Best practice in early childhood education

Western Teacher asked members in early childhood education (ECE) to share their thoughts about best practice in ECE. In this issue we hear from Applecross Primary School deputy principal Judith James (pictured right). own observations of learners.

We provide collaborative opportunities for year levels and the K-2 team alongside an expectation of informal interactions when required.

We have found that by respecting the experience of teachers in the face-to-face teaching environment and understanding the importance of observing individual children's learning experiences we are more effectively selecting the best strategies to improve every child's learning opportunities.

What is your teaching and school leader background?

I am currently a deputy principal at Applecross Primary School. I have been in this role for three and a half years. Prior to that I have worked in three other school as a deputy principal and before that as an early childhood teacher for over 20 years in schools across the state.

What does connected practice look like in your classroom or school?
Connected practice at Applecross Primary is a combination of common language and recognition of teachers' professional knowledge and judgement.

We encourage staff to meet with colleagues to discuss best practice, reflecting on expert research and their

How do you gather information about your class?

In Kindergarten and Pre-Primary we use a detailed survey to collect initial information about the child and their family.

In 2020 our early childhood leader took us on a journey to consider the difference between parent involvement and engagement.

As an outcome of these discussions, we are reviewing these surveys, updating the questions to gain more insight into the family perspective to learning and education, and providing versions of the survey for our Year 1 and 2 families too.

Following on from that decision we are also planning to offer individual parent- teacher chats rather than large year-level parent meetings.

We are hoping by meeting the parents individually we will be making them feel more comfortable to communicate with the teacher, learn more about the child and family and build a rapport that encourages an interest in how home and school can support each other to give the children the best chance at success.

How do you cater for the students interests in a balanced curriculum?

This has been one of the big challenges for early childhood teachers since the introduction of the Australian Curriculum, including Pre-Primary, although it has always been a challenge for the Year 1 and 2 teachers.

We continue to discuss this and try out our ideas. We have been on quite a journey in this regard at Applecross Primary School.

A few years ago we introduced the Walker Learning Approach, with Investigations four mornings a week.

While this provided opportunity for play- based experiences and children developed social and emotional skills, we found it difficult to really provide a balanced curriculum we were all happy with.

It did however provide the impetus for us to consider how we engage children in all of our learning experiences and that has led us to investigating how we can better integrate learning areas and use projects and inquiry to both cater for students'

interests and link learning to real life situations.

How would you describe best practice ECE?

Best practice in ECE caters across the Kindy to Year 2 phase of learning in our school.

We aim to provide a smooth transition across this phase from the home and preschool experiences into the rest of primary school.

Knowing each child and identifying their individual learning journey provides the foundation for helping them access the curriculum at the correct point.

Providing an indoor and outdoor learning environment that allows all children to be actively involved in their learning is also a key feature in best practice.

We have continued to modify classroom spaces and open up new outdoor learning spaces to create engaging opportunities for our children.

How do the EYLF or the NQS influence your practice?

The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and National Quality Standards (NQS) have provided a strong foundation for ECE, supporting what many teachers felt was important.

It provides a common language and support from the highest levels to encourage discussions among teachers.

It is important for us to come back to these documents as other influences can often sway our practice in the wrong direction.

Can you describe an example of integrated play-based learning in your classroom/ school?

One day I walked through the quadrangle to see all of the Year 1 children and their Year 5/6 buddies playing together!

The Year 1 children had been using the story of The Three Billy Goats Gruff to learn about narrative writing structure (cue the handmade puppets) and worked in pairs to build a bridge with junk materials (design technologies, collaborative learning).

First, they retold the story to their buddies but that wasn't the end. They collaborated with their buddies to create a new story with the same characters (creative thinking).

No doubt that this play-based learning had an impact on the learning of both the Year 1 and Year 5/6 students as they enjoyed themselves while taking risks and putting learning into action.

How does your school implement the EYLF and NQS?

The Kindergarten teachers use the Kindergarten Curriculum Guidelines (based on EYLF) for planning and reporting purposes.

As a K-2 team we review the NQS annually and make decisions on what are our focus areas for the year ahead.

We use the NQS Guidelines book to inspire discussions about a variety of topics that come up through the year.

It is important to go back to these documents when staff have differing opinions on some topics as it brings us back to a common understanding or guides us to investigate why our ideas differ.

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