Premier’s Early Childhood Education Council Early Childhood Scholarship

Talking Transition

Comparing Teaching Practices that are in Place in the Last Year of a Child’s Preschooling and the First Year of Primary School

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I am and have been an infants teacher my whole teaching career, which spans 30 years in several Sydney schools and a small infants school in central London. I returned to study Early Childhood Education at Macquarie University, gaining a Graduate Diploma in Early Childhood Studies in 2005. This study gave me a much greater insight into the life of a preschooler and the role of the educator in preparing children before entering ‘big school’.

Leading kindergarten over many years I have developed a deep interest in the developing the transition process for students coming into our school. I have long-standing relationships with local early childhood providers and their directors where communication is excellent; however, that communication was only functional at orientation times and when preparing classes for the following year.

Transition to school requires a strong relationship between educators, teachers and communities with a broader focus over a much longer time. Evidence suggests that children who have a positive start to school are likely to engage well and to experience ongoing academic and social success.

My aim was to develop an active network in Wahroonga, making links between neighbouring early childhood settings and school kindergarten staff to foster relationships and learn from each other’s teaching practices. Why should preschool and school be so different? Why can we not learn from each other and ensure our pedagogies are more like each other? Kindergarten staff must acknowledge children’s prior learning and provide opportunities for play-based experiences while moving into the more formal environment of a school setting.

Children learn best when they are responsible for their own learning. The classroom is organised for independence. The goal is for students to become self-managed learners who can take over the process for themselves. A centre-based designed environment in early years classrooms provides enhanced quality learning and allows children to have choices in their learning. According to the quality teaching framework, ‘Self-regulation enables (them) to achieve their goals… and contributes to their overall sense of agency.’ And ‘Children also develop a sense of agency when they are encouraged to choose their own activities.’ (Whitington, 2014)

*The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia’s* (EYLF) emphasis on learning through play also links the important role of the teacher in providing a balance between child-led, child-initiated and educated supported learning. (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009) Children need adult guidance to monitor of levels of engagement and learning; however, they can learn in environments where they can take risks and explore rather than being told most or all of the time what they should do. (Whitington, 2014)

Preschool educators do a wonderful job preparing our students to become independent, self-regulated learners. Children’s sense of agency is developed and encouraged in preschool, and that needs to be embraced and continued in kindergarten classrooms.

Therefore, the goal of my study tour was to examine and compare the teaching practices that are in place in the last year of a child’s preschooling and the first year of primary school. I wanted to speak with teachers who use centre-based learning and observe meaningful practice that is meeting students’ learning needs in literacy and numeracy. I wanted to compare the learning environments, flexible learning spaces, student choice of activities, methods of grouping students and systems of recording observed learning in both preschools and kindergarten classrooms.

The EYLF emphasises the importance of play-based learning in the early years and acknowledges the importance of language, communication, and social and emotional development as well as building skills in literacy and numeracy.My study aimed to make the links between the EYLF, the Literacy and Numeracy continuums and the quality teaching framework to ensure both educational settings are meeting individual student needs and monitoring student progress in literacy and numeracy through assessment for learning practices, quality explicit instruction and meaningful differentiated independent practices.

My Learning on Tour and Key Discoveries

*Denver, Colorado*

Whilst in Denver I met with Laura Dietert, a graduate research assistant at Denver University at The Marsico Institute for Early Learning and Literacy, where renowned researchers Douglas Clements and Julie Sarama have developed the research-based, interdisciplinary curriculum, Connect4Learning: The Pre-K Curriculum (C4L)- Early Childhood Education in the Context of Mathematics, Science and Literacy. Comprised of six units and 32 weeks of learning and centre lessons, C4L builds skills across all four domains of early learning (math, science, literacy, and social-emotional development.) After meeting the research team at the university, I then went on to Wheats Ridge Preschool to see first hand the C4L program in action.

