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# Educating and Inspiring through Toys and Play

## An Interview with Terri-Nichelle Bradley

Terri-Nichelle Bradley is the founder and principal of play at Brown Toy Box, an educational toy company dedicated to improving the lives of Black children by cultivating their curiosity, expanding their skills, and underscoring Black excellence. She is a graduate of Augsburg College and has earned numerous awards for her work, including a 2019 Civic Impact Award from the Center for Civic Innovation and the 2021 Social Entrepreneur of the Year from the *Atlanta Business Chronicle's* Leaders in Corporate Citizenship. **Key words:** Brown Toy Box; diversity and toys; educational toys; STEAM; STEM; toy design; toy industry

**American Journal of Play:** As the creator of Brown Toy Box and its “principal of play,” you focus on the importance of staying curious. Did any of the toys or play in your childhood help cultivate your own curiosity?

**Terri-Nichelle Bradley:** As a child, I was naturally curious. I would always try to figure out why something was the way it was or how something worked. Things needed to make sense to me. To this day, I’m trying to understand the how and the why.

One of my favorite toys as a kid was the Holly Hobbie Bake Oven, which was like an Easy Bake Oven, but more folksy. I was fascinated with transformation. You make the batter, then the dough, then push the uncooked dough through the oven door and, when it came out the other side, it transformed into a cake. I loved that. When it came to how I played, I was always imaginative. I liked to play school and house, I always wanted to be the teacher or the mom. I liked to be the one in charge. As a child, I was called bossy, but we saw this as demonstrating leadership skills. When playing with kids in the neighborhood, I would say, “We are going to plant a garden.” Even though we didn’t have anything to plant, I would be the kid giving orders to pull something out, and replant it in the ground.

Seen from a cultural perspective, curiosity did not receive much support. In my house, though, it did. But culturally speaking, in general it was: “Don’t ask questions. Adults have the answers. Respect adults. Respect authority. Why do you need to know, just do it.” And those notions never sat well with me as a kid, because I wanted to know the answers. My mother helped encourage my curiosity, as she knew who I was and encouraged it.

When I say “cultivating curiosity,” we want kids to stay curious. Inquisitive minds grow and expand. But we also need adults to cultivate curiosity and encourage it. It’s common for kids to take things apart—they are exploring. A parent might think, “Oh, he’s bad or she’s being mischievous,” but really the child is trying to figure out how things work.

**AJP:** Brown Toy Box aims to address a long-standing deficit in toys that reflect Black culture. Did you personally experience this lack? And before creating Brown Toy Box, did you ever see your culture reflected in the toy aisle or toy industry?

**Bradley:** I grew up in St. Paul, Minnesota, in the 1970s with my two older sisters, my younger brother, and my parents. My father had a blue-collar job working as a supervisor at a water treatment plant. We were middle class. We moved from the inner city to the suburbs and were the only Black family in my neighborhood. I did not see us represented in toys as a kid. I didn’t see it when my kids were young either. But now, we are finally having these conversations.

My mother, who had only a high school education, was probably the smartest person I knew because she had emotional intelligence. She saw this discrepancy, this gap. A lot of our friends were succumbing to low self-image, low self-esteem. Being a Black girl in the 1970s in St. Paul, Minnesota, was not easy. We were not the standard of beauty, traditionally speaking. My mother made sure we had *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines in the house and Black art on our walls. Whenever a news article came out about a Black woman breaking the glass ceiling somehow, she made sure we read it and had a conversation about it. There was a Black theater company called Penumbra Theater, and when they had a production, she would make sure we went to see these examples of Black excellence. They had profound plays—for example, a Black nativity for Christmas. As a mom myself, I just think, how awesome and brave is that, that she was able to say, here are examples of greatness I want you guys to aspire to. I think it’s such a brave thing.

My mother used to get my dolls, and she would color their skin with a brown marker. As a child, I used to think it was ridiculous and didn't understand. And then I became a mother, and I got it. She was trying to help us see ourselves represented in the toys that we played with. At the time, I didn't appreciate that. I even used to put a white towel on my head and would fling it around, like that was as close as I was going to be with long blonde hair. My mother was trying to counteract that, but I didn't understand. Even though I would play with a white doll, there was this message: "This is what a doll should look like. This is what beauty looks like." This is why I put the towel on my head and pretended to have long blonde hair and flipped it and became Malibu Barbie. So, for me, it's important that we create toys that center and celebrate Black children through play.

