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##### Early Childhood and

# Studies of Society and Environment

#### Key Learning Area

### Occasional paper prepared for the

## Queensland School Curriculum Council

By

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**1. Learning and teaching theories**

The Years 1 to 10 Studies of Society and Environment syllabus and associated curriculum materials (SOSE) support and model practices that acknowledge students as active constructors of their learning and teachers as active facilitators of this process.

This approach to learning and teaching in Studies of Society and Environment materials is supported by current educational and psychological theories, including *social constructivism* and *critical theory*. The social constructivist theory recognises that knowledge is (re)constructed by each person in response to reflection on acquired knowledge and experiences, and during interactions with others and materials in their environment. Critical theory is concerned with change and social action. Through activities, which investigate multiple perspectives related to social and environmental issues relevant to the students’ lives and local community, students begin to appreciate the different perspectives people have of values and value issues, and how aspects of diversity, including culture, gender, family structure and group membership can influence these perspectives.

*The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century* (1999) affirms use of approaches which enable ‘all young people to engage effectively with an increasingly complex world’ that includes advances in technology, communication, increased global mobility and migration and challenging social and environmental issues. Emphasis on schools as learning communities where students and families work in partnership with the wider community is reinforced through goals such as:

‘1. Schools should develop fully the talents and capacities of all students. In particular, when students leave schools they should:

* 1. have the capacity for, and skills in, analysis and problem solving and the ability to communicate ideas and information, to plan and organise activities and to collaborate with others
  2. have qualities of self-confidence, optimism, high self-esteem, and a commitment to personal excellence as a basis for their potential life roles as family, community and workforce members.’

These goals acknowledge collaborative efforts of groups of learners as sources of learning, and imply the need for implementation of quality teaching and learning practice.

Teachers in the early years construct curriculum from understandings about children and from understandings about an outcomes approach using syllabus documents and associated materials. Aspects of this active construction of curriculum by early childhood teachers includes:

* planning flexible learning environments
* establishing partnerships that support learning
* exploring aspects of curriculum related to an outcomes approach, including concurrent considerations of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment
* gathering evidence of young students’ demonstrations of learning outcomes in a range of learning contexts including play, real-life situations, investigations, transitions and routines, and focused learning situations.

The following table provides an overview of the roles of the young students and teachers in environments that promote social constructivist and critical perspectives.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Learning and teaching practices** | Role of young students | Role of teachers |
| sharing understandings and skills | * active participants in cooperative activities | * encourage conversations, dialogue between all stakeholders in the learning community |
| applying knowledge in use | * co-constructors of own knowledge and meaning making * organisers of self and materials | * supporters of children’s cognitive development by providing opportunities to extend and revisit thinking and skills |
| problem-solving | * initiators, negotiators and explorers when working alone or with others on a problem or challenging task * planners and designers that are curious and persistent to find solutions | * guides and supporters of children’s ‘self-initiated, fact-finding missions’ that promote the learning process as active, contextualised and meaningful * modellers and scaffolders that provide connections between children’s prior experiences and knowledge and the ‘new’ |
| critical thinking | * listeners and contributors to discussions * (re)consider ideas, thoughts and feelings based on new experiences and knowledge * begin to challenge stereotypes and bias which relate to gender, cultural heritage, work roles, group membership, familial and other experiences * consider others’ views and perspectives on issues, including those that may belong to less dominant groups and may be ‘silent voices’ | * providers of learning environments which foster diversity, equity and equality that relate to gender, cultural heritage, work roles, group membership, familial and other experiences * encourage independent thinking and opportunities to consider and express possibilities |
| reflection | * gatherer of information about own and others’ talents and limitations when working * participants in reflective inquiries and activities to assist goal-setting and envisioning preferred futures * assess their own learning and set goals to further cater for their needs and interests when working independently or with others | * organisers of metacognitive activities * participants in reflective practices to assist goal-setting and future planning considerations * assessors of students’ individual needs, interests by using a variety of assessment techniques that consider diverse learning styles * planners of new activities based on negotiated decision making with students and (re)consideration of possibilities |

The Years 1 to 10 Studies of Society and Environment Early Primary Sourcebook Modules incorporate these practices, as part of the processes of social and environmental inquiry that include *investigating, creating, participating, communicating and reflecting*.

