

Early years curriculum materials

Developing an early years philosophy



Background

This case study shows how one school developed a Junior School incorporating a Preparatory Year. It then describes the Prep–Year 3 class's collaborative planning and implementation of an investigation.

On teamwork

My teaching partner and I began working in 2004. I had been a Preschool teacher in this school and I moved over to the school campus when the Preparatory Year began in 2003. Following wide consultation, the school community decided to form a Junior School in 2004.

We didn't know each other but we just clicked. One of the things that made it easy for us was that we had no history together. This allowed us to work together and discuss our beliefs about how children learn. We found that we agreed on several important issues: we both believed, and the research supported us, that children learn through active investigation and play in an environment where individual progress is acknowledged. But how could we share our belief with the school community?

We started with our colleagues. We began to have regular Junior School staff meetings — attended by all Junior School staff and the principal. As preparation for the first meeting, the four early years staff recorded their philosophy about teaching and learning in the early years. Staff were then grouped together to work in teams.

In the early meetings, each staff member took responsibility for sharing current research on how young children learn. This was a good starting point, and the research challenged some of our common perceptions about how children learn.

Next, we considered what our role as teachers might be. The group decided that collaboration with children was vital. We had to find out what they wanted to learn and use this when we planned for learning. Now we begin each term by posing the question to children "What do you want to know or learn about?"

All of the children's ideas and suggestions are recorded and discussed, then we make decisions as a group as to what we will find out about first. When needed, we steer this discussion in a particular direction, to ensure the curriculum is covered. So, it is true collaboration.

Once we established a way of working collaboratively, we began to develop a curriculum plan. This plan was to contain:

- a school profile
- a Junior School philosophy
- information about Junior School organisation
- a curriculum framework and outline
- documentation of core learning and planning
- assessment and folio requirements, reporting and intervention.

Extracts from some of these documents are in the Appendix.

Developing the curriculum plan was the best thing we could have done. The curriculum plan addresses parent and school community concerns about multi-age learning including a Preparatory Year. It states clearly how the children at our school will learn, and is continually adapted when we feel it is needed. This plan is discussed with any new early years' staff, and we repeat initial information sessions to ensure that we all have common understandings.

We believe that this curriculum plan is about good teaching — not just good teaching in the early years — and helps our students move easily from Junior School to Middle School.

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Currently, the staff is working together to ensure greater continuity for the students. Now, at the end of our second year as a Junior School, our staff meetings are focused on looking at continuity of teaching, learning and assessment between Junior School and Middle School. We do PowerPoint presentations at staff meetings of the whole school to inform the staff about what students at our school are learning.

Research into Middle School development indicated the benefits and appropriateness of active, inquiry-based learning. As a whole staff we continue to look at how the physical environment is structured, how time is used and how the social learning programs will continue throughout the whole school. These discussions will continue next year to develop the professional learning the staff will need to achieve these changes. We also need to inform parents of these connections.

We are not only looking at continuity after Junior School, but have begun to develop partnerships with our community kindergarten. We aim to learn about the children's understandings, capabilities and dispositions before they begin at the Junior School, and take note of the type of programs they have experienced.

Teamwork continues to be a real challenge, but is made more effective by our two non-contact periods together per week. Non-contact time provides a chance to plan, discuss evidence of learning and also share our problems!

Finding out about the children

In Term 1 we hold parent and carer interviews to share information about children's learning. We tell parent and carers about how we establish individual goals for the children. This provides a foundation for later discussion about the distance travelled by the children in relation to the learning statements from the *Early Years Curriculum Guidelines (EYCG)* and core learning outcomes from the KLA syllabuses.

Establishing learning goals for children

The rubrics provided in the *EYCG* required us to look at how we make judgments about what children know and what they can do in the Prep Year and beyond. How were we interpreting the evidence before us and making judgments?

We use the KLA syllabuses and support materials for planning, and use the phase structure in the *EYCG* (Becoming aware, Exploring, Making connections and Applying) to think about what learning looks like as children move through to Level 1 and Level 2.

We wanted to develop a tool that could be used to make judgments across Prep–Year 3. We began to develop rubrics that show the distance travelled by students as they move from Applying through to Level 1 and 2. These rubrics are associated with our curriculum organisers (see next paragraph). To minimise confusion for parents and carers we use the same reporting format for all children in the Junior School. We call it an early learning record (ELR), adapted from the suggested models in the *EYCG* (see example in Appendix).

