



Early years curriculum materials

The Circus

**This case study examines
a negotiated project from
a preparatory classroom**



**Queensland
Government**



**Queensland
Studies Authority**
Partnership and Innovation

	<p>Background</p> <p>This is a case study from a class of 20 Preparatory children and five preschool children. The Preparatory class is part of a P to 12 campus in an independent school. In this case study the teacher recounts how a unit of learning was negotiated with children in Term 3. The curriculum planning for Term 3 is included in this case study as an appendix.</p> <p>Children’s prior learning</p> <p>We constructed a framework to use as a tool for investigations throughout the year. This framework has been negotiated with the children, teachers and parents/carers and was developed and implemented during the first two terms of the Preparatory Year. The children have demonstrated confidence and independence using this tool.</p> <p>There are assumptions about learning embedded in the framework and we refer to these in our daily interactions:</p> <p>We all have a right to be listened to. What we say is important and valuable.</p> <p>Our ideas are clever and can become even better when we investigate and reflect.</p> <p>Everyone has something to contribute — no matter how big or small.</p> <p>The more we learn the more we know and grow.</p> <p>The following core strategies are part of the framework</p> <p>Research is easy. We can actively seek out information:</p> <p>We can work in small groups to develop understandings. Group brainstorming is fun.</p> <p>We can use libraries, books, videos and internet sites. Librarians, parents/carers, teachers and buddies can help us.</p> <p>We can email the high school students and their teachers for help.</p> <p>Experts in the local community can help us. We can interview experts. We can use the phone book to help us find what we need.</p> <p>We can record our investigations and thinking using drawings, maps, concept maps, photos, videos, recordings and writing.</p>	
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	<p>We can try something hard each day. We can take a risk and learn something new each day.</p> <p>We can practise using new knowledge.</p> <p>The children have consolidated many of these core strategies and have begun to apply them as they research a project. These are lifelong learning strategies that have empowered the children to become active participants in expanding their knowledge and understanding their world.</p>	
	<p>My background</p> <p>I am an experienced project facilitator and I have enjoyed implementing the project approach over a period of six years in a variety of contexts.</p> <p>It is exciting to observe children's enthusiasm as they learn how to develop and construct their own knowledge base. They become very involved with brainstorming and seeking information. They are full of wonderful curiosity that deserves to be fulfilled.</p> <p>In this case study I share with you the four phases of our circus project.</p>	

Links to <i>Early Years Curriculum Guidelines</i>		Teacher monitoring and reflection
<p>Language learning & communication — Early literacy (writing & shaping)</p> <p><i>Interacting</i></p> <p>Model writing while co-constructing texts for a range of purposes.</p>	<p>Phase 1: Beginning</p>	
	<p>Our project began with lots of rich conversations and sharing of ideas. Some very interesting ideas were formed during this phase. This was the exciting part as the children became very enthusiastic and involved as their knowledge base grew.</p> <p>Our beginning</p> <p>Phase 1 spanned a two-week period. What began as a small investigation escalated into a whole-group investigation that lasted eight weeks. This was the first time I had worked on a whole-group project of such depth. The older age cohort that made up our Preparatory class had well-developed cooperative skills, which encouraged collaborative group work. Drawing, concept mapping or webbing, listening, brainstorming and proposing questions were vital tools used during our investigative learning.</p>	
	<p>Catalyst for the investigation</p> <p>The idea came from a game where three children were attempting to juggle. I listened to their conversations and became excited as they began to discuss how “cool” it would be to put on their own circus. The children roleplayed a variety of “acts” during their outdoor playtime and I observed their excitement and keenness to investigate this idea further. They asked if they could organise their own investigation over the next week.</p> <p>I recorded their ideas on audiotape and the children drew representations of their understandings.</p>	

The project topic was generated from the children’s ideas and play. I was an active listener and observer. I also prepared my own web of questions.