###### 2. Outcomes approach

The Years 1 to 10 Studies of Society and Environment Syllabus uses an outcomes approach to teaching and learning. Consistent with an outcomes approach, is an understanding and incorporation of *curriculum, pedagogy and assessment* as concurrent planning and implementation considerations. By providing a clear focus on learning outcomes, teaching and learning is focusing on:

* what students know and can do, rather than on content
* children, teachers, parents/carers and community members being informed about the outcomes students are working towards
* students understanding the reasons for what they are learning.

An outcomes approach incorporates social constructivist and critical theories by acknowledging children as ‘meaning-makers’ and ‘co-constructors’ of their own knowledge through active, purposeful participation in real-life and life-like tasks. Through *negotiated play* and inquiry-based, sensory-filled environments, children develop further skills of creative thinking such as problem-solving and those of cooperation including negotiation, turn-taking and sharing.

**3. Cross-curricular priorities**

Through early childhood classrooms that adopt a futures-focused approach, children begin to understand that they too, are active citizens and ‘agents of change’ who are able to help create preferred futures. The applicability of a futures-focused approach in early childhood is evident when it is considered that:

* ‘early childhood curriculum combines practice with theoretical in a manner directly relevant to future issues
* change and adaptation are particularly significant in context of early childhood curriculum
* early childhood curriculum is or should be flexible, adaptable in its scope and application
* curriculum construction is by nature, futures’ oriented.’ (Page, quoted by O’Rourke, B. 1993, p. 378)

Australian researcher from the University of Melbourne, Jane Page (in O’Rourke, 1993, p.15) suggests features of present and future curricula that would enable children to function successfully as adults in the 21st century:

By incorporating *futures perspectives* as a cross-curricular priority, young students are assisted to make links within their world, and empowered to consider and reflect on probable and preferred futures. By using thinking skills that involve critical, reflective, creative and effective domains, children may grow in self-confidence and self-esteem. Such attributes are necessary for children experiencing success at school, and in future, knowledge-based, multi-skilled work environments.

To solve today’s problems, we need to explore a myriad of new ways of thinking. Thinking skill programs such as *Multiple Intelligences* and *Six Thinking Hats* encourage young students to apply their knowledge and skills at different levels of complexity and in divergent, lateral ways. Studies of Society and Environment sourcebook modules that feature thinking skill programs include:

* Level 1: *Ready, set, go: Rights and responsibilities* (Six Thinking Hats)

: *Lean, green, cleaning machine: Caring for environments* (Multiple

Intelligences).

The Years 1 to 10 Studies of Society and Environment Syllabus embodies past and present studies of humans’ interaction with each other and environments. A cross-curricular priority, *lifeskills*, is practiced through young students being active participants in their world. It is well known and documented that children learn best by ‘doing’. By being encouraged and supported to actively investigate concepts of key values including democratic process, social justice, economic and ecological sustainability and peace in familiar contexts such as home and school, children develop abilities to reflect on and make decisions about their place in the world.

Through collaborative activities in Years 1 to 10 Studies of Society and Environment Sourcebook Modules that explore topics such as *Individual identity*, *Working together*, *Stories of diverse cultures* and *Caring for the environment*, students use lifeskills and related life roles including:

* personal development skills
* social skills
* self-management skills
* citizenship skills.

It is these topics and others in the suite of modules that are descendent of the identified National Goals for Schooling (Adelaide Declaration) — ‘understand and acknowledge the value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and cultural diversity…stewardship of the natural environment…potential life roles…establish and maintain a healthy lifestyle…understanding of the work environment…’

*Literacy* is another cross-curricular priority reinforced in each key learning area syllabus. By incorporating a *multiliteracies* approach, young students begin to appreciate multiple perspectives of people across cultures, space and time. In response to issues of globalisation that include increased mobilisation of people, advances in technology and changes in work and leisure practices, students will need to become ‘*environmentally literate*’ to actively pursue a lifestyle that protects rather than damages the environment (Murdoch, 1992, p.3) and become ‘*socially and politically literate*’ when responding to the demands for recognition of cultural diversity, and civic and citizenship rights and responsibilities.

The Studies of Society and Environment key learning area promotes *critical literacy*, which involves awareness of aspects in texts such as stereotyping, cultural bias, author’s intention, ‘hidden agendas’ and ‘silent voices’. Through a Level 1 Studies of Society and Environment sourcebook module such as *A world full of stories: Stories of diverse cultures*; and Level 2 Studies of Society and Environment modules, *A patchwork of memories: Family diversity* and *Telling stories: Stories and perspectives*, young students have multiple opportunities to comprehend, construct and reconstruct their own texts with critical perspectives.