Parents and carers seem to like our consistent use of the ELR. Some families have two children in the Junior School in different year levels, so having one consistent reporting format has made it less confusing.

The early learning records encourage parents and carers to ask "How is my child going with their social and personal learning?" We include information on the amount and type of support required, and parents can see how this is important in the early years. The ELR shows parents how learning and development occurs as children progress through the Junior School.

Developing curriculum organisers

We realised that continuity was an important issue in our discussion around the formation of a Junior School. Together, as a school community, we developed five curriculum organisers: Literacy, Mathematics, Investigating and creating, Health and physical development and Personal and social development. The early learning areas and the key learning areas associate easily into these organisers. These five organising ideas give us a common language to talk about children's learning with parents, carers and the school community.

Collaborative planning

At the start of each term we ask the children “What do we want to find out about?” Once all of the children’s ideas are recorded and the main idea is chosen, we link them with learning statements from the EYCG and the KLA syllabuses. In a sense we select core learning outcomes and learning statements that match the focus ideas. We continue to focus and develop the learning, but children have more choice than they would have if we used a pre-planned unit.

Monitoring and assessing learning using folios

Because we operate as a Junior School, we use the same folio structure for students from Preparatory Year to Year 3. The teachers gather evidence of learning for each child and organise it according to the Junior School curriculum organisers. At first we found we were collecting far too much evidence, and Middle School teachers were finding it hard to interpret. Now we have narrowed it down to one sample per term per learning statement, together with other pertinent information, such as specialist reports. This means that two to three examples are collected for each early learning area. Each sample has a simple, clear analysis or interpretation attached for other partners to refer to.

Using checklists

We talked with the learning support teacher about using checklists to help us if we needed information about a particular area. We decided to use checklists to give us information at a glance. However, there were sometimes surprising anomalies between what we found out in checklists and what we had observed during our program. Now we use both methods to help us make judgments, taking the context into account as well.

Language learning & communication, and social & personal learning

When the Junior School was formed, we had lengthy discussions about the children’s needs in our context. We identified language learning & communication, and social & personal learning as particular focuses. In all our learning experiences and units we provide specific modelling and opportunities for language use in real-life and relevant contexts. The active, play-based and investigative program encourages children to experiment with language and use scripts related to their learning. For example, we set up an ambulance station and discussed how ambulance officers might answer an emergency phone call. We visited the ambulance station, interviewed ambulance officers and recorded the script that they use when answering the telephone. The older students typed this script out and placed it in the ambulance play area for use in games.

We have used similar strategies in other social and cultural contexts that are relevant to our children, including a police station, fire station, SES base, butcher shop and wedding chapel. The children look up to the people who work in these areas of the community, so the learning is meaningful for them. Showing children how language is used in real life encourages them to build upon the interactions that they have, extends their vocabulary and helps them to gain confidence and feel capable and competent.

Collecting evidence of learning and making observations

During lunchtime inside play, one teacher acts as observer, while the other takes on a role in play, modelling language and facilitating learning. The observer takes notes on about five children per week, which are entered into the computer with relevant photographs. We then choose one observation that gives a representative record of each child’s learning for use in the semester report for parents. It provides them with rich information about the things that interest their child and what they are learning about at school. It also enlivens our early learning record, at times capturing unseen learning for parents. We find out lots of valuable information during the children’s play. For example, in butcher shop play one of the items cost \$6. One Prep Year child said “That’s three gold ones.” We found out what this child knew about money! A teacher then tendered \$20 for \$16 worth of meat, and a Year 1 child got four dollars change from the cash register and counted it back. We added this information to their folios.

Investigating the emergency services

Before the end of each term, we ask the children to think over the holidays about what they would like to learn about in the next term. On the first day back we meet as a whole group and write down all the ideas. Then we look for similarities between the ideas, so we can group some ideas together. Next, we cross out anything that we may have learned about already. Finally, we come to a decision.

This term, Sophie (Year 1) said, "I like the magic school bus." Another child replied, "I don't want to go on another trip. I want to learn about police and stuff." Ashley (whose Dad is an ambulance officer) said "It's not called police, ambulance, fire brigade. It's the emergency services."

