notes on potential topics and corresponding citations was time consuming to say the least, but with the extensive use of resources, we were able to hone our ideas down to the most important hypothesis we could study. After the Karniol et al. (2011) study captivated our attention, we went back to the literature to look for clues to support the potential relationship
between executive functioning and delayed gratification. We were initially baffled by the overwhelming extent of research that has been conducted on pretend play in preschool children, not to mention executive functioning, but we knew that there had to be a systematic way to find the information we required. A turning point came when we began to focus our searches on keywords specific to our variables of interest (i.e., self-transformation, executive functioning, attention-shifting, and response inhibition), which drastically helped to decrease the total number of search results and increase their overall relevance.

Interlibrary Loan and NExpress were also crucial in our efforts to read as many relevant articles as possible. We found a PsycINFO and AcademicOneFile function particularly helpful. With the Karniol et al. (2011) article, for example, we were able to search the articles that Karniol et al. cited, as well as the articles that referenced Karniol et al. From this growing trail of related articles, we built an extensive network of research relevant to our study’s overarching themes. As an organizational tool, we created several tables sorted by topic, listing article names, citations, notes, status of ILL or NExpress request, to ensure that we did not repeat search criteria or confuse nuanced results obtained from literature reviews performed on different days. These strategies helped ease the process of writing our final paper, as we were able to keep track of the many different articles that we had read.

Throughout the research experience, we have developed a higher level of fluency with searches and a familiarity with the extent of library resources available. We also gained confidence with the knowledge that we had access to research librarians, such as Neil Nero, from whom we could obtain guidance and support. Our research has been undeniably strengthened by all of the resources that we have utilized from the library. It is with the assistance of the library that we were able to work on a project that we believe in, which has consequently motivated us
to continue with our project from Fall 2012 into Spring 2013. We have also been fortunate to have the mentorship and guidance of our advisor to develop our ideas into relevant, statistically sound, respectable research, and are privileged to have the opportunity to share our research with the Wellesley community at this year’s Ruhlman Conference. Additionally, our project underwent a competitive, peer-reviewed process, and was accepted for presentation at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) which is a professional conference that will be held in Seattle, Washington in April.