



Early years curriculum materials

The birthday party

**Using a real-life event to develop
early literacy and numeracy
understandings in a
Preparatory classroom**



**Queensland
Government**



**Queensland
Studies Authority**
Partnership and innovation

Links to Early Years Curriculum Guidelines		Teacher monitoring and reflection
	<p>Background information</p> <p>This case study looks at a two-day event in a preparatory classroom using a teacher aide’s birthday as a focus for learning.</p> <p>Day 1</p> <p>Using thinking — what is a birthday?</p> <p>The day began with a whole group discussion about birthdays.</p>	
<p>Active learning processes: Thinking</p> <p>Generating and discussing ideas and plans and solving problems</p>	<p>I asked the children, “What happens on your birthday? Did you know it will be Miss Michelle’s (teacher aide) birthday tomorrow? What are the main things that show someone is having a birthday?”</p> <p>I used the children’s suggestions to construct a concept map around the central title “What is a Birthday?”</p>	<p><i>Children were eager to talk about their birthday experiences.</i></p>
	<div data-bbox="571 1048 1090 1541" data-label="Image"> </div> <p style="text-align: center;">Concept map</p>	
<p>Early mathematical understandings: Early numeracy</p> <p>Investigating and communicating about quantities and their representations</p>	<p>The children made suggestions: Birthday cake and presents.</p> <p>Discussion developed around Miss Michelle’s age. I extended the children’s thinking by inviting them to make inferences about people’s ages. <i>How old could she be? If she was one hundred what would she look like?</i> When the children made suggestions about how old Miss Michelle might be, I talked about their suggestions and asked why they thought she would be a particular number.</p> <p>One hundred is a very big number, a very old person. What do very old people look like?</p>	<p><i>SC /NB/FA</i></p> <p><i>Good guesses of number.</i></p>

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<p>Language learning & communication: Oral language</p> <p>Monitoring & assessing</p> <p>Extending vocabulary and sentence structures to explain, describe, imagine and recount events</p>	<p>I began a brainstorming session by prompting: If Miss Michelle were 100, she might have grey hair, wrinkly skin, a walking stick, and walk very slowly. Could she be one hundred?</p> <p>We then discussed what a young person looks like.</p>	<p><i>Children loved describing old people.</i></p>
	<p>The discussion moved back to the birthday and I made a concept map of the jobs the group needed to do from the children's suggestions: cake, present, room decorations, card.</p>	<p><i>KM & JP made appropriate suggestions</i></p>
	<p>Planning the party</p>	
<p>Partnerships</p> <p>Collaboratively plan learning contexts to ensure that learning is meaningful to children.</p>	<p>The group decided that it would be a good idea to make a cake and some presents for Miss Michelle. I circled the things that the children needed to do that day on the concept web: cook a butter cake and a chocolate cake; make a present; paint a banner saying "Happy birthday, Miss Michelle" and decorate balloons to hang in the room. The children also made other suggestions about what could be used to decorate the room.</p>	
<p>Early mathematical understandings: Early numeracy</p> <p>Interacting</p> <p>Develop and extend the language of mathematics</p>	<p>During indoor time, the children decorated glass jars using permanent markers. They drew faces on one jar, wrote their names on a second jar and drew flowers and hearts on a third jar. I modelled the use of the mathematical language "first", "second" and "third" throughout the experience.</p>	