*Numeracy*, as a cross-curricular priority, is developed through activities whereby children develop and use numeracy skills to solve problems related to their social, built and natural environments. Using a variety of data from the areas of number, space, measurement and data that are collected, organised and analysed, young students apply numerical and spatial concepts and skills to real-life and life-like tasks.

Level 1 Studies of Society and Environment sourcebook modules that provide opportunities to develop numeracy skills prominently include —

* *Growing and changing: Individual identity*
* *Our island dream: Futures study*

and Level 2 Studies of Society and Environment modules include

* *Way to grow: Individual development*
* *Read all about it: Participating*
* *Eco-consumerism: Conserving the environment*
* *Our places: Local area and global environments*.

**4. Social and environmental inquiry**

Inquiry-based learning assists young learners to practise critical and creative thinking, problem solving and decision making in real-life and lifelike contexts. As ‘investigators’ of issues and topics meaningful to their lives, children begin to view themselves as active citizens who are able to assist in decision-making processes about their interactions in familiar settings. By being encouraged and supported to actively investigate concepts of key values (democratic process, social justice, economic and ecological sustainability and peace), and key processes in familiar contexts such as home and school, students learn how to reflect on their actions and those of others in the past and present to inform future decision making.

Part of this decision-making process involves learning how groups operate and how people can work together to promote social and environmental values. Inquiry learning assists young students to consider a variety of perspectives about an issue, and make balanced judgments about this knowledge when making decisions and taking possible action.

When learning through inquiry, children are assisted to develop skills that relate to:

* forming questions
* listening to and responding to others’ ideas and perspectives
* researching for relevant information
* sharing thoughts, ideas and feelings in a range of self-selected formats such as painting, drawing, construction (including box, paper, clay, blocks and roleplay)
* working with others on collective and small group real-life tasks (*cooperative learning* is a valuable strategy for maximising students’ learning from each other and practising social skills)
* acknowledging, respecting and valuing viewpoints of others about a range of issues and topics (*inclusive curriculum practices* that respect and value the diversity of perspectives and experiences children bring to learning experiences)
* considering other perspectives that challenge personal beliefs and values
* beginning to acknowledge dominant and marginalised groups — and develop awareness of aspects of *critical literacy* including stereotypes, biases and ‘silent voices’
* acting personally and collectively as a group on issues of relevance
* reflecting on actions personally and as a group on issues of relevance (*metacognition* — assisting young students to ‘learn how to learn’, to develop awareness of their knowledge and thinking processes and to take control of this thinking)
* assessing own and others’ participation and understanding about relevant issues and topics.

**5. Play**

Much has been researched and recorded about the way children learn through play, real-life situations, investigations, transitions and routines, and focused learning situations. The value of play environments in aiding young children’s learning and development is commonly known. Through types of play such as exploratory play, fantasy play, make believe play, free play, directed play and constructive play, children are able to enact their understandings of the world through interaction with others and materials around them. ‘Play is the fundamental medium for young children’s learning…it is a natural activity for children through which they make meaning of the world around them…play facilitates all development and is an ‘invaluable means for initiating, promoting and sustaining learning…’ (Moyles,1989 in ‘Preschool Curriculum Guidelines’, p. 30). Consult the ‘Preschool Curriculum Guidelines’ for more information about play.

Through inclusion of negotiated play activities in Years 1 to 10 Studies of Society and Environment Sourcebook Modules, students are encouraged to independently roleplay their understandings about concepts such as gender and work roles, environments (and elements within environments), and familiar settings natural, built and social environments reflective of the local community. The following table highlights specific Level 1, ‘Early Primary’ Years 1 to 10 Studies of Society and Environment Sourcebook Modules that use negotiated play as a prominent teaching and learning strategy.