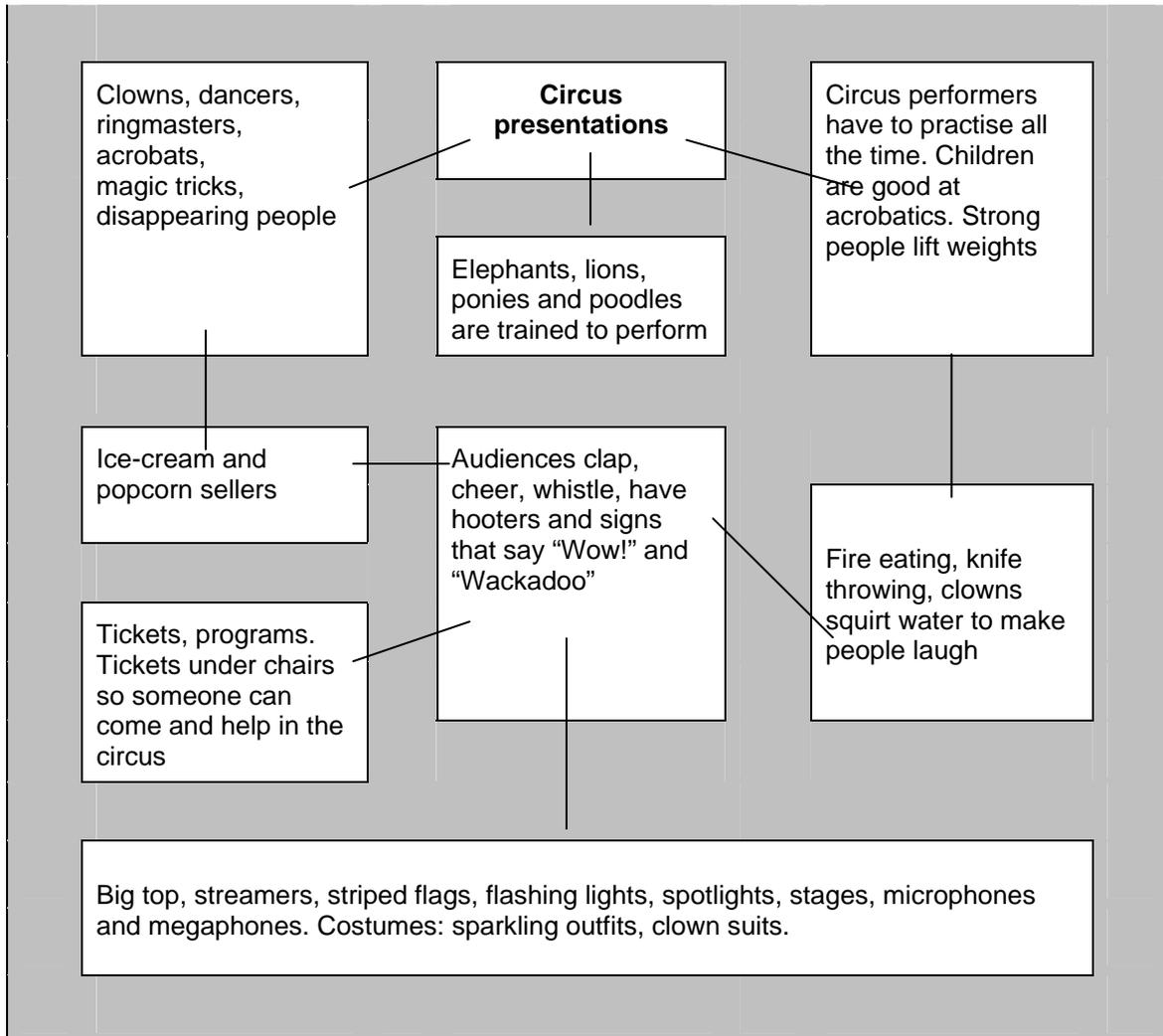
What do the children know already about circus presentations? Web and list questions to investigate. What do we want to find out?

