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Karen McCallum:

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Vicki Davis:

The Ten-minute Teacher podcast with Vicki Davis. Every week day you’ll learn powerful practical ways to be a more remarkable teacher today.

VICKI: It’s wonderful Wednesday and today we’re digging into the best practices from Karen McCallum from Alberta, Canada. Now, Karen, you have found in your 33 years a very unique way to reach special education children and other children. Tell us your story about when you kind of shifted your practice.

KAREN: Well, it started about 15 years ago. My husband and I were at a teacher’s convention in Edmonton, Alberta and they had these puppets for sale as we walked by the trade show. And there was one little puppet I felt as I walked by that he was staring at me. So we picked him up. He was goofy-looking little boy with just messy black hair. And then we bought an additional puppet, a little girl who looked more prim and proper. And so he just spoke to me and we played with these puppets all the way home just in traffic and not talking to people. And it was just so much fun and we just had some good belly laughs.

At the time I was teaching grade one and I had a little girl in my room that did not speak. She was non-verbal and I couldn’t get her to vocalize anything, not even a grunt or a sound. So I thought I maybe try it with these grade ones, I’m not a ventriloquist by any means. So I took it to these grade one students and he just looked around and they were instantly – and I’m talking instantly mesmerized by this little-by puppet.

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And he looked at them and called them by name and I introduced them to the kids. And right away this little girl and I’ll call her Susan just for namesake, she just started screaming, she just went absolutely crazy interacting with this puppet. She started to grunt and scream and try to – you could tell by the intonation in her voice she was trying to say something to him. And so he just started interacting with her.

And so from that day on – it was 15 years ago, I call him Matts, I don’t know why. And the little girl is Penny. And they talk to my students every single day and they live to talk to them. So I use them more for social stories. And so they talk about whatever is going in our classroom or whatever. So it’s amazing. And in the 15 years I’ve use them, not one child has ever said, “You’re talking, that’s not really

the puppet.” They ask questions, they whisper in his ear, they want to tell them what’s happening at home, all kinds of things.

And so it’s unbelievable how they believe in this little boy.

VICKI: Wow. So what are the results in terms of how – you know, because it’s all about teaching and we want to help our students? Have you seen Matts and Penny, your other puppet – how have they helped students?

KAREN: What I’ve done with Matts – because I teach primary, I teacher kindergarten, like 5-year-olds and 6-year-olds, Matts has difficulty reading, like identifying letters and counting to ten. He tells the kids, I need some help counting to ten. So he gets to seven and he goes, “One, two, three, four, five, six, seven... eleven” because it rhymes. And he cannot get past seven. So then the kids laugh and they say, “No Matts, it’s seven, eight.” And then, “What do you mean? Eight all my supper?” So he has difficulty reading.

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And then Penny, my other puppet, she reads fluently. And she reads their morning message fluently and she giggles at Matts and the kids are mortified that she laughs at him. Then Matts start to cry and then the kids talk about she should really apologize to him, and Penny, that’s not very nice.

So I use them for social stories and the kids that have learning differences or challenges really relate to him. And they are more up to attempt to read to him because he’s experiencing the same emotions that they are. It’s just been unbelievable.

VICKI: So what’s the response from people who come and evaluate your classroom or observe what you’re doing?

KAREN: I had some principals from Seattle come, they were touring our school and my principal invited them to come into my classroom to see the Matts and Penny show. And they were absolutely mesmerized by how engaged they were. Like, Matts just has to look at them with his button eyes. I can’t get their attention like this puppet can. It’s unbelievable how they believe. The time that the principals were observing me just as visiting administrators, I had stepped on the finger of one of my little boys as I was teaching and, of course, he started to cry. So one of the adults took him out of the room to soothe him and get him a little bit of an icepack and what not. And the adult came back and said,

“This little boy doesn’t want to come back into the room until he talks to Matts.”

So I took Matts out to the hallway and he’s just crying and sniffing and he said, “Matts, before Mrs. McCallum stepped on my figure. I was going to tell you that I made you a present and I wanted to show you.”

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And so he went to this locker and got this picture he made for Matts and showed it to the puppet and then he was fine. And then the tears stopped and he returned to my classroom.

So one of the things I was teaching this year was library behaviors, when we go to the library, it's the quietest room in our school. Matts loved books so the kids asked if we could take Matts to the library. And, of course, Matts walked into the library and he started screaming with excitement. So the librarian politely asked him to leave the library because that is not how we are. So he was asked to leave the library and the kids were mortified. Absolutely mortified. And they sat looking at their books without a peep. And they returned to the classroom and they wanted to talk to Matts and, of course, Matts was crying. And he's crying to the kids about why he was asked to leave the library.

But the kids came up with solutions on how he could contain his excitement the next time. Like maybe they could go and bring a basket of books out and he could look at a few books in the hallway to get rid of his emotions and then come to the library or maybe he could go into the library by himself so he wouldn't distract the other kids. They had all kinds of ideas for this puppet. But they were just – like, I'm sure they had tears in their eyes when Matts was asked to leave. It was just heartwarming.

VICKI: Well, and you're modeling what to and not to do. It's just such great teaching, Karen.

KAREN: It's so much fun.

VICKI: So Karen, as we finish up, kind of give us an overview, how much time of the instruction time are Matts and Penny interacting with kids?

KAREN: You know, what, I start my day with them so it's only about 10 or 15 minutes and he talks about our day and if it's muddy outside and we're going outside. You know, he talks to the kids about, how are we going to stay dry and where we should play? The kids ask to read with him when it's quiet reading time, when we have our reading at the end of the day, they'll sit to him and Matts looks at the picture and they'll cue him, "Make sure you're looking at the pictures, Matts. Don't interrupt."

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It's so funny. St. Patrick's Day was funny in our room because the kids were making leprechaun traps for the leprechauns that were going to come. And Matts said to the kids that he would protect the classroom. So the next day the classroom was upside down and there was green glitter all over and gold coins. And Matts was dressed up as a leprechaun and his mouth was taped shut with green tape. He had a leprechaun hat a green bow on. And of course, Matts is trying to talk but his mouth is tapped-shut. Then he goes on to explain what the leprechauns did and how funny they were and they're not mean at all. They set up a little scavenger

hunt for the class and they took Matts around to try and find the clues. He was just so much fun.

VICKI: Teachers, we really have a remarkable experience. And I just hope that I love that Karen in 2002 decided on a whim to experiment and then she stuck with it. And look at what's happening. I wonder how many classrooms where puppets really would help us with kids. There's just so many exciting things.

KAREN: Yeah. And you know, I've even taken the puppet into older classrooms, into our grade five, six and seven and talked to them about the puppet and I have Matts talk to them. And just the engagement is just unbelievable. And to reach them socially, emotionally, like the kids will whisper things in his ear when they're upset and Matts talked to them quietly. But they don't see me as the one talking, that's the thing. They honestly believe that Matts knows and understands what they're going through. So it's awesome.

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