Eastern rings up a winning toy

Wooden cash register is tops in annual TIMPANI study

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WILLIMANTIC — Young Luka Rodriguez was very focused on his “job” at the Eastern Connecticut State University Center for Early Childhood Education Monday morning.

Rodriguez, a 4-year-old pupil at the preschool, was pretending to be a veterinarian.

He charged his classmate, 3-year-old Sofia Gallegos, a small amount of money to fix her “broken” puppy, ringing up the transaction on a wooden cash register.

To the folks behind the 2015 Toys that Inspire Mindful Play and Nurture Imagination (TIMPANI) study, that cash register is more than just a prop.

It is a vital education tool and it was named the top toy this year as part of the annual unveiling at the ECSU preschool Monday.

On Monday, members of the media were invited to see children interact with the “Checkout Register,” a wooden cash register created by Hape Toys, an international company, that retails for about $35.

Hape Toys has offices all over the world, including Canada, Switzerland, France and China.

Jeffrey Trawick-Smith, the Phyllis Waite Endowed Chairman of Early Childhood Education and principal investigator on the study, credited Eastern President Elsa Núñez with the idea for the study.

“You’re the mother of TIMPANI,” he told her.

Research for the annual study began in 2009, but the first announcement wasn’t made until 2010.

The study is designed to evaluate how preschool-age children play with a variety of toys in natural settings and identify toys that best engage children in intellectual, creative and social interactions within classrooms.

It does not evaluate the safety of toys.

According to a press release issued by Eastern, five student researchers worked on the study: Heather Oski, Kristen Krause, Kimberly DePaolis, Danni Meskill and Alyssa Zebrowski.

All of the student researchers graduated from Eastern last May, the press release states.

Students conducted several hours of research, recording the children as they played with different toys in the preschool.

They coded the data based on the following categories: thinking and learning, imagination, social interaction and verbalization.

That type of experience, center program coordinator Julia DeLapp said, “is part of what makes a liberal arts education at Eastern so special.”

“One of the things that I think makes this study unique and our center unique is the engagement of our students,” she said.

Trawick-Smith said the school got recommendations of toys from the community members, such as university staff and parents.

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“It goes through a screening process,” he said.

The wooden cash register, which scored highly in all categories, was chosen from among 10 toys used during the study. It was the highest scoring toy in the “verbalization” category.

Sue Mehalick, a teacher at the preschool, noted the wooden cash register is different from the one the preschool owns.

She said the winning cash register has a scanner, which the cash register at the center does not have.

Mehalick noted that whenever there’s a new toy, children are likely to enjoy playing with it. “Dramatic play in general is very popular,” she said.

Niloufar Rezai, director of the center, noted the importance of children interacting with one another as they play.

“When I walk into a classroom and I see children talking and playing together, I know we’ve done our job,” she said.

Rezai noted the results of the study show a toy doesn’t have to have “all the bells and the whistles” for children to enjoy it.

The study has shown that to be true every year.

Past winners of the TIMPANI toy study were “Wooden Vehicles and Signs” by Melissa and Doug, 2010; Tinker Toys by Hasbro, 2011; Duplo blocks by Lego, 2012; Magna-Tiles by Valtech! and My First Railway by Brio, 2013; and Hot Wheels by Mattel and Paint and Easel by Community Playthings in 2014.

Núñez said she depends on the study, which has “become a tradition at Eastern,” for her Christmas shopping.

“This year’s results are interesting,” she said.

The study has gotten national, and even international attention, and Núñez said she has gotten a call from Turkey about it.

Trawick-Smith noted three of the highest scoring toys in 2015 study were “pretend play” props and explained the importance of “pretend play.”

“It has unique contributions to a children’s development,” he said.

According to him, “pretend play” develops a part of the brain related to self-regulation, involves conversation about math and literacy, reduces anxiety and leads to predictions math and reading abilities in third-grade.

Trawick-Smith noted he would like to see those involved with the study focusing on a specific type of toy one year.

For more information about the study, contact the Center for Early Childhood Education at (860) 465-0885 or visit http://www1.easternct.edu/cece/timpani/.