I observed children naturally exploring and engaging with the content areas during their free play. I had the opportunity to talk with the centre director about the impact of the C4L Building Blocks curriculum and the professional learning it provides educators, particularly the support teachers who are not formally trained.

Douglas Clements states on the C4L website, ‘Children are ready and eager to learn, but many early childhood educators are not equally prepared to engage them in the rich math and science experiences needed to lay the groundwork for later success in school and career. What’s more, this lack of meaningful math and science instruction in the preschool years means that school readiness in these important domains, particularly among underserved populations, is unlikely to improve.’

One of the highlights of the study trip was my day in Boulder, Colorado, at The Boulder Journey School, a privately owned school catering for over 250 children from infants to Pre-K. Alex Cruickshank (Study Program Coordinator) and Alison Maher (Education Director) tailored my visit perfectly in line with my study tour. The philosophy and pedagogy of this beautiful school are inspired by schools in Reggio Emilia, Italy, where it is well known that ‘the environment as the third teacher’.

The Boulder Journey School is an explosion of colour, creativity and imagination throughout the classrooms, studio, theatre, hallways and outdoors. Evidence of student learning through project based experiences and intentional provocations; detailed documentation and parent involvement is everywhere. Classrooms are highly stimulating and student centred. Each room has a ‘studio’ space, and with an artist in residence program the centre is vibrant and inviting. After meeting with the Pre-K teacher to discuss their transition to school practice, or Elementary Week, I was struck with the reality of how quality prior-to-school pedagogies like those at Boulder Journey School and our kindergarten classrooms can be so polarising.

I came away totally inspired by so many practices, particularly ‘loose parts’. The theory of “loose parts” first proposed by architect Simon Nicholson in the 1970's has begun to influence child-play experts and the people who design play spaces for children. Nicholson believed that it is the 'loose parts' in our environment that will empower our creativity. In a play, loose parts are materials that can be moved, carried, combined, redesigned, lined up, and taken apart and put back together in multiple ways. They are materials with no specific set of directions that can be used alone or combined with other materials.

As soon as I returned to Wahroonga Public School, I set up a loose parts room for kindergarten as an element of our STEAM program. (STEAM is an educational approach to learning that uses Science, Technology, Engineering, the Arts and Mathematics as access points for guiding student inquiry, dialogue, and critical thinking.)

*Houston, Texas*

During my week-long stay in Houston, I visited eight schools and one government educational agency. I chose to come to Houston to see firsthand how learning centres are used successfully in United States schools.

Donna Boucher, a mathematics instructional coach and intervention teacher in the Katy Independent School District (ISD) gave me the opportunity to meet instructional coaches, teachers and students in Pre-K to Year 4 classrooms. Maths instructional coaches have a dual role of teaching and leading the professional learning within the school, much like instructional leaders in the NSW Early Action for Success Schools program. Through my observations and discussion with teachers I was able to learn how teachers planned activities, organised and displayed student groupings and collected evidence of learning. The class teacher explicitly instructs differentiated concepts to a small group of students, whilst the remainder of the class are working independently in small groups on a variety of activities at ‘stations’ around the room. Together we discussed and compared our goals of meeting curriculum expectations – the US Common Core Standards and the Texas Expected Knowledge & Skills with the NSW Numeracy Continuums and Targeted Early Numeracy benchmarks.

I was fortunate to spend time with Debbie Diller visiting three Houston ISD schools to see literacy stations in action at schools she has been mentoring. Debbie Diller is an independent consultant and the author of eight books, most recently *Growing Independent Learners: From Literacy Standards to Stations K–3*. It was truly an honour to see Debbie teach in a Year 1 classroom and see students move and choose stations independently. Driving between schools we were able to reflect and discuss the journey that has bought her to this point in her career. I was able to make many links to common practices in NSW schools in literacy instruction, particularly to Language, Learning and Literacy (L3).

Debbie states, ‘All children can learn to work independently of the teacher. It is the teacher’s responsibility to create a setting in which children can work independently.’ She also said, ‘To help children