When my kids were little, we used to have calling trees with Black moms where we would call each other to let the others know when a toy or product would be culturally representative and available at retail. (This was before texting was a thing). It was so rare to find a toy that looked like you. So, when a store would carry something, everybody would get so excited and run to that store. I would look for stores carrying Weebles, but ones that had Black Weebles. I could seldom find them, but when we did find them, we would tell the other moms. Another example is window clings. When we found window clings with Black kids on them, we would tell each other. I sit back now and think how messed up this is. That it was so rare to find something that should be normal, such as a window cling of a winter scene with Black children on it. A North Star for us was the character Disney introduced in 2012, Doc McStuffins, who was a Black girl and a doctor to her stuffed animals. I remember seeing Doc McStuffins costumes in the toy aisle, and on the packaging there were white, Asian, and Hispanic kids. It was just good fun and that's how it should be.

When we say, "Americana," Americana could appear in a lot of different ways. And I don't think that was really reflected in toys or in activities for kids. Even now, when people talk about diversity in toys, they are really just talking about dolls. When there first started to be representation in dolls, I thought, "This is great, but what about everything else?" Even now, when I see Toys for Tots and other toy drives, and these very well-meaning folks only giving white dolls to these little Black kids, they are sending a subliminal message and don't even realize it. And the way

you know it's true is when that is reversed. For example, I was reading an article from a white mom, and she said that she went to a birthday party and gave her friend's daughter a Black doll. And she said it was very controversial. The other mother said, "What point are you trying to make?" So, it's normalized one way, but the other way around it's like: "What are you trying to say?"

**AJP:** How would you define purposeful play? Why is it central for you?

**Bradley:** Brown Toy Box makes play culturally representative, accessible, and fun by creating high-quality products that are data driven, child centered and developed, based on accredited urban education pedagogy. Play is where children first develop their ideas about who they are, what they want to be, and what their place is in the world. We would start there. We make learning fun. When children don't see themselves represented in toys, this erasure makes them feel "othered," as if these things are not meant for them. Brown Toy Box creates products, games, content, and experiences that leverage educational play to expose children to boldly chase every dream.

We want to encourage Black kids to dream a bigger dream for themselves, to expand their ideas of the possibilities for their lives. So, where one may have never imagined being a marine biologist, maybe now he or she will. Our goal is to change the trajectory of kids' lives and change the way they engage with their family, in their classroom, and in their communities.

After *Bloomberg* ran an article about Brown Box Toys (March 16, 2022), I remember seeing comments saying, "How does she expect to change the trajectory of kids' lives through play?" And yes, this absolutely starts with play. I remember when I was younger, I worked at a recreation center and there was this little boy who was fascinated by bridges. He loved learning facts about bridges and sharing his knowledge. When I left working there, I gave him a book on bridges. I wanted to encourage his curiosity and passion. However, his mother pulled me aside and said, "Why are you giving him this? Do you know any Black people who have built bridges?" And it broke my heart and made me frustrated. If she was saying this to me, she was probably also saying this to him. We have to breathe life into our kids' dreams, not speak death to them. Years later I learned about Horace King, who was a brilliant architect and built bridges all over Atlanta. I wish I could tell that little boy about Horace King.

**AJP:** As you say, Brown Toy Box's educational toys help inspire "Black and

Brown children so that they can see themselves pursuing STEAM career pathways.” What initially sparked your interest in STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics)-based play learning?

**Bradley:** The lack of diversity in technology (tech) is what began my interest in STEM and STEAM. I kept reading about this “leaky pipeline” in STEAM. Particularly in tech, they couldn’t find Black and Brown people to fill these jobs, and that’s why the tech industry was primarily white males. And I was like, I call malarkey on that. I went down a rabbit hole and realized, it’s not tech, it’s all of these different industries that lack representation.

