Guidance in early childhood education: the use of toys

Teaching involves a fine balance between what legislature states should be provided for students and the creativity of each teacher. Today, the way which these two elements work together to serve students best will be examined along with a talk about how maths toys can assist us in our work. The curriculum guidance for the foundation stage was distributed to schools with nursery and reception classes. This guidance includes six areas of learning which form the basis of the foundation stage curriculum. These areas include personal, social and emotional development; communication, language and literacy; mathematical development; knowledge and understanding of the world; physical development; and creative development. These six areas were created so that practitioners can effectively meet the needs of a diverse student population with a variety of needs. The hope of all practitioners who follow the curriculum guide is that all individual children's needs are met, whether it is that a child needs increased individualized assistance or is in need of a gifted program.

Principles of the curriculum guidance direct all individuals who interact with children to help facilitate learning in various environments. Doing so causes greater understanding between both school personnel and caretakers. In effect, it also allows the teacher to better understand the needs of the family, thus, reduces various forms of exclusion. For instance, if the family has another child at home with special needs who is immobile; teachers are better able to understand why parents are unable to come to every school program (Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage, p. 12).

The curriculum guidance format also heavily emphasizes the need for practitioners to focus on children's individuality and emphasize what is

unique and special about each child. In some instances, we as teachers become frustrated with unique personalities or the different methods some children use to understand curriculum. However, the curriculum guidance specifically says that we should embrace these idiosyncrasies. In line with this idea is another point made in the curriculum guidance documentation. It states that " no child [is] excluded or disadvantaged because of ethnicity, culture or religion, home language, family background, special educational needs, disability, gender or ability". Instead, it goes on to say that practitioners should learn more about each child's ethnic, faith and cultural heritage and home experiences so that they can be used to create an environment of familiarity for the child. For instance, a familiar custom can be employed within the classroom to increase familiarity for one child while teaching multiculturalism. It is amazing how little familiar notions such as this can promote not only comfort in a new environment but can also facilitate increased self-confidence (Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage, p12-14).

Every Which Way We Can: A Literacy and Social Inclusion Position Paper discusses policy, school, home and community issues relating to children's literacy and learning. The authors discuss the many ways children can have access to literacy and education so that no child is excluded from receiving a strong education. They also discuss the importance of involvement in policymaking and how there is much work to be done in this area to advocate for inclusion (Bird and Akerman, 2005).

The DfES regarding Excellence and Enjoyment is another document that specifies best practice in education with children. This article states that an

effective combination for learning includes elements of both excellence in teaching and enjoyment in learning. Excellence in teaching includes challenging yet engaging teaching, while enjoyment comes from the child being given the opportunity to engage in learning in the mental and physical environment that suits him best. If a child is very playful, then play could be a useful tool in teaching him. If he learns best with visual tools, he can be given the option to pictorially draw out a solution (DfES Excellence and Enjoyment, p. 6-8).

Excellence and Enjoyment also charges practitioners to " take ownership of the curriculum, shaping it and making it their own". This is encouraging to hear, especially because a curriculum is already set and a teacher sometimes feels that room for creativity is limited. However, when we hear that we can take ownership of the curriculum and mold it through a practitioner's creative and playful eyes, it feels as though there is great possibility to generate other ideas from it.

Another important aspect of effective implementation of the Curriculum guidance is of course practitioners who truly understand curriculum requirements and have the ability to effectively implement them. Not only is it important that practitioners understand the curriculum, but that they also understand a child's development in midst of the curriculum. This is a very significant point and the rest of the presentation will be focused on how curriculum and child development meet to produce a fruitful and educationally creative environment for children (Curriculum guide for the foundation stage, p. 13-15).

It is well-documented that children learn best when they are manipulating objects or participating vibrant discussion. Play and discussion are key factors in learning. Through play and discussion, children make great discoveries, are allowed to create hypotheses that may or may not always be correct and explore new ideas. There is a freedom and carefree attitude in play that allows creativity to flow naturally. The practitioner's role then, is to gently guide the play and discussion without overtaking it.

Play becomes vital, particularly when working with children on the curriculum guidance point, Mathematical Development. Creative and unique methods must be employed in teaching young ones. There are currently hundreds of toys available on the market that aid in learning various school subjects. Many of them are focused around mathematical concepts and learning. Various maths toys stress different functions, whether it is addition, subtraction, or even just learning the maths symbols (Perry & Dockett, 2001, p. 1-3).

Toys in learning become a common language between teacher and student. They are indispensable in the learning environment and can be utilized in several different ways. For maths particularly, many toys can be created right in the classroom without few or no materials. For instance, the class could sing a number song together. The class could also make shapes with pencils and glue. While applying the glue, children could count the number of pencils being used. There are many examples such as these that could facilitate mathematical development. The important part of utilizing toys is to present the toy or game as engaging and fun. This should not be a difficult

task to do, being that children already have a propensity to be drawn to toys (Perry & Dockett, 2001, p. 1-3).

Some toys are available for free online while others could become quite expensive. Many could easily be created in the classroom or at home. Some examples of online games include Numeracy Powerpoints, Number Poem and Five Little Ducks. These games do not require payment or any materials. Most of the games available online are placed there by parents and teachers who have utilized these games and found positive results (Brooker, 2003, p. 4; Conoley et. al., 2006, p47-48).

It is important to take some aspects into consideration when looking for educational maths toys. Most importantly, question whether the toy is really teaching the child about maths. Sometimes, although toys are geared toward children, they are not attractive to children. Second, make sure that the toy is suitable to the age range you are working with. Question whether it encapsulates the mix of children in your classroom. Will the child struggling most be attracted by this game? Will the advanced child be bored? Third, can the child recreate the game at home or in other environments? Every parent cannot afford some of the toys on the market. Therefore, it is important to consider whether parents can recreate it. If this is not possible and you would like to continue to use the game at school, are there other games that parents can create at home for the child that can assist in learning? In considering parents' financial limitations, you can accommodate them in other ways and still ensure that all students are learning the same concepts (Brooker, 2003, p. 4). This type of questioning, by the way, is an example of using the inclusion framework at all times when

working with students. As long as we as professionals continue to always think and play, we allow this same mind frame in our students.

References

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