Links to <i>Early Years Curriculum Guidelines</i>		Teacher monitoring and reflection
<p>Teacher's role in building and maintaining partnerships</p> <p>Work collaboratively by sharing information and valuing the input of others.</p>	<p>We sent a letter about the project home to parents/carers. I encouraged the parents/carers to talk with their children about the topic and to share any relevant expertise. New ideas often arose from these interactions. The parents/carers became valued partners in the project.</p> <p>We listened to a variety of music and selected some videos to build our understanding of circuses.</p> <p>During this phase I helped the children develop questions that their investigations would answer. We made a concept map to discover what the children had found out and what they already knew.</p>	

Our first concept map of what we know about circuses

Active learning processes – Thinking

Interacting — Collaboratively planning new environments for play or investigations

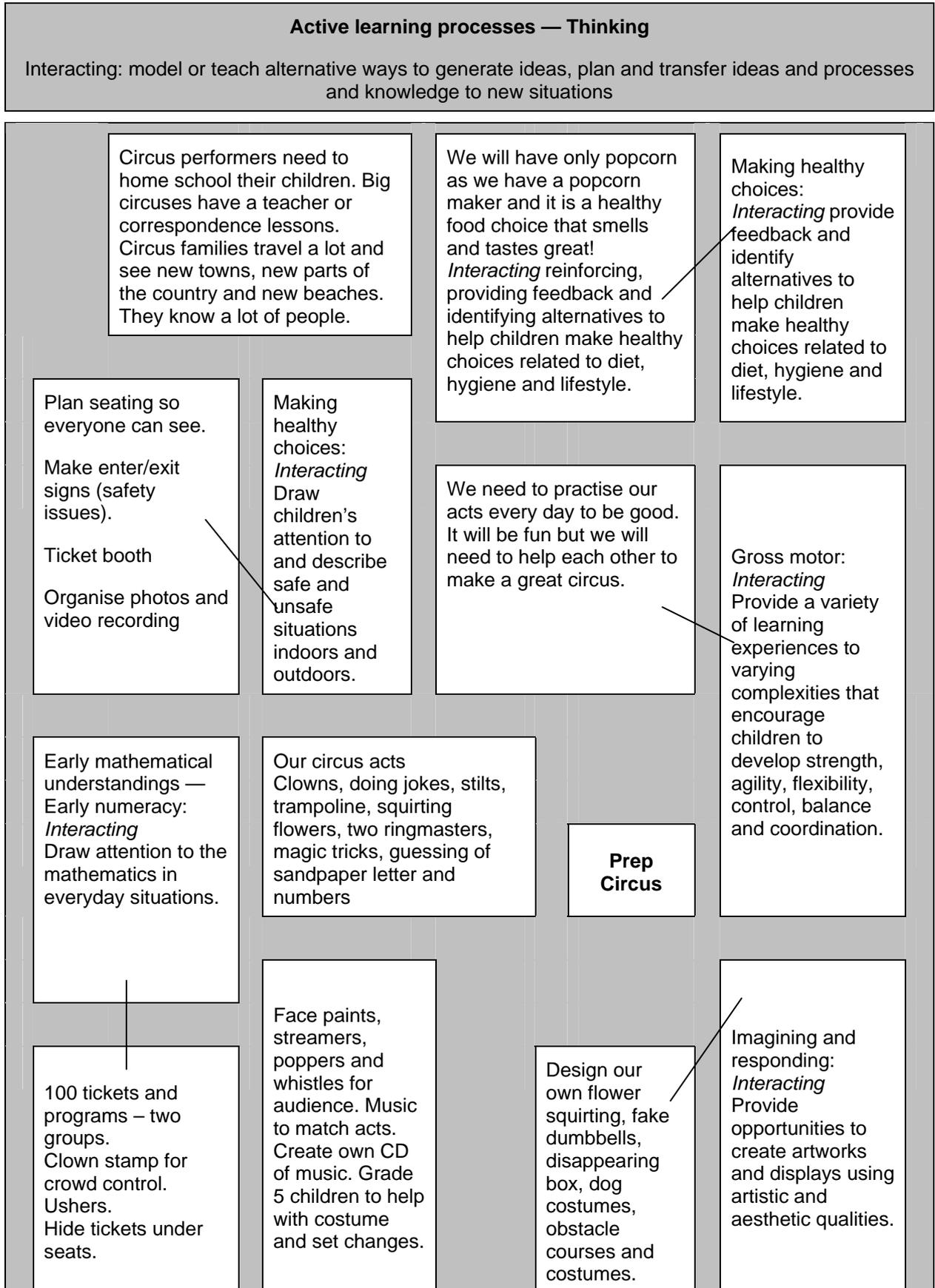


Links to <i>Early Years Curriculum Guidelines</i>		Teacher monitoring and reflection
<p>Active learning processes — Imagining and responding</p> <p><i>Interacting</i></p> <p>Negotiate projects with children and providing suitable space, time, resources and support.</p> <p>Question children to help them reflect on how they generated or represented ideas.</p>	<p>Phase 2: Investigations</p> <p>We began our investigations with a large group discussion about how we could learn some really good clown tricks. We referred to the videos and books and the children’s prior knowledge about clown acts. A child suggested, We could ask an expert. We helped the children to look through the yellow pages and find the contact details for local clown troupes. We wrote to and phoned a few and this is where we got most of our information.</p> <p>The children then phoned and invited Ned the Clown to come and help them with their tricks. They planned a list of questions for Ned and prepared props ready for his visit. Ned suggested that they work on preparing a trampoline act, a tea party and squirty flowers. They were inspired and worked really hard creating their act.</p>	<p><i>I had just seen the small group’s first clown tricks and told them they needed to try something else, as it did not keep us interested.</i></p>
