

Play Project

Introduction

From its inception, Bala Mandir has been dedicated to the holistic care of orphan, destitute and deprived children in India.

Since 1962, the Bala Mandir Carpentry Unit has specialised in the manufacture of affordable wooden toys and educational aids for children. Over the past four decades, it has served both as a production unit, and as a recognised training centre. Its clients include Government ICDS centres, NGOs, schools, and funding agencies such as UNICEF and Save the Children.

In 2003, Bala Mandir took on a project entitled "Developing Materials and Methods for SPRUCE¹, based on the widespread success of the Learning through Play (LTP) programme in India. The aim of the project was to create a ready-to-use set of toys, play materials and educational equipment, appropriate for the early years (birth to ten), along with a manual/handbook for their use.

The main objectives of the project were:

- To conduct a review of available materials in Bala Mandir, and other institutions in Chennai, with a focus on traditional and culturally relevant toys and games.
- To develop a matrix, cross-referencing age and SPRUCE development domains, to identify gaps.
- To design new materials and methods for the gaps identified.
- To test the new materials and methods across different age groups.
- To develop a prototype, with a bilingual manual, for reproduction.

The project culminated in the publication of a Toy Manual, as part of a series "Play Materials for Young Children". For each toy or piece of equipment, the booklet offers guidelines on its main features, the activities children can engage in, the age range for which it is suitable, the skills that children would acquire by playing with it, as well as alternative methods by which it can be made by the parent or teacher.

Background

An old Chinese proverb:

I hear and I forget,
I see and I remember,

¹ SPRUCE is an acronym, first introduced by Judith Evans, for the 6 critical domains of child development: S - Sense of Self, P - Physical, R - Relationships, U - Understanding, C - Communication, and E - Environment.

I do and I understand.

We want children to understand, and 'doing' is a vital part of learning.

Play is an integral part of a child's education. Games teach:

- Social skills, such as taking turns, which are important in school.
- Logical and reasoning skills, e.g. matching, sorting.
- Language and communication skills, i.e. talking about the activity.
- Gross and fine motor skills, e.g. running, climbing, hopping, and colouring, drawing, stringing beads, etc.

Age-appropriate play activities and games contribute to the holistic development of the child. This further leads to the children feeling good about themselves, as well as being able to deal with success and failure effectively.

The importance of play has been an integral part of Bala Mandir's teachings and philosophy, with focus on:

- a. Activity-orientated, playway methods, over traditional learning by rote.
- b. Age-appropriate activities, and seriation of use of educational and recreational aids.
- c. Joyful learning for the child.

Methodology

Phases

The project was carried out in three phases:

- I. 2003-04: Review of available materials, and development of a matrix (with SPRUCE areas of development on the X axis, and the age categories on the Y axis), to identify gaps.
- II. 2004-05: Designing, and testing, of new materials and methods.
- III. 2005: Developing a prototype, with a bilingual manual, for replication.

Planning the Developmental Materials for SPRUCE

Whilst there are many toys readily available in the market, few come with a user manual, highlighting age and developmental domains.

The following unique parameters were identified for each of the planned materials:

- The age for which the material can best be used.
- The specific SPRUCE domain at which the material is targeted.
- The other SPRUCE aspects that can also be addressed.
- The material for fabrication, i.e. cloth, paper, laminated cardboard, Thermocol.
- Available materials in the market, i.e. balls, marbles, skipping rope.
- Activities and games that can accompany the material.
- Songs, poems and drama related to the concepts.
- Outdoor activities for different seasons.
- Inclusive design to ensure suitability for all children.

The materials were designed to be inclusive of all children, including those who may have a disability or who may be specially challenged. The materials were multi-sensory, appealing to vision, hearing, and touch, and where possible, to taste and smell. The materials were fabricated at the Bala Mandir Workshop, helping to keep the costs low, and enabling adolescent children to develop useful craft/vocational skills. The materials and methods were also tested with children of the specified age from Bala Mandir, and the Maduram Narayanan Centre (MNC).

Craft Classes

Special craft classes were conducted, as part of the project, for pre-primary and primary school children.

Craft classes for younger children from UKG to Std. II were converted into Learning through Play sessions, planned to:

- Teach children how to make low-cost, age-appropriate, and culturally relevant toys, using easily available materials.
- Involve teachers in craft and serve as a useful resource for the toyshop.
- Enhance cognitive, creative, logical, and fine motor skills.
- Develop Sense of Self, and Communication.
- Eventually develop a manual/book of ideas for parents and caregivers on creative play.

Special craft classes were also conducted for Std. III to V, to help develop skills in areas such as perception, observation, and attention, as well as social and emotional skills. One of the primary objectives was to make children feel good about themselves, stressing that there is no right or wrong way of doing something in art and craft. The classes also helped to enhance creativity and imagination.

Observations:

The children found the classes and activities very interesting and enjoyable and participated with great enthusiasm.

Workshop for Teachers

Workshops were conducted for Vidyalaya and primary school teachers, to create awareness on the importance of play, art and craft. The workshops focused on the importance of play, stages of play, and various forms of play, as well as activity-based teaching, using art and craft as a medium.

Observations:

Teachers were initially hesitant to implement the ideas of the play project, focusing only on completing the syllabus in time via traditional verbal and black board teaching

methods. The workshops/sessions helped to break, and gradually change this mindset. Through the sessions, teachers realised the value and importance of play and that children actually learnt better under the playway method, through activities they did themselves. The teachers were much more forthcoming, and enthusiastic about the project in the second year, having seen positive results from the earlier year. Classes were also divided into smaller, activity-based groups in the next stage, to enhance learning.

Syllabus of Play Activities

Having incorporated activity-based learning in class, a syllabus of play activities was created, for indoor and outdoor games. The academic syllabus was also linked with these indoor and outdoor activities, to make learning more interesting and meaningful. Many syllabus topics were taught/illustrated through games and activities.

Teachers were given 'observation sheets', to record the play activities conducted, materials used, and children's participation and learning experiences. The sheets were designed to assess the children's level of enjoyment, as well as whether the activity addressed the developmental milestones of that age.

Observations:

Both indoor and outdoor games helped children to learn in a fun and interesting way. They also taught necessary life skills, such as competition, learning to win and lose, listening to instructions, team spirit, and working in groups. Indoor and outdoor games also aided development of fine motor, and gross motor skills respectively.

Recommendations

It was recommended that the play project be extended in the next phase, using existing infrastructure under the IBM KidSmart Early Learning Programme. The Early Learning Centre (ELC) can be used to help design activities based on the syllabus, for both the reading and craft corners, whilst providing visual inputs via the technology corner.

Conclusion

For children, play is their way to learn. Playing and learning are not separate activities, but fully mingled. The play project resulted in the publication of a Toy Manual, "Learning to Play, Playing to Learn", based on Ellen Sharma's original notes and pioneering work in early education (in collaboration with the Children's Garden School). This booklet is the first of the series to introduce to the public, play materials with suggestions on how they can be used.