It’s not about talent, it’s about opportunity, access, and exposure. STEM and STEAM are the careers of the future. For me, it’s about how do we get Black and Brown kids to pursue these types of careers? The more I researched, the more I learned about the importance of early and recurring exposure. The question is, how do we give kids early and recurring exposure to STEM and STEAM? For me, it was very obvious that this is going to be play-based learning with STEAM early exposure so they can build their confidence to explore those activities, and then later those clubs, those college majors, and after that, those careers. We, Brown Toy Box, want to be the “on ramp.” If it’s a pipeline, we want to be at the opening, at the beginning, to help these kids through it with continuous exposure.

It’s important to mention that it’s not just about preparing kids for STEM and STEAM careers. It’s also about developing their critical-thinking skills, their communication abilities. About cultivating their creativity and collaboration skill sets. We need to develop these skills so that they can use them throughout their lives and their academic careers.

**AJP:** What was your own relationship to these subjects when you were growing up?

**Bradley:** Growing up, I was never exposed to STEM or STEAM. Of course, it wasn’t called that back then, but still, I was never encouraged to pursue those interests so I never developed them. I wish someone had told me I could, in fact, be good at math and science, that I come from a legacy of inventors and creators. But that just wasn’t the case for me growing up. So, while I had the positive representation, my parents just didn’t know that this life was possible.

We had a very diverse school in St. Paul, Minnesota, which was a refugee resettlement city. However, my best friend and I were the only two

Blacks in the Advanced Placement classes in elementary, middle, and high school. Therefore, in the interest of diversity, we would always be split up, so there could be at least one Black kid in each class, but it was the loneliest feeling all the time.

**AJP:** When you decided to help develop young minds, what drew you to the toy business specifically?

**Bradley:** When I started to think about how I can affect change in terms of the leaky pipeline, the only thing that came to mind was toys. As a mother raising Black children, I always wanted to have more diverse toys for my kids and could never find them.

The vision of Brown Toy Box is to create a world where Black children are positively represented in any space that they experience on a regular basis and for them to know they can achieve anything they set their minds to becoming. For me, this looked like the toy box, the classroom, and television, or wherever they are consuming content. It's about cultivating curiosity and normalizing Black excellence. Success and joy can look like many different things. How do we help children expand their ideas of the possibilities for their lives to include these careers? And it came to me, we do this through play. Once I decided this was the work I was going to do, it was always toys.

**AJP:** Elsewhere, you have noted how discussions of diversity in toys tend to focus on dolls. What distinguishes Brown Toy Box as an educational toy company?

**Bradley:** The majority of the time, when people are talking about diversity in toys, they are primarily thinking of dolls. Dolls are absolutely important, and representation in dolls absolutely matters to build self-esteem and confidence. For the most part, dolls will have different hair textures, and there is a diverse range of skin colors within darker skin tones. But, by and large, little boys are not playing with these types of dolls.

So, while representation in dolls is important, what is the next step? What about everything else? How do you cultivate curiosity, how do you empower a child to explore something new, have them shift their perspective about what they can do or be in life? We must be an educational toy company to meet our vision and goals. Play-based learning is the vehicle for change.

**AJP:** Tell us how you initially identified consumers for Brown Toy Box. How did you let parents, care givers, teachers, and others know the benefits of

Black-centered and STEAM-focused play materials for young children?

**Bradley:** When we first started as a subscription box, I always knew I wanted to touch both affluent families and families living in high-poverty communities. We looked at it as a three-legged stool: the care givers, the teachers, and the kids. We began testing our products and concepts with play-based learning in school. By testing in schools, we were able to figure out the toys kids actually wanted to play with, the toys teachers actually got excited about, and the toys parents or care givers wanted to see. When we began as a subscription box, we would provide teachers with the curriculum and product and advise how to roll it out. After that, we would survey and ask for feedback from parents, teachers, and the kids.

When testing with kids, we would observe how they engaged and played with the product. We took into consideration if the toy was durable enough, if it was fun, and how long it held kids' attention spans. We also wanted to know if kids played independently or if they played together collaboratively.

We were scrappy in the beginning. We also held focus groups with moms and church groups where—through a lot of conversation—we were able to identify what resonated. Moms would say, “You know it would be cool if the toy could do X, Y, Z” or “it would be great if . . .” We wanted to develop toys that are not just nice to have but are something that a parent or teacher would buy. We wanted to be a valuable brand as opposed to a value brand. We knew we wanted both the affluent moms at retail and the Title 1 schools to be our customers. Through these different focus groups and testing in schools, care givers and teachers became our customers, advocates, and evangelists.