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<p>Language learning & communication: Early literacy</p> <p>Reading & viewing</p> <p>Using emerging understandings to predict and make meanings from a variety of written, visual and multimodal texts</p>	<p>A group of children painted a big banner to hang up in the room. With adult support, the children made two cakes, following a recipe written on butcher's paper.</p> <p>After indoor time, when the whole group came together, the children took turns to count out lollies from a packet to fill the jars. I scaffolded the activity by questioning: "How many lollies do you think will fit? Let's guess and check."</p>	<p><i>KW/CT/BR made sensible guesses and could verbalise their choices. KW represented the quantities of small collections.</i></p>
	<p>The whole group then constructed a giant birthday card. What message should go inside the card? During small group time in the afternoon, the children each drew a picture of themselves and wrote their first name and surname on a coloured paper square, then glued the squares on the card. They also iced cakes; blew up balloons, wrote Michelle's name on them and tied on a ribbon; and read a birthday book from the library. At the end of small group time the children came together to look at all the results and wrapped Miss Michelle's presents, which they had made earlier.</p>	<p><i>CR's picture of self very immature — still using upper case letters in her name.</i></p> <p><i>Poor letter formations in name.</i></p> <p><i>GC/OM Very detailed picture.</i></p> <p><i>AM wrote his surname</i></p>
	<p>Day 2</p>	
	<p>Reflecting and planning: How do we make the things we need?</p>	
	<p>The day began with the children sitting on the carpet as a whole group. We focused on the easel whiteboard, which displayed the previous day's concept map 'What is a birthday'. I reminded the children about preparations that they had been making yesterday for Miss Michelle's card and presents. The children became very excited. Together, they checked to see which things were done, rubbing out the items one by one, to see what was left.</p> <p>I asked, "How could we surprise Miss Michelle with the presents?"</p> <p>The children made some suggestions: <i>Hide them. Make a treasure map for her to follow.</i> Everyone agreed that this would be a good idea. They decided to write clues together for Miss Michelle to follow.</p> <p>I asked one child to get a piece of paper from the paper shelf. The paper was then placed on the whiteboard ready for me to scribe.</p>	

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<p>Language learning & communication: Early literacy (writing & shaping)</p> <p>Interacting</p> <p>Model writing while co-constructing texts</p>	<p>What do we put at the beginning of a letter? I asked.</p> <p><i>Dear Miss Michelle</i>, replied the children.</p>	
	<p>After writing this on the piece of paper, I asked, "What is the first clue that we would like to give Miss Michelle?"</p> <p><i>Look under the surprise bags</i>, suggested the children</p> <p>"Look', what does 'look' start with?" I asked.</p> <p>"LIII", replied some children.</p>	<p><i>KW knows how a letter starts.</i></p>
	<p>While most of the group were involved in the scribing process, three children were chosen to take a computer-generated word strip saying 'Happy birthday Miss Michelle', to the writing table. They copied this message onto an envelope for the giant card.</p>	<p><i>GW/CR could not identify the beginning sound</i></p>
		<p><i>BR/GC/FA able to copy print correctly and easily.</i></p>
<p>Language learning & communication: Early literacy (writing & shaping)</p> <p>Planning</p> <p>Develop understandings of the relationship between letters and sounds; during experiences with writing</p>	<p>Throughout the scribing process I asked questions:</p> <p>"How many words were in that sentence? What sound can you hear? What letter would I need to begin writing that word? What letter do you think goes at the end of that word?"</p> <p>The clues were sealed in three envelopes and the presents were hidden in three places (inside and outside) chosen by three children.</p>	<p><i>SC/SH/NB/GM/KW/GB /JP/BR Good knowledge of print</i></p> <p><i>JF confuses words with letters.</i></p>