<p>Social & personal learning — Social learning</p> <p><i>Interacting</i></p> <p>Engage children in collaborative decision making about ways to solve social problems arising at school</p> <p>Provide a warm, supportive and accepting learning environment that recognises all partner’s efforts and successes in new social situations.</p>	<p>The children formed themselves into groups that, together, would constitute a circus. The groups were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • circus dogs • clowns • dancers • strong people • scooter riders • magicians and knife throwers • prop and stage designers • ticket, program and popcorn sellers • ushers and crowd controllers. 	<p><i>I encouraged the children to brainstorm and negotiate. These strategies were crucial to the project.</i></p>
	<p>Everyone helped with costume design. The children worked cooperatively in small groups. They were inspired and worked very hard.</p> <p>Parents/carers became active partners in this project and they were kept informed of its progress.</p>	

<p>Links to Early Years Curriculum Guidelines</p>		<p>Teacher monitoring and reflection</p>
<p>Active learning processes — Imagining and responding</p> <p><i>Interacting</i></p> <p>Model ways to generate and represent ideas verbally, visually (plans, maps, diagrams, top view perspective, constructions, paintings) or through roleplay movement and music.</p> <p>Draw attention to other possibilities and valuing other people's ideas.</p>	<div data-bbox="541 421 1083 826" data-label="Image"> </div> <p>The children were responsible for representing and presenting their learning and progress. We shared our joint progress through displays and group meetings. The children began to become the “experts” and wanted to share their knowledge and new skills with everyone. Our circus was growing ... on a weekly basis!</p> <p>We visited the Drama department and asked for help with juggling and props. The high school students do a unit on circus performance and we spent four sessions gathering information, advice and wonderful ideas.</p>	<p><i>Clowns practising stilt walking. B, M and T balanced confidently.</i></p> <p><i>By seeking expert knowledge and help, the children were finding out answers independently and using the information to enhance their understandings.</i></p>
<p>Active learning processes — Thinking</p> <p><i>Interacting</i></p> <p>Model a language for reflecting and critically judging thinking and problem solving.</p>	<p>The “circus dog” group had their thinking challenged. At first they wanted to have lions, elephants and tigers in their circus, but when we researched the natural habitats and environments of these wild animals, the children decided it was “too mean” to keep those sorts of animals in a circus.</p> <p>The children decided, Dogs were a great idea because they could live with the circus families and eat all the left-over scraps and protect the big tent when no one was around.</p>	