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| **Level 1 Years 1 to 10 Studies of Society and Environment Sourcebook Module** | **Module description** | **Play context** |
| *Ready, set, go: Rights and responsibilities* | Students reflect on their personal abilities and limitations as they investigate relationships between rights and responsibilities in familiar social contexts. | * collaborate with students to set up a \*playspace that depicts a familiar, local community service centre * students enact understandings of gender and work roles of workers in community service occupations such as State Emergency Services, Ambulance and Bush Fire Brigade. |
| *Let’s get together: Families and needs* | Students explore family member roles, traditions and stereotypes to understand how families meet their needs. | * collaborate with students to set up a home corner playspace that encourages students to roleplay their understandings of work roles within families |
| *Whistle while you work: Working together* | Students self-reflect on sustainable and peaceful ways of relating to others in groups as they explore groups to which they belong and the attitudes and behaviours that help groups work. | * collaborate with students to create a playspace that depicts a workplace reflective of the local community such as fishing equipment hire stall or marketplace * students enact understandings of workplace roles |
| *Hideaway spaces, special places: Elements of the environment* | Students investigate their school environment to develop simple understandings of interconnectedness between humans and natural systems. | * collaborate with students to create a park environment indoors that reflects understandings about natural, built and social elements within this environment * students roleplay work roles associated with sustaining a park environment such as park ranger, guide and groundskeeper |
| *A world full of stories: Stories of diverse cultures* | Students explore stories from diverse cultures in various mediums to develop cultural understandings and share perceptions. | * collaborate with students to set up a story-telling playspace whereby students may independently tell stories that use a variety of modes and media — oral, dance, puppetry, sand, string and felt |
| *Our island dream: Futures study* | Students create an imaginary island and explore their personal abilities in dealing with geographical and social scenarios based on their island. | * create an ‘island setting’ playspace and roleplay their understandings of life on an island * assist students to understand interrelationships between natural, built and social elements of an island environment. |

\**Playspace* denotes only the *physical setting* – ensure that negotiations, discussions and reflections with students about their play highlight interactions between each other and materials in the playspace.

**6. Partnerships with parents/carers, Elders and the community**

Active and effective partnerships between home, school and the community benefit the ‘learning community’ in a range of ways:

* communicates a shared, clear focus of an outcomes approach to education
* provides regular communication about children’s holistic progress
* provides teaching staff with broader information about the child and other interpretations which may not have been previously considered
* incorporates a child-responsive focus to planning and implementing curriculum which acknowledges and reflects diversity of families, culture heritages and experiences of children
* incorporates participation by parents/carers, Elders and community members in class activities that involve inquiry into relevant local issues and topics
* develops mutual trust and respect, negotiation and protocol processes, and open communication between stakeholders in the ‘learning community’.

The Years 1 to 10 Studies of Society and Environment sourcebook modules incorporate active participation by parents/carers, Elders and community members in social and environmental inquiries undertaken by young students. In Level 1 Studies of Society and Environment sourcebook modules, *Let’s get together: Families and needs, Whistle while you work: Working together and A world full of stories: Stories of diverse cultures*, parents/carers, Elders and community members are invited to participate in information-sharing sessions that include creating a class quilt which each family has sewn to represent diversity of family experiences and heritages, sharing their experiences about work and changes observed from work in the past to that of today, and reading or telling stories from their childhood.

**7. Assessment techniques and strategies**

Young students’ demonstrations of learning outcomes should be assessed through a range of assessment techniques, which cater for the diversity of student learning styles and abilities. Consistent with this approach is the need to provide multiple opportunities in a range of meaningful, localised contexts for students to demonstrate learning outcomes.

Collecting evidence of students’ demonstrations of learning outcomes involves using developmentally appropriate assessment techniques such as:

* *observations* — anecdotal records, check lists
* *conferencing* — informal interviews, student and teacher conversations and records of interviews
* *work samples* — independent and directed students’ work samples that use a variety of media and consider students’ learning styles and abilities
* *performances and demonstrations* — free and directed play and planning and participating in real life events
* *folios* — collection of students’ self-selected and teacher-selected, annotated evidence of students’ demonstrations of learning outcomes using any of techniques listed above. By developing folios for students, effective tracking and monitoring of their progress may occur. This evidence may also be used during informal and formal moderation sessions to assist in making judgments about young children’s progress.

Discussions with young students about relevant core learning outcomes and what they are expected to be able ‘to know and do’ with what they know in developmentally appropriate language will assist in creation of negotiated learning contexts between teacher and students, and support children in taking responsibility for their own learning. Assessment opportunities and considerations have been detailed in each of the Years 1 to 10 Studies of Society and Environment Sourcebook Modules, as suggested advice for teachers.

For further information about assessment, consult the *Years 1 to 10 Studies of Society and Environment Syllabus* and *Years 1 to 10 Studies of Society and Environment Sourcebook Guidelines* and *Position and Guidelines on Assessment and Reporting for Years 1 to 10* on the Queensland School Curriculum Council website at www.qscc.qld.edu.au

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