We started testing with diverse mom groups to include white families when we started our pivot into retail. We began in an informal way where I had my white friends give the STEAM kits to their kids to play with. And we found that the results were very similar to the way affluent Black kids played and engaged. I used to say, “It would never hurt a white child to play with a Black toy.” Theoretically, that made sense to me, but through testing, it became clear. Yes, representation in toys matters, but our toys are meant for all children.

**AJP:** You say that one of the chief goals of Brown Toy Box is to disrupt Black generational poverty. Can you share how the company works toward this goal in its creative and business practices?

**Bradley:** Brown Toy Box’s mission seeks to disrupt generational poverty by normalizing Black excellence, cultivating curiosity, and building twenty-first-century skills to create pathways to prosperous careers and expand Black children’s ideas for the possibilities for their lives.

We believe all children should see themselves positively represented in every aspect of their lives. From the toy aisle to the classroom to TV, we want Black children to grow up and see positive depictions of themselves so that they believe they can achieve anything they set their minds to. We are the on-ramp to STEAM access and education. If this is a leaky pipeline, let’s plug those holes, work with corporate partners like Microsoft and the nonprofit DonorsChoose to make sure there is a continuum where kids can build their confidence and explore these activities.

I’m very intentional about making sure I can do trade or business with other Black women-owned and Black-lead organizations and companies so that we can see our dollars circulate in this community. I love being able to incorporate books in each STEAM kit and help self-published authors have distribution. We can be the change that we seek. For me, Brown Toy Box is an economic driver just as much as it is a tool for educating and disrupting generational poverty.

The other way we are disrupting generational poverty is by redefining what it means to be Black in the Black community. We need to break down the walls of this culturally self-imposed small box of what “being Black” means. In school, if you were “acting smart” you were “acting white” or if you were speaking articulately, you were “talking white.” There is this narrow viewpoint that you can be successful only as a basketball player or a rapper. And that is absolutely not the case. Whatever Black children are excited about, they need to feel empowered to be able to do that, and that it is “Black” because they are Black. We need to normalize the idea that it’s cool to be smart and cool to try new things. We want parents to be advocates for their kids to have STEAM access in their schools and be willing to drive their kids to participate in clubs and activities. I feel like this is supposed to be my life’s work: disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline and helping kids be on track to prosperous careers.

**AJP:** Brown Toy Box originally began as a direct-to-consumer subscription box and now has been available online, in stores, and in Title 1 classrooms through partnerships with nonprofit organizations. Have these experiences provided any insights about the issue of access, specifically concerning toys



and educational products that celebrate and center on Black and brown children?

**Bradley:** Absolutely. We attended the International Step by Step Association (ISSA) Conference, a Title 1 school conference, at the beginning of the year, and I cannot tell you how packed our booth stayed. Teachers were fawning over our products. We had different diversity groups tell us how important what we are doing is, and that representation matters. We have seen the school side of our business grow. In fact, recently we filled an order with Louisiana Parish, which was a relationship we developed at the ISSA Conference. For educational conferences, I predict we will see more educational-based toy companies represented.

Our corporate partners, like Electro Learning, were there, and Electro's contact told us they called their president to inform him how popular and packed our booth stayed. Typically, in Title 1 schools, the only representation they have are posters of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks. But there has been representation before them and after. For us, we create posters for our Dadisi Crew toylines that are fun, positive examples of representation. So, our corporate partners, schools, and teachers are excited, and the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive.

Right now, we are gearing up for toy drives and are in talks with major corporations to incorporate Brown Toy Box into their campaigns.

**AJP:** Tell us about your process for creating new products and themes at the Brown Toy Box. Where do you start?

**Bradley:** We always start with research, speaking with teachers, and asking the question, "Wouldn't it be cool if..." Our strong partnerships with schools, for example, allow us to brainstorm and develop new STEAM kits. We marry these ideas with our toy designers' creative process.