	<p>Two of the children had taken their dogs to dog-training sessions and had lots of ideas on what circus dogs could do.</p>   <p>Phase 3: Developing our project</p> <p>During this phase we revisited our web and added new information to it that we had collected from our investigation. The final web was brainstormed over a two-week period. We facilitated this planning in small focus groups.</p>	<p>Teacher monitoring and reflection</p> <p><i>The project gained useful ideas through the children's sharing of their prior knowledge.</i></p> <p><i>The dog trainer did a great job keeping them all on task. The children designed their own ears and tails and developed their own tricks.</i></p> <p><i>The children designed their own popcorn holders and tickets. M and A copied the modelled text and used some experimental writing to make the tickets.</i></p>
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Our second concept map of what we know about circuses



<p>Links to <i>Early Years Curriculum Guidelines</i></p>		<p>Teacher monitoring and reflection</p>
<p>Language learning & communication — Early literacy (writing & shaping)</p> <p><i>Interacting</i></p> <p>Create word-rich environments filled with meaningful messages.</p>	<p>The revised web from Phase 2 showed that the children had remained interested and had acquired new knowledge. The Preparatory children were keen to create and design their own circus performances.</p> <p>The cooperation, problem solving, commitment and creativity in their understandings amazed us. The whole group demonstrated empowering behaviours as they worked out who should be doing what in their circus. We often overheard comments such as, Ruby you would be really good at riding the scooter. You're the best and you could help teach Brandon. The children recognised and affirmed one another's strengths, and viewed themselves as capable learners, able to assimilate new skills and knowledge from their peers.</p> <div data-bbox="539 920 1134 1361" data-label="Image"> </div> <div data-bbox="539 1391 1134 1832" data-label="Image"> </div>	<p><i>We displayed the webs in the classroom for staff, parents/carers and children to see.</i></p> <p><i>“Clap hands” sign for the performers to hold up to the audience during the circus. M and C are showing a definite hand preference when painting and writing. Strength and control are evident.</i></p> <p><i>“Wow!” A banner for the audience to hold up during the circus performance.</i></p>

<p>Links to <i>Early Years Curriculum Guidelines</i></p>		<p>Teacher monitoring and reflection</p>
<p>Language learning & communication (writing & shaping)</p> <p><i>Interacting</i></p> <p>Work alongside children as they experiment with writing and shaping experiences.</p>		<p><i>The children designed and made 104 tickets and programs. H commented that 100 is “humungous”.</i></p>
<p>Active learning processes — Imagining and Responding</p> <p><i>Interacting</i></p> <p>Provide opportunities to create artistic works and displays using artistic and aesthetic qualities.</p>	<p>Phase 4: Concluding the project</p> <p>We organised the circus presentation as a culminating event where the children shared their learning adventure and celebrated with friends, school community and parents/carers.</p> <p>Culminating event</p> <p>The children were very nervous and some said they had butterflies. (We had discussions about what “butterflies” were afterwards.) The audience was very responsive and the children developed a sense of competence and pride.</p> 	<p><i>Performing the song “We are going to make a circus”.</i></p>



Macarena dancers. T enjoyed expressing her feelings through singing and dance.



Daring bike rider uses only one hand! A demonstrated good coordination when riding on two wheels.



Michael the Magnificent with a blindfold on, guessing the magic letters and numbers. M used words like "straight" and "curvy" to describe the letter and number shapes.