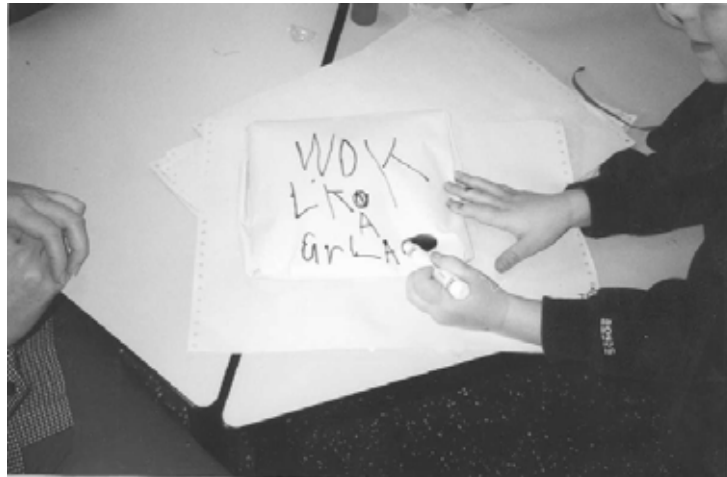
	<p>Investigating and thinking: Find your presents Miss Michelle</p>	
<p>Early mathematical understandings: Early numeracy:</p> <p>Investigating and communicating about position, movement and direction</p> <p>Early mathematical understandings: Early numeracy</p> <p>Investigating and communicating about quantities and their representations, and attributes of objects and collections</p>	<p>Soon after the presents were hidden, Miss Michelle arrived. The children were extremely excited. Children were chosen to give Miss Michelle her card, presents and the first envelope.</p> <p>Miss Michelle opened the first envelope and read out the clue. Then the children, Miss Michelle and I explored the playground and classroom to find the other hidden clues and presents. Time was taken to explore and use descriptive language while hunting. I scaffolded the children’s search using questioning based on positional terms. “Could it be under the fort? Is it next to the sandpit?”</p> <p>I took photos of Miss Michelle and the children while they were hunting – this would be turned into a book later on. Everyone then returned inside, where Miss Michelle was given a chair to sit on. The whole group then focused on her unwrapping the presents.</p> <p>The three cylindrical presents were arranged on the easel and children were chosen to give clues to Miss Michelle about what present she should open first. I scaffolded the children’s clues by giving specific prompts about the size, shape, and colour of the present. In conjunction with this, Miss Michelle asked the children questions about the contents of the present: “Can I eat it? Can I wear it? Can I play with it?”</p> 	<p><i>Present hunt worked well — could have used easel paper so all children could read the clues for Miss Michelle.</i></p> <p><i>Very time consuming — the children got restless after giving their present.</i></p> <p><i>BM/EC gave great clues.</i></p> <p><i>ZC needed scaffolding to think of present clues.</i></p> <p>Talking and thinking about the three presents.</p>

<p>Early mathematical understandings: Early numeracy</p> <p>Investigating and communicating about attributes of objects and collections</p> <p>Language learning and communication: Monitoring and assessing: Oral language</p> <p>Extending vocabulary and sentence structures to describe</p>	<p>Each cylindrical present was discussed in great detail before opening. The children had also brought in presents from home for Miss Michelle. Again, I scaffolded the children's learning by asking "Would that present roll? Does it have a smell? What shape is it?" The children were encouraged to think about the attributes of the presents — inside and out. Their early mathematical thinking was being applied, encouraged and challenged.</p> <p>After exploring the attributes of the presents for about ten minutes, the children stood up and joined in a transition/movement activity for a few minutes. This enabled them to stretch and refocus. The children then sat down on the carpet again, and I changed places with Miss Michelle to lead the group. I began another learning conversation related to Miss Michelle's birthday.</p> <p>"One thing is missing. We have the presents, but we need something else, something that you have on your birthday."</p> <p>The children thought about it and finally they decided that what was missing was a party. Yeah! The children became excited again. One child said: "I have an idea. Let's have a birthday party here. I asked What do we need if we are going to have a party?"</p> <p>I made a new concept map on the whiteboard by scribing the children's suggestions under headings.</p>	
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	 <p style="text-align: center;">Brainstorming a new concept map</p> <p>During the brainstorming, I gave directions to the teacher aide, for example, “Oh, party hats, what would we need to make those? Do you think we would have some streamers and ribbons in the back room Miss Michelle? Could you get us some so that we could make our hats?” The children’s suggestions became part of the program plan, and gathering the resources was done as part of the learning conversation.</p>	<p><i>AC/ZC — good ideas for equipment needed.</i></p>
	<p>Thinking: What do we need for a birthday party?</p>	
<p>Active learning processes: Thinking</p> <p>Generating and discussing ideas and plans</p>	<p>The components of the party were identified and written on the brainstorming web around the title “Birthday Party” as follows: Hats, Games and Food.</p> <p>Food – I told the children that I had brought some cheerios in. “How many do we need? What about the lollies and the fairy bread?”</p> <p>Hats – “What shapes could they be?”</p> <p>Games – The children suggested “Burst the balloon” and “Pass the parcel”.</p> <p>Jobs from the brainstorm were listed. The jobs remaining for the children were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • make a party hat • make pass the parcel game and burst the balloon game 	