My teaching partner and I had in the back of our minds that we wanted to focus on team work, and this idea had potential to provide real-life and life-like contexts for learning associated with team work. I replied "I only know about the fire brigade because my husband is in it." My teaching partner replied "I don't know anything about it. How could we find out about it?" The children brainstormed suggestions for finding out more. Together, we came up with a plan!

Getting started

Setting up the play areas at the beginning of the year is really challenging. Before we develop investigations, we have to establish protocols for role-play and investigating. What is acceptable? What isn't? We also scaffold the play so that it is focused and purposeful — not just everyone taking on the role of the dog! When planning and discussing how to set up a play area, we provide examples of language to use in roles.

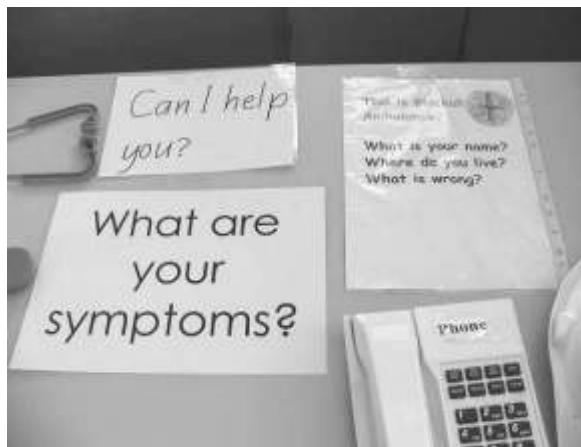
First, the children began to set up play areas related to the emergency services. They used these areas daily during 1-hour blocks of time set aside for investigating and creating on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday (2–3 pm). By having three days in a row, children are able to continue developing parts of their project, design or idea over an extended period of time. Typically, on Day 1, the children plan how they will set up their learning area. On Day 2 they continue to set up the area, labelling and making resources needed for the play. On Day 3 they are able to play in their area. The teacher takes on a role in the play area to facilitate learning. For example, the teacher can prompt thinking by saying "There is a lot of equipment in a fire station. How could it be stored safely?"



The Fire Station Play Area



Jack in the Fire Station



Ambulance station script



stetheskop

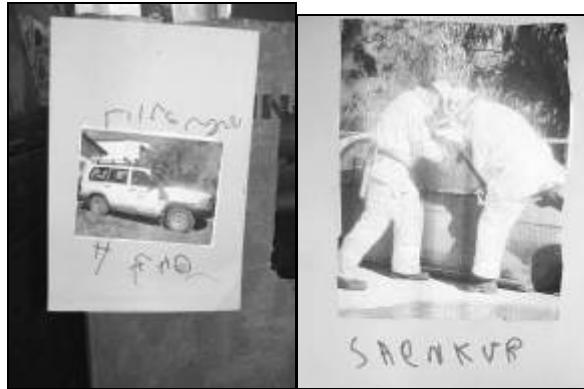
Label for a stethoscope in the ambulance station

On Day 4 of the project, children record what they have done and learned so far in their play area. The children decide where and how they will do this. On Day 5 the planning and labelling continues as the children ask "What else does our area need?"

Time for reflection is set aside at the end of each one-hour investigating and creating session. This helps the children to share and reflect with their peers playing in other areas. Both teachers take on a role in reflection — either as recorder or questioner.

Visiting real-life contexts

We often go out into the community to visit real sites that we will recreate in the classroom. For the emergency services investigation we visited the police station, the fire station/SES base and the ambulance station. After the visits, we set up play areas and experimented with them. Then we discussed and practised conducting interviews for leadership positions in each play area. We advertised for a local controller (SES), a senior sergeant (police), a fire captain and an officer-in-charge (ambulance).



Labels made in the play areas by Prep Year children

My teaching partner and I conducted the interviews, encouraging children to share information about their abilities. Logan said "I like to help people." Emma said "I know about helping people in pain. Because when I was in hospital with my broken hip, the nurse helped me with the pain." This was a great opportunity for the children to use oral language in a purposeful context.

