WHAT I DON’T GET ABOUT PLAY IS . . .

Siobhan Skeffington

“What I don’t get about play is how any productive learning takes place. For example if I am with my children and intervening in their play, they seem to be doing something useful, but left to their own devices they just muck about.”

Sitting in a management meeting listening to my Y2 colleague, I was suddenly jolted to attention by her comment. Having taught Reception for four years I am an ardent believer that play is essential to young children’s learning. I recognise that at some points adult intervention is appropriate in extending and developing learning. However, I feel the example I used in the meeting and use here, illustrates how children quite often use the stimulus they receive through direct teaching to create their own exciting play.

Recently in my classroom I spotted two girls who had developed an exciting game of their own. All year the children had been encouraged to play a variety of board games, such as Snakes and Ladders, Incey Wincey Spider, Ladybirds, Ludo, Drafts and Chess, independently.

On this particular day on the maths table I had put out a variety of equipment including:

- Different sized pieces of paper
- Different sized, coloured and numbered dice
- Number lines and squares
- Counting equipment
- Felt tips

The children choose which tables and activities they wish to engage with and move freely around the classroom. A number of the children had chosen to use the maths table in different ways, for example, rolling the dice and then counting out objects. I was

Implications and challenges for my maths classroom?

The scenarios in which I studied at the ATM conference allowed a problem-solving culture. Why, and how does it compare to a mathematics class?

Like minded individuals all happy to work on a problem together (not necessarily the case in the classroom?)

The resource was the teacher, the participants and the problems. Not a textbook.

So the benefits for the classroom due to a problem-solving environment:

- pupils work collaboratively
- pupils develop problem solving skills
- enables pupils to explore a topic in more depth to provide a richer understanding

However there are issues relating to making this a success:

- good problems
- techniques to motivate pupils to work collaboratively
- allowing the pupils to explore
- maximising the learning experiences for all pupils, that is they leave feeling a sense of learning and achievement

I don’t believe this is an easy challenge by any means, but if we don’t try it, then we cannot improve. Also if a problem goes in a different mathematical direction, then so what – many teachers need to learn the humility of going away from a class to research, solve a problem and then take it back to the children. Learning to accept our limitations will enable us to realise them and go beyond.

Now if you will excuse me I need to go back to the undergraduate texts and look up some things about isomorphisms.

Justin Coad teaches at Weydon School.

References

observing what was going on without intervening.

Two girls, each with their own piece of paper and felt tip pen, were rolling a dice each to see who rolled the highest number. They were then recording their scores on a piece of paper and also drawing the correct number of dots for each dice-roll. After about ten minutes they changed to see who rolled the smallest number. Their recordings are included here.

When I asked the girls to explain to the class what they had been doing they said, “We were just throwing dice”. Neither child was able to articulate exactly what they had been doing, although they had developed quite a complex game that involved using a number of skills:

- Recognising numerals
- Counting spots
- Recognising numerals equate to different amounts
- Comparing numbers
- Recognising which numbers were greater or smaller
- Developing a systematic approach
- Taking turns
- Working collaboratively
- Sustaining a self initiated task that lasted for over 25 minutes
- Using a culmination of skills for their own enjoyment and purpose

I feel this activity demonstrates that child-initiated play can often be as effective as anything adult-led. If children are in a stimulating environment, feel confident and enthusiastic about early mathematics and are given time and space to use their skills, they will often extend their play, with far-reaching results.

Children are experts in learning through play and as teachers we can learn so much ourselves through just observing them.

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