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<p>Early mathematical understandings: Early numeracy</p> <p>Investigating and communicating about sequence</p> <p>Active learning processes: Imagining & responding</p> <p>Experimenting with materials and processes in a variety of creative, imaginative and innovative ways</p> <p>Language learning & communication: Early literacy (writing & shaping)</p> <p>Experimenting with emerging understandings of written texts to communicate meanings</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • prepare the fairy bread • count out lollies onto plates • cut the cheerios • pour the sauce into dishes. <p>Before they started on their chosen projects, I helped the children sequence the making of fairy bread by engaging them in rehearsal of “How to make fairy bread”. Together, the children mimed how they would make the fairy bread. They practised spreading butter, sprinkling hundreds and thousands, placing a cutter on the bread and extracting the shape from the cutter. This gave them a fine motor plan to follow and enabled self-direction. Sprinkling was discussed in detail, so that the children would understand how to sprinkle carefully. A small group chose to go and begin making fairy bread. The rehearsal gave the children confidence to go and make the fairy bread independently.</p> <p>Some of the children began to make party hats from old cereal boxes, paper, ribbons and streamers.</p> <p>A small group of children wrote messages on wrapping paper for a pass the parcel game. I suggested they write actions for the players to act out. This would mean that when a child took off a layer of paper, they would have to follow a direction, for example, <i>Walk like a gorilla</i>.</p> <p>The children applied their knowledge of alphabet sounds to write the directions. All efforts were accepted and praised.</p>	<p><i>Children knew what to do with the fairy-bread-making — miming helped.</i></p> <p><i>AC/GW — trouble spreading butter</i></p> <p><i>GW didn't recall sequence or order of jobs.</i></p> <p><i>Too many children trying to make hats all at once.</i></p> <p><i>CT knew exactly what he wanted for his hat.</i></p> <p><i>TP/GW needed lots of help with their hat.</i></p> <p><i>BR/GC/JP/SH/SC great job of invented spelling for game instructions</i></p>
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"Pass the parcel" — instructions to "walk like a gorilla"

Active learning processes: Imagining & responding

Experimenting with materials and processes in a variety of creative, imaginative and innovative ways

After their jobs were done, some children chose to play in the hairdressing salon that had been set up and contained scrunchies, sprays, gel pots, blow driers, brushes and other hairdressing props. I suggested that because it was Miss Michelle's birthday she might like her hair done. This extended the children's hairdressing play. The hairdressers were very attentive to Miss Michelle's needs.



Practising hair brushing



Miss Michelle at the hairdresser's

Once the play, construction, writing and food preparation had developed and come to a close, I clapped a rhythm to get the children's attention, asked them to tidy up the things that weren't needed anymore and brought everyone together on the carpet.



Thinking game


Active learning processes:
Thinking

Interacting

Questioning children
"How do you know?"
"How did you work out that problem?"
and 'Why did you do it that way?'

I sang: *If you want to come to the party, hop on the bus. You have to give me a special password. If you said window, I would say No. If you said sausage rolls, I would say Yes. If you said train I would say No. If you said cheerios, I would say yes.* This strategy aimed to develop the children's ability to think about what category the password would have to be in. The children listened and then formed a circle on the carpet. From their circle, the children put up their hands to nominate possible passwords.

<p>Active learning processes: Thinking</p> <p>Interacting</p> <p>Provide opportunities for children to encounter new and different types of problems</p>	<p>Gradually the children realised that if they nominated a party food, they would be chosen to hop on the bus. As I chose them, they nominated possible passwords. Once they nominated a party food, they got up and sat behind me as if on a bus. If children nominated a party food that had been chosen by someone else, I scaffolded them by helping them with clues about other party food.</p> <p>This was really challenging for the children — they had to think of many unusual types of party food, so that they did not repeat what another child had nominated. Once everyone had nominated something belonging to “party food”, the whole group stood up as one and moved around the room and sang The Wheels on the bus go round and round ... all the way to the party.</p>	<p><i>KW/GW/TP/RH had trouble identifying the category the password was from.</i></p>
<p>Whole group focus</p>		
<p>Active learning processes: Thinking</p> <p>Planning</p> <p>Analyse and synthesise information</p> <p>Test ideas, observe, predict, hypothesise and infer relationships</p>	<p>The group returned to the carpet in a circle. I told the children that now they were going to play “What’s in the birthday box?” I took a sparkly present box from a set of five on a nearby shelf and brought it to the carpet, along with a pack of object cards. The children had noticed the boxes earlier and asked what they were for.</p> <p>I spread the object cards out on the carpet and generated discussion and questioning about what was pictured on the card. This developed the children’s awareness of classification. <i>Was it an inside object or an outside object? What colour was it? Who has used one of these?</i> After about five minutes of detailed discussion, the teacher chose four cards to put inside the sparkly box, keeping their identity secret, saying that they could be presents for Miss Michelle. <i>What could we choose to give Miss Michelle? What do you think I have inside the box?</i></p> <p>The children were then asked to think of five questions about the object cards hidden in the sparkly box. Based on my answers they had to try to guess what object was featured on the card chosen from the box.</p>	<p><i>Children are getting better playing this game; getting the idea of using the attributes in their questions, not the name of the object.</i></p>