Using emergency scenarios

Once the children developed confidence with their roles and responsibilities in the play areas, we added another dimension to the play. In partnership with our school Adopt-a-Cop we developed emergency scenarios that were delivered in the form of a newspaper article. We planned some scenarios — "A lost dog", "Family trapped in rising flood waters" and "Miss Morrison goes missing". Children responded to these scenarios in their roles as fire officers, ambulance officers, police officers and SES personnel.



Emergency scenarios are presented to children as a Newspaper Article. The paper is delivered each time by the school's Adopt-a-Cop.



Partnerships enhance the investigations

The children's responses to the emergencies became more complex and rich as the scenarios progressed. After each emergency, my teaching partner and I led whole group reflection to provide explicit feedback to the children about their roles.



Finding and rescuing Miss Morrison



Pain relief and care delivered by attentive ambulance officers

For example, in "Family trapped in rising flood waters" children discovered Mrs Kellie stuck in a flooded sandpit. After the fire brigade rescued her, the ambulance officers attended to any possible injuries. During reflection on this scenario, we discussed how the children used ambulance technology. I said, "Emma, when I was hurt you arrived to help me and you just placed an oxygen mask on my face. How else could you have done this? Is there anything that Officer Frank taught us about caring for patients?"

By the third emergency, children knew that they had to introduce themselves to the patients in a standard way. We made the oral language associated with these interactions explicit. For example, the following script was used during the "Miss Morrison goes missing" scenario: "Hello, my name is Emma and I am a nurse. I am just giving you some oxygen to help you breathe."

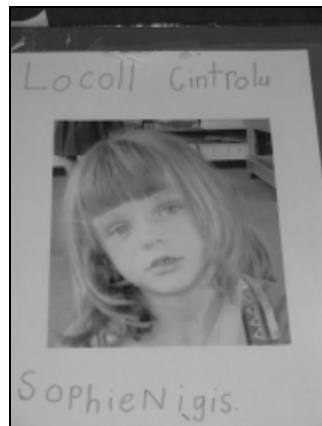
During reflection periods we also discussed how sometimes complaints are made against employees in the emergency services. We discussed ways this could be limited and again, practised ways of providing good quality care and assistance in an emergency.

Investigations in Prep-Year 3

In the Junior School, play and investigations are significant contexts for learning for all children from the Prep Year to Year 3. The older children take on different roles in the play, modelling reading and writing and numeracy strategies for the younger children. This peer support enhances the learning of all children; the younger children develop their understandings and the

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older children develop more confidence with their strategies. My teaching partner and I are constantly challenged to extend the learning in play. We refer back to the curriculum frequently to ensure that the children's learning is focused and builds their understandings, capabilities and dispositions.



Sophie was successful in her application to be the local controller for the SES

Conclusion

Our investigations involve the children in exploring ways to make and represent objects in context by testing many ideas:

- How should I design my oxygen backpack?
- What is the role of certain medicines?
- How do sergeants lead their officers?
- When someone goes missing, what response sequence do the police follow?
- How do the *jaws of life* work? How could I make my own?
- Why do SES personnel walk in a line to find clues?
- How do emergency services personnel use numbers and writing?

We allow time for children to thoroughly investigate their ideas and new knowledge. We reflect on successes and suggest explicit strategies when things haven't worked well. By scheduling time for investigations we have enriched the Junior School program and made learning relevant for the children.

Appendix

Extract from Junior School Curriculum Plan

Blackall Junior School (Prep/1/2/3) Timetable – Term 3 2005		Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8:50am - 9:15am	Ob. Course & Gross Motor Rotations	HPE	Ob. Course & Gross Motor Rotations			
9:15am - 10:10am	Reading Block	Reading Block	Reading Block	Reading Block		Reading Block
10:20am - 11:00am						
11:00am - 11:50am	Library	Music	Mathematics Block	Writing Block		
11:50am - 12:30pm	Maths	Writing				Maths Block
12:30pm - 1:10pm						
1:10pm - 1:30pm	Rest	Rest	Rest	Rest		Rest
1:30pm - 2:00pm		Prep - sleep	Prep - sleep	Prep - sleep		Prep - sleep
2:00pm - 3:00pm	HPE	1/2/3 – Fine Motor	1/2/3 – Fine Motor	1/2/3 – Fine Motor	1/2/3 – Fine Motor	Junior School Sport
		Investigating & Creating	Investigating & Creating	Investigating & Creating		

Note: During the reading block, children are involved in contextualised learning. For example, in the emergency services unit, they wrote emergency plans, labelled items in play areas, and wrote and typed scripts to use in the play areas. Focused learning and teaching and explicit teaching occur during these small group sessions. Contextualised teaching also occurs during the maths sessions. For example, the children set up a butcher's shop and investigated quantities, measurement and the uses of money. They also recorded home deliveries and phone orders. Focused learning and teaching also occurs during these blocks.