For our new line, College Builds, we were looking at construction kits and thinking, "How can we make this different? How do we make this unique or special? How do we make that point of representation?" So we came up with the idea of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and went from there. HBCUs were founded after slavery ended and were essentially large land-grant institutions where Black students could get an education. Some of the schools couldn't sustain themselves, but many still thrive today. There's a lot of pride and legacy at these schools. We started with six schools, which we needed to get the licenses to be able to construct each one. Our toy designers began with a blueprint of the

campuses and 3-D modeling, and then our manufacturer made a 3-D foam puzzle that kids can build and put together. Parents or care givers will be able to buy more buildings for the campus as kids build.

Generally speaking, for new products we will create a rough prototype and see how kids respond and play with it before we create the “real” version. I still have creative input, but I trust our toy designers to do what they do.

**AJP:** The company’s Dadisi Crew features a diverse cast of Black and Brown children with their own back stories and STEAM interests. Can you share your creative process for these characters and what you feel they bring to the line?

**Bradley:** We wanted to develop the Dadisi Crew with a global lens. The word “Dadisi” means “curious” in Swahili. The crew comes from various places across the world and have diverse back stories that we hope resonate with kids. What we know for sure is that representation in play is not an issue only in the United States, but rather a global one, so we want young Black kids in Paris to see themselves, kids in Mexico to see themselves, children in Kenya and South Africa to see themselves. We were intentional with every aspect of each character. We wanted to make sure each character represented different skin tones, from very light shades to very dark shades. It was very intentional that the haircuts and hair textures were diverse. When you think about diversity in the Black community, we have a character that represents albinism all the way to a very dark-skinned girl and boy and everything in between. We want kids to feel connected and proud that these characters share similar stories or places of origin as theirs.

**AJP:** Brown Toy Box materials also draw attention to overlooked and ignored Black innovators in STEAM history. What has been your own research into their stories? Do these discoveries inform the toy design process?

**Bradley:** Yes, researching these stories absolutely informs our toy design process. For example, in our STEAM kits, we include booklets in which we introduce kids to trailblazers who have accomplishments in these fields. In our McKayla Museum Arts STEAM kit, there’s a 3-D foldable replica of an art museum where we were very intentional about putting Black artists’ names. For College Builds, we were very intentional with the history and created fun fact cards to go along with them. It’s so important that these kids learn about the Black legacy and contributions of Black people in this country. We infuse this in our toys to make hands-on learning positive and fun.

**AJP:** In addition to various toy lines, Brown Toy Box also offers supplemental materials such as the child-led *Kids on a Quest* videos, which take viewers inside local Atlanta businesses to see STEAM topics in action. How were these created, and what do you hope children, care givers, and teachers will gain from these resources?

**Bradley:** The goal is to expose kids to different careers in action. I leverage my relationships, but for the most part I leave it up to my creative team. We have fifteen different STEAM themes that we are focusing on. The idea is that kids can actually see someone they can identify with working in these careers that perhaps they hadn't envisioned for themselves. We take kids into the environment so they can see first-hand, real-life experiences. We once took kids to a donut shop so they could see how donuts and different pastries were made. There's the STEM and STEAM hands-on learning component, and then there are the skills such as communication and collaboration. We are trying to build confidence and are doing so by introducing kids to adults and having them ask questions from the perspective of a kid. We want kids who are physically there to conduct the interviews and ask fun questions. When we share these videos with schools and others, we hope kids learn something new or see how cool it would be to do something like that.

**AJP:** Has COVID-19 had an effect on toy or game trends and design?

**Bradley:** We are still feeling the impact of the supply chain crisis and shipping delays. COVID-19 hasn't impacted our toy design considerations, but our delivery methods have been affected. And the fiscal impact has been huge. A lot of the large retailers have cut orders because they have an overabundance of inventory from the supply chain crisis last year. A lot of places received products late, and so we have been impacted by this overabundance of inventory.

Cost has certainly gone up. Many said that by February 2022, costs would go down, but so far, they haven't. I was always skeptical because no one stopped shipping. If the freight companies were negatively impacted financially, they would have figured out how to decrease these costs. Because people were able to rise to that pricing and pay exorbitant costs, it's gone down a little, but certainly not to pre-COVID-19 status. I think last year people were able to bear those costs, however there's going to be an inflection point that will squeeze small businesses. The larger toy companies, like the Mattels and Hasbros, will be impacted negatively.