<p>Links to <i>Early Years Curriculum Guidelines</i></p>		<p>Teacher monitoring and reflection</p>
		<p><i>So long, Farewell. The children really enjoyed experimenting with music and singing.</i></p>
<p>Social & personal learning — Personal learning</p> <p><i>Interacting</i></p> <p>Work alongside and provide feedback to children about the ways they took risks and persevered to complete tasks.</p>	<p>The children saw themselves as confident learners who had worked together to present their own circus from their investigations. We observed new behaviours of cooperation, resilience, risk taking, enjoyment and encouragement emerging throughout the group of active learners.</p> <p>Parents/carers and the school community were able to view first hand the skills, knowledge and learning styles that were strengthened by the circus project.</p>	<p><i>The children have developed a strong sense of belonging to a community of learners.</i></p> <p><i>The circus group felt proud, excited and in charge of their learning.</i></p>
<p>Language learning & communication — Oral language</p> <p><i>Interacting</i></p> <p>Make explicit the speaking and listening practices used in group and social situations.</p>	<p>The ringmasters and other speakers explained how we had researched the project and applied our knowledge.</p>	

	<p>Reflections and revisiting</p> <p>After the performance we recorded our new knowledge on a concept map with the involvement of our partners and the children. The children also watched the video and shared their delight with our buddy class. Many parents/carers wanted copies of the video to share with their family. The children re-enacted a variety of performances for weeks after the event and still sit and look at our project book and talk about what they did.</p> <p>Special thanks to the teacher, Vivienne Walsh, teacher aide Monique Shearer and children of the preparatory class at Good Shepherd Lutheran College, Noosaville.</p>	
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Further reading

Fell, K. 2003, *Play works for young learners*, November 3. *The Age*. This article comments on the value of play-based, negotiated curriculum. Go to: The Age (online). 2003, <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/10/31/1067566080692.html> [accessed 30 November 2005].

Helm Harris, J. & Katz, L. 2001, *Young investigators: the project approach in the early years*, Teachers College Press, New York.

Wright, S. 2003, *The Arts, young children and learning*, Pearson Education, Sydney.

Wright, S. (ed.) 2003, *Children, meaning making and the Arts*, Pearson Education, Sydney.

Appendix

Planning for Term 3

The teacher planned three units for Term 3. The circus unit outlined in this case study was one of the three units she planned. Planning for the circus unit is detailed in Unit 2 below. The other units were implemented during the term and have been included as an example of one way of planning for a term. This appendix contains information on which learning experiences were identified for assessment and evidence collection. Other chances for assessment and monitoring arose during the term and the teacher used this plan flexibly with input from the children through negotiation.

Unit 1

Look at me: In my school, church and local community. I am an Australian

- I am an important member of my school community.
- I like to play with my friends at Preschool and the Year 1s. I feel special because I have a buddy in Year 5 who plays with me and teaches me how to do new and challenging activities.
- I like the high school students who come and help in my classroom.
- I am learning where the tuckshop, Year 5 classroom, oval, playing fields and tennis courts are located on our campus.
- I will visit the art room and computer laboratory for an interactive learning experience.
- I participate in chapel and enjoy Pastor Bartholamaeus's visits. He tells us his favourite Bible stories. We will invite Pastor Minge to visit us too. We are preparing for our family service.
- I will go on a neighbourhood walk to "map" local services and post letters.
- I will visit the local nursery, livestock outlet and library.
- People will visit us from the police, ambulance and fire services, Surf Safety, post office and wild-life department.

