

Joyful Math: Invitations to Play and Explore in the Early Childhood Classroom

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Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

Joyful Math: Invitations to Play and Explore in the Early Childhood Classroom

by Deanna McLennan

Pembroke Publishers (2020), 148 pages

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The invitation to the book *Joyful Math* begins with a colorful cover of five young inquisitive children peering out at the observer. They are clearly enjoying the process of making a cover in a playful manner. That representation of joy persists with the book including colour photos throughout and a positive demeanor within the writing.

The book begins with an introduction to the notion of joy that explains why the author believes it is an important consideration in early learning of mathematics. It is brief and supported by a couple of vignettes that serve to draw attention to the possibility. The brevity is beneficial because, like an appetizer, it sets the reader up for a substantial chapter that provides details of an implementation within a classroom.

Within the holistic view of an early learning classroom, there exists many facets. McLennan does not attempt to speak to this within the brevity of introducing the notion of joy, but rather addresses it by providing a detailed portrayal of aspects of her own, Ontario, classroom where she has developed the ideas that are within the book. The starting point is the beginning of the school year when there are considerations for the layout of

the classroom. The book provides details of the kind of resources that are conducive to student happiness. There are elements that speak to student ownership of the space, but it goes beyond this with considerations of how details can be conducive to students finding joyful ways to engage. There are some aspects, such as cut flowers from a community garden, which may seem intangible, however, they cause one to think, and provoke the reader to consider the larger contextual possibilities of the environment within the school and the larger community.

Classroom setup provides a space with opportunities. The book spends considerable time focused on how to implement the usage of the space. This is a useful practitioner stance that addresses the issue that “many teachers have reported difficulty integrating the concepts of play and learning” (Lyle et al., 2017, p. 339). The engagement of students with a playful sense invites children to experience activities with enjoyment is detailed and includes vignettes portraying the feel and sound of the classroom. The chapter also addresses the periodic engagement of parents.

Subsequent chapters address mathematics within the context of art, the combining of math and literacy, and the use of the outdoors. These chapters share a common approach where the teacher uses circumstances that are ripe for student inquiry that can be student centered. Following this, are ways that a degree of direction and guiding can support particular teacher curricular objectives. The approach highlights ways that teachers can include themselves while maintaining the emphasis on student enjoyment. The final part of the approach is a generative view of opportunities that might push the reader’s thinking to consider possibilities beyond what they have been doing.

By providing a detailed account of how students can be engaged through play, while paying attention to the curricular aspects of learning, the book achieves a useful position of supporting both developmental and academic learning. The bridging of both forms of learning places it at a key point that has been identified as requiring a focus on integration (Lyle et al., 2017). The final component of the book addresses the need for documentation that serves assessment needs; the challenge being how to do this in an implicit manner that does not disrupt a child’s engagement. To this end, the author suggests using observation and the interpretation of the results of learning-play activities. The chapter clarifies that documentation is achievable in a variety of ways that provide the teacher with options.

Reference

Pyle, A., DeLuca, C., & Danniels, E. (2017). A scoping review of research on play-based pedagogies in kindergarten education. *Review of Education (British Education Research Association)*, 5(3), 311–351. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3097>