Over recent years, Hendal Primary School in Wakefield has celebrated several world festivals such as Divali, Hanukkah, Eid and Chinese New Year in order to help children’s personal and social development and their understanding of the wider world.

Chinese New Year can provide interesting starting points for many areas of learning for young children, as well as their personal and social development. Teachers in Foundation and KS1, led by Heather Brooks, planned practical mathematical activities together to ensure progression. Classroom assistants were included in the planning to ensure activities, covering aspects of shape and space, measures (including time and money) could be matched to the age and experience of the children.

Teachers and assistants collected examples of Chinese calendars, decorations, cards, artefacts and Chinese newspapers to provide interactive displays in the classrooms and corridors. Books and notes provided background information for the children. Further information is available on various websites. I found the site www.blss.portsmouth.sch.uk/ particularly helpful.

Chinese New Year for 2006 is 29th January. In 2005 it was 9th February. The date is not fixed as, like other traditional Chinese festivals, it is calculated using the lunar calendar. Like many schools in Wakefield, Hendal Primary has very few children from cultural minorities. Headteacher David Harvey encourages discussion about different festivals during assembly, talking about the reasons for celebrations and the differences and similarities for children throughout the world. Children love to say ‘Kung Hey Fat Choy’ the traditional Chinese New Year greeting.

The teachers at Hendal used the following starting points:
- The traditional Chinese calendar
- Decorations
- Dragon dances
- Lucky money envelopes lai see
- Traditional food
- Games

**CHINESE NEW YEAR**

Marjorie Gorman describes some ideas for young children to explore mathematics while celebrating Chinese New Year.
The Chinese calendar

In the Chinese calendar, each year in a twelve-year cycle is named after a different animal. 2005 was the year of the rooster. 2006 is the year of the dog.

Each animal is associated with certain characteristics – for example, people born during the year of the dog are supposed to be loyal and trustworthy.

Kelly Ashton, the teacher in the Foundation class, displayed a colourful calendar obtained from a local Chinese restaurant and found matching cut-outs of the animals to count and talk about. The children talked about similarities and differences, which were real animals and which (like dragons) were legendary and they sorted the animals into groups according to the number of legs or whether they had fur or feathers.

KS1 children made animal masks and re-enacted the legend of the animal cycle. They counted on and back as they answered questions such as:

- When was the last year of the rooster?
- What year will be the next year of the rooster?
- What was the animal sign for the year when you were born?
- How many years before the next one?

Since the children in a year group will probably have the share of only two animals, they could be asked to find out about other members of their families and do some simple data collecting.

Decorations

Red and gold colours symbolise good luck and wealth for the Chinese. According to legend, red symbolises fire that drives away bad luck. For the month or so before the festival, houses are cleaned and decorated with ‘good luck’ hangings, paper cut-outs and banners.

Young children made banners from red paper, discussed and tried to copy the good luck messages with large felt tipped pens. Y2 children were more ambitious. They made large banners from fabric using wax-resist to write the Chinese symbols. They had to use their measuring skills to cut lengths of fabric and the wooden dowelling hangers to an exact size.

The lantern festival comes at the end of the New Year period when families gather to show off their lanterns of different shapes and sizes. Young children make paper lanterns from coloured paper and decorate them.

Chinese dragons

The famous lion and dragon dances to be seen in London and other large cities are traditionally part of the New Year celebrations. In Hendal Primary the youngest children played Chinese music and did a simple dragon dance using a parachute. They learned to arrange themselves in a circle and move one or two steps to the left or to the right. They were developing their maths vocabulary in a most enjoyable way.

Older children made dragon puppets by folding long strips of red paper to make a body and joining it to a head, made from card.

The teacher deliberately gave the children different lengths of paper. Children compared the dragon lengths and estimated how much more paper they would need to make them half a metre long.

Other artefacts carried in the processions include imitation firecrackers, red triangular pennants and lucky windmills that drive away any lurking evil spirits.
Making any of these decorative features provides opportunities for meaningful talk about shapes.

**Lucky money envelopes (lai see)**

Children appreciate the tradition of giving lucky red envelopes containing money to young people at New Year. Parents often slip the envelopes under the children’s pillows as they sleep. Children made envelopes from pieces of A4 paper. They talked as they folded a square to make a rectangle – doubling and halving – all valuable shape vocabulary acquired in a meaningful situation.

You can use the lucky money envelopes to introduce some work on coin recognition and simple money problems in a ‘fun’ situation.

**Traditional food**

As with many festivals, food is an important aspect in Chinese New Year and sharing traditional dishes with friends and family is part of the enjoyment of the celebration.

Several traditional dishes have names and shapes linked to good fortune – for example Yau Gwok or golden puff, are crescent-shaped dumplings regarded as symbols of prosperity.

Young children enjoy preparing food from simple ingredients. They can cut up vegetables, mix flour and water and do many of the preparatory stages of cooking festival food even if the final cooking in deep fat has to be done elsewhere.

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**A simple recipe for Chinese rice cakes**

**You need:**
- 75g flour
- 25g ground rice
- 50g sugar
- 50g margarine
- 1 egg
- jam

**What to do:**
1. Put the flour in a bowl and rub in the margarine.
2. Add the sugar and egg and mix well.
3. Drop small pieces of mixture on to a greased baking tray.
4. Make a small hole in each cake and fill with jam.
5. Bake in the oven at 200C for 15 minutes.
6. Cool on a wire tray – jam can be very hot!

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They liked trying to eat a simple Chinese dish of chicken and vegetables using chopsticks. They tried eating rice – a staple in the south of China whereas in the north wheat-based dishes such as noodles are more common. Children created a Chinese restaurant in the role-play area and enjoyed playing the roles of waiters and diners. Older children can follow a simple recipe and weigh out ingredients.

**Holiday games**

- **100 square jigsaws**
  During the New Year holiday friends like to play games – why not make a 100 square of Chinese numbers. Cut part of the square (say about 25 or 30 number squares) into several pieces of four or five numbered squares. Friends challenge each other to fit the pieces back together. If they are really keen they use the whole square – they look at the pattern of the numbers for clues.

**Magic squares**

The famous Lo-Shu magic square from ancient China is said to be the first example of a ‘magic’ square. For young children use a $3 \times 3$ grid and have the numbers 1-9 on counters so that they can be moved around to make rows, columns and diagonals that add to 15. As an extension activity, use the numbers 2-10 and make sure the columns, rows and diagonals add to 18.

Marjorie Gorman is a retired mathematics consultant who enjoys regular visits to local schools. With thanks to the children and staff of Hendal Primary School, Wakefield.
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