But because of the volume that they're producing and the relationships that they have with manufacturers, they'll have a lot more grace.

For small companies like Brown Toy Box, we're really getting squeezed in a way that's very difficult. When I hear legislators talking about the supply chain, they are only focused on big businesses and not focused on us small companies and how we really have to fight through it. The retailers have shelf space that they need to have filled. We have made gains in an inclusive supply chain, inclusive product offerings, but at the end of the day, if the only companies who can fill their orders are like Jazwares, Inc., then that's all the retailers will have, because of course product needs to be on shelves for the holidays. I hope we have made gains in terms of retailers opening their eyes and saying, "We always had diverse customers, but we never had inclusive product offerings." I hope they don't lose those because we're not able to work in this atmosphere of skyrocketing costs. It's definitely something that needs to be addressed.

In the beginning of COVID-19, we did very well financially. So much so that we were able to evolve from a subscription-based company to a toy company. There was a period where schools really wanted our hands-on STEAM kits. They wanted something that students could do while they were home. That afforded us the opportunity to take profits from those sales and further evolve our business as a toy company. So, it's definitely been a blessing and a curse. We are starting shipping now and are in that crunch. I don't know if it will be different from last year. But I'm ready to weather it. I'm battle tested now.

In terms of toy and game trends during the pandemic, there has been a lot more focus on educational toys. Kids were home, not in school, and parents wanted to keep their kids learning. There was definitely an appreciation for tactile engagement as opposed to viewing a screen.

**AJP:** You describe yourself as an equity-in-play advocate—what would you say are the most pressing challenges still facing Black toy designers dedicated to play equity?

**Bradley:** Opportunity. There is so much room for more diversity and representation in toys. People ask me, "What if someone is trying to replicate what you are doing?" And my answer always is, we will continue to keep innovating, being creative, and intentional in how we design. There's always a new approach, and there's intentionality in our work. Given our aggressive pipeline of development, we are using freelancers and contract toy

designers. Our toy designers are so creative, and I really trust what they do. When you have an idea for a house, you need an architect and a vision of what you want. I'll say, "Let's do a crossover kit with museum arts and coding," so we can see these two things converge. And our toy designers will come back with storyboards, and we'll have several to choose from and go from there.

**AJP:** How do you hope the Brown Toy Box will be remembered?

**Bradley:** My dream is that one day when we have a more equitable world, a more equitable economy, people will say that they pursued their careers in science, technology, engineering, arts, or math because they were first exposed to it through Brown Toy Box. That Brown Toy Box made them believe that it was possible and created a love for these fields for them. We want to be responsible for helping ignite the fire in kids to be inspired by STEAM, one that grows like a wildfire throughout their lives.

**AJP:** Could you tell us what's up next for the Brown Toy Box?

**Bradley:** Our vision is to be in any space that a child experiences regularly, whether that's the classroom, toy aisle, or television. Last year we had thirty toys on the market, this year we're going to release one hundred by the fall and for the holidays. We are heavily in product development now. We are adding new people to the team and are focused on sales.

Our STEAM kits are expanding to nine new characters and new themes in the fourth quarter, so there will be a total of fifteen kits. Our original six STEAM kits will be updated in the first quarter of 2023. One of my personal favorite new STEAM kits is the zoology kit.

We are releasing a couple of new product lines. One is called College Builds for eight- to twelve-year-olds, in which kids can build replicas of HBCUs. We also have a line of early learning toys for preschool and plus the Dadisi Crew characters. In terms of content, we are also rolling out a Dadisi Crew book series and we want to bring the Dadisi Academy to life with an animation series.

There are several partnerships in the works. We just signed a partnership with Lecture Learning and with Microsoft. With Microsoft, we will bring our STEAM kits and Dadisi Crew to life online. We are in the process of finalizing a licensing agreement with Nickelodeon. We will be collaborating on STEAM kits for their Blaze property for preschoolers ages two to five.

We are also looking to diversify our channel retail partners. Our biggest

customer currently is Target. We are looking to expand to other retailers. For our direct to consumer for our school kits, we are going deeper and expanding those as well.

Ultimately, we want to be international, and so exporting will be big for us.