Early learning record cover

Specialised Music	Comment on understandings, capabilities and dispositions			
Related learning goal	Becoming aware	Exploring	Making connections	Applying
* Identify families of instruments within the Orchestra. * Recognise treble notation—B, A, G and play them on the recorder. * Identify and sing songs in canon form. * Identify expressive elements ie. (p) piano, (f) forte, crescendo, decrescendo.	Olly the Owl is able to recognise simple notation on a staff and when concentrating and with support, he can play basic songs on the recorder. Olly the Owl can identify families of instruments which make up an orchestra and with limited teacher assistance categorise instruments into these families. Olly the Owl's knowledge of 'canons' is developing and he enjoys singing songs in this formation. Olly is able to identify and define some basic expressive elements used in music. Olly's knowledge of the music staff and its components continues to develop well. Keep up the good work Olly. (Tracey Fox)			



19/11/04

Investigating & Creating: The Secret Physics Lab

Olly the Owl was chosen to be the "2nd Assistant" for the afternoon when working in the secret physics laboratory investigating and building pulleys. In his role he was required to help other laboratory groups to record their observations & carry out the experiment and also to assist the professor in demonstrating and handing out equipment. Olly the Owl took his job very seriously and was able to fulfill his duties very well. Another student commented that "Olly the Owl was a very good assistant" as he was very helpful.

Should you wish to discuss any concerns further please make a time to see your child's classroom teacher.

Literacy

This section of the early record describes how Ollie the Owl is developing in relation to the three learning focuses:
 -Speaking and listening - Reading and viewing - Writing and shaping

Speaking and Listening	Comment on understandings, capabilities and dispositions			
Related learning goal	Becoming aware	Exploring	Making connections	Applying
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listens to and follows instructions. • Takes part in group discussions. 				At times Ollie the owl still needs prompts to listen to teacher directions and then to follow them. He often needs encouragement to join in with whole group discussions, but is more confident to do so independently in smaller groups. He is able to use appropriate social speaking and listening conventions in the classroom.

Reading and Viewing	Comment on understandings, capabilities and understandings			
Related learning goal	Becoming aware	Exploring	Making connections	Applying
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reads with expression. • Read familiar text fluently. • Comprehend text. • Acknowledge punctuation when reading. 				Ollie has made significant progress in his comprehension of texts this semester. He is reading well beyond the end of year 3 reading benchmarks and is beginning to read familiar texts both fluently and with some expression. He tries hard to remember to acknowledge punctuation when reading. Well done Ollie!

Writing and shaping	Comment on understandings, capabilities and dispositions			
Related learning goal	Becoming aware	Exploring	Making connections	Applying
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plans for writing. • Proofreads after writing and complete comprehensive editing. • Understands the genre of explanation. • Punctuates sentences correctly 				Ollie the owl is beginning to write a variety of simple and extended sentences. He is showing that he can develop a topic when writing and often includes specific vocabulary to explain or describe what he is writing about. Ollie has received phonemic awareness support again this semester and this has helped him to identify sounds in the words when he writes—he still has difficulty writing the correct spelling choice though. Ollie now needs to ensure that he proofreads and edits his writing more thoroughly. Ollie understands the genre of an explanation and tries to write one using the correct structure and specific language features.

Mathematical Understandings

This section of the early learning record describes how Ollie the Owl is developing in relation to the learning strands:
 - Number concepts - Space and shape - Measurement - Patterns and Algebra - Chance and data

Measurement	Comment on understandings, capabilities and dispositions			
Related Learning Goal	Becoming aware	Exploring	Making connections	Applying
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read and represent minutes past the hour in digital and analogue form. • Read and interpret a calendar. 				Ollie is able to independently read and represent minutes past the hour in both digital and analogue form. He can read and interpret a calendar without teacher assistance.

Early learning record