Links to the Early Years Curriculum Guidelines

Links to learning statements	Culminating events	Assessment and evidence collected
Language learning and communication Imagining and responding Early mathematical understandings	Prepare a class talk. Children will recall their “mapping” journey of school grounds. Children will create own signs they find on walk.	Maps for folios. Signs they have designed. Photographs of children presenting their talks. Written observations
Language learning and communication Imagining and responding Active learning processes Social and personal learning	“I am” booklets. Children will work in small groups, with buddies. Children will reflect on their place in school, church and local community. For example — I am an Australian. I am in Preparatory Year. My address is...	Booklets and photographs.
Language learning and communication Imagining and responding Active learning processes Social and personal learning	Participation in family service. Preparing, practising and working as a group. Focus on Jesus as part of a community just like us. Children will imagine what Jesus would have looked like today and where he would have lived in our community.	Photographs. Art works and writing samples associated with preparation. Document children’s reflections, ideas and research. Written observations. Children to retell their favourite Bible story or dramatise it in small groups.

Links to key learning areas

The Arts	Role-playing, designing and creating fun cultural art pieces. Setting up a doctor’s office, travel agent, post office and circus. Exploring clay representations of themselves and environment.
English	Speaking, listening, writing letters to buddies, community personnel, parents/carers.
Health	Health and safety for oneself and community members.
L.I.F.E.	My church community. Family service.
Mathematics	Measurement, Space, Number, Chance & Data. Documenting numbers in our communities, graphing transport preferences, mapping skills.
Physical Education	P.M.P. Cultural dance, Japanese fan dance. Children to play games with rules on oval — for example, soccer, tunnel ball, poison ball.

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Science	Natural and human features of a community. Foods eaten by people from different cultures. Cooking activities prepared by children.
Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE)	Observing, recording, researching and analysing cultural and community needs — for example, food, shelter, recreation, religion and celebrations. Reflect on society in Jesus' times. Focus on Japanese and Australian cultures.
Technology	Computer laboratory time. Explore cultural sites and investigate local community sites.

Unit 2 The Circus

Look at me: I can create and design and learn. My ideas are brilliant!

Children will follow their interests and design their own circus. The children in the Preparatory classroom will be discussing, communicating, brainstorming, creating, designing, investigating and learning about presenting a circus. The children are revisiting this idea from the previous term. In order to research their “hot” topic effectively, we will be scaffolding their webbing, concept mapping and initial plans to guide the processes involved.

- Children as a whole group will develop a “web” of information about what they know about a circus.
- Small focus groups will work together to record what they would like to learn.
- Whole group to reflect on what we need to research. Break into small investigating teams to research chosen topics.
- Children will use De Bono’s Thinking Hats Strategies during research and discussions.
- Children break into four groups to represent a circus in a variety of contexts:
 - collage circus scene (3D design)
 - block building (design with props)
 - group mural
 - individual designs.
- Project groups to work on circus acts, props, costumes, tickets, programs, refreshments, signage.
- Children will use phone book and local resources to invite experts in for interviews.
- Children will plan their own circus. Break into groups to plan and implement plans from research and investigations.
- Culminating activity — a circus performance with an invited audience of friends, parents/carers, administration staff and other classes.

Links to the Early Years Curriculum Guidelines

Learning statements	Culminating events	Assessment and evidence collected
Language learning and communication Imagining and responding Early mathematical understandings	Children will design circus flyers, signs, circus programs, and tickets. They will work out the quantities and where to store everything.	Photographs of processes and finished products.
Gross motor Fine motor Social and personal learning	Children will design obstacle courses, balancing acts, gymnastics displays, dance acts and costumes.	Photographs and drawings of plans from beginning. Graph improvement in skills.

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Imagining and responding Making healthy choices	Children will create the environment by making the backdrop, decorations and centre ring. They will organise seating, crowd control, and the entrances and exits. They will be aware of healthy and safety issues.	Photographs. Written observations. Work samples. Safety booklet for circus.
Making healthy choices Investigating technology	Children will make circus food, refreshments and design food carriers. They will learn about healthy food and safe, hygienic food preparation.	Photographs. Written observations. Plans.
Imagining and responding	Costume designers will make masks, headgear. Children will design stage format with drama equipment.	Photographs of designs with written documentation.
Social and personal learning	Friends will photograph and video the circus for whole-group reflection. The whole class will develop a PowerPoint presentation together to share with Pacific Lutheran Prep.	Children will document with a buddy how they would have changed the circus.