	 <p style="text-align: center;">Using oral language to describe objects</p> <p><i>Is it brown? Can you use it outside?</i> The children used lots of early mathematical language and I introduced new words that were useful for describing an object. In the middle of this discussion, I asked the children: "If we're going to have a party, what do we need to do with the tables?" One child said, "What about a Harry Potter table, a big long one?"</p> <p>A child was chosen to go and move the tables with a small group of friends. The teacher aide assisted them.</p> <p>The remaining children continued the sparkly birthday box game. Once a child had guessed the object on the card I held, they took their place at the long party table that the small group of children had assembled. The food was laid out, along with the two birthday cakes that the children had made and iced the previous day.</p>	<p><i>GW wants to name object rather than identify its features for the clue.</i></p> <p><i>GC/SC play this game well.</i></p>
	<p>How many people? How much food? How do we share the food?</p>	
<p>Early mathematical understandings: Early numeracy</p> <p>Interacting</p> <p>Modelling mathematical language and ways to represent mathematical ideas</p>	<p>At the party table the children counted the number of children at the party. They then counted the number of adults. I asked the children, "If we added the children and adults together, how many people would need a piece of cake?" One child answered: "Twenty-three. Nineteen and four more."</p> <p>When dividing up the food, the children were given a suggestion about how much food they could have: two jellybeans, one cheerio, two pieces of fairy bread and so on. The guest of honour – Miss Michelle was asked to sit in the middle of the group. She asked the children a number of questions to help her find out where the middle of the group was. "Was it next to Jordan, or someone else?" The children continued their thinking and interpreting.</p>	<p><i>SC used counting on to problem solve.</i></p> <p><i>CT wants to count from 1 to find the answer.</i></p> <p><i>GB/SC good at explaining their reason for their answers.</i></p>

Active learning processes:
Thinking

Interacting

Using teachable moments to reinforce or model particular thinking or problem solving strategies

When it was time to eat the birthday cake, discussion focused on the children's preferred flavour of cake. The chocolate cake was cut into rectangles and the butter cake was cut into triangles. I asked specific questions about the shape of the pieces of cake. "Would they roll? What do they look like? How many people like chocolate? How many people like vanilla?"



Sharing party food

After enjoying the party food, Miss Michelle's party group moved to the carpet. Party games were next on the agenda. *Who was going to walk like a gorilla?*

The children loved the idea of the party and got completely involved.

The birthday party

	Summary	
	<p>The learning conversations in this preparatory classroom centred on Miss Michelle's birthday. This real-life event informed focused learning and teaching, play, routines and transitions and investigations. The engagement of the children reflected the relevance this event had to their lives.</p> <p>As their teacher aide, Miss Michelle is very important and the children considered her birthday special. By focusing on what a birthday is, and identifying how birthdays are celebrated, I allowed the children to construct the plan for Miss Michelle's birthday party based on their own understandings and ideas.</p> <p>The children enjoyed setting up the party and their talking, reading/writing, matching, describing, creating, and role-playing had a real-life purpose.</p>	
	<p>Special thanks to the Preparatory Year teacher, Felice Eastwood, the teacher aide, Miss Michelle, and children of the preparatory class at Camp Hill Infants State School.</p>	
	Further reading	
	<p>Beecher, B & Arthur, I. 2001, <i>Play and literacy in children's worlds</i>, Primary English Teachers' Association, Newtown, Australia.</p>	