Links to key learning areas

The Arts	Creating and designing in a variety of contexts.
English	Public speaking, listening, reading, writing.
Health	Developing understandings of health and safety issues in public places, including evacuation plans and food hygiene.
L.I.F.E.	Developing understanding of own abilities, uniqueness and special gifts from God.
Mathematics	Measurement, graphing, parts of a whole, shapes, number.
Music	Discovering and exploring different types of music to accompany the circus acts.
Physical Education	Balance, coordination. Using and developing large muscle skills. Exploring rolling and flipping skills.
Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE)	Participating in diverse roles, questions ideas and practices that may be stereotypical or biased.

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Science	Balance, designing obstacle course with existing equipment, cause and effect, engaging with others to investigate and test ideas, observe, experiment and recording observations.
Technology	Using digital photographs, videos and CDs. Research circus games on the internet.

Unit 3

Look at me: Caring for our environment and small creatures

- Children in the Preparatory classroom will be learning how to investigate and implement caring practices for our school and local environment as well as developing animal husbandry skills when dealing with young animals.
- Children will be presented with an opportunity to implement their learning with the arrival of four baby guinea pigs and the “Hatching eggs” program.
- The children will also use compost and waste in our vegetable and flower gardens.
- The children will initially explore the process of recycling in their classroom as a caring practice and as stewardship for our planet.
- Children will discuss why it is a good idea to recycle packaging and other items from morning tea and lunch breaks.
- The children will discuss living and non-living things in our environment.
- We will plan a rubbish-free day for morning tea and lunch.
- Children will discuss the meaning of “resources” and how we can work together to save our resources.
- The children will discuss how we can care for our guinea pigs.
- We observe and record life cycles of chickens with the “Hatching eggs” program.
- We share our experiences with our friends and families through technology.

Links to Early Years Curriculum Guidelines

Learning statements	Culminating events	Assessment and evidence collected
Investigating technology Social and personal learning	Children will prepare new cages for baby guinea pigs and housing for the guinea pig parents. Children will create a diary using photographs and drawings. Children will share their experiences with their friends and families through technology, designs and written texts.	Diary of growth, feeding and change of babies. Observe ability to gently handle small guinea pigs, photographs. Written observations.
Investigating the natural world	Children will develop their own compost for a “foam box garden”. They will add worms to aid breakdown of compost.	Garden maintenance and turning of compost. Ability to identify composting food scraps. Photographs and drawings.

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<p>Language learning and communication</p> <p>Investigating the natural world</p>	<p>Children develop understandings of life cycle. They observe eggs hatching in incubator. They develop a web page diary together and make class/individual diaries of hatchings and growth.</p>	<p>Web page diary.</p> <p>Drawings of life cycles.</p>
<p>Investigating environments</p>	<p>They bring a “rubbish-free” lunch box to school.</p> <p>Children collect rubbish around school.</p>	<p>Rubbish-free lunch box.</p> <p>Photographs.</p>

Links to key learning areas

The Arts	Fine motor, creativity, imagining, designing and acting.
English	Speaking, rhyming, phonological awareness, talking in front of peers/buddies, writing and reading multimodal texts.
Health	Hygiene, safety, caring for small animals, cooperating.
L.I.F.E	Stewardship of our environment. Caring for our animals. Being Christlike.
Mathematics	Space/patterns and uses terms of position, shape, movement, temperature, time and measurement — full, empty, push, pull, yesterday, today, tomorrow, hot, cold, long, short.
Physical Education	Moving in different ways pretending to be baby animals.
Science	Discovery, caring, observing, place and space.
Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE)	Places, habitats, shelter, past, present, future.
Technology	Digital camera, PowerPoint, web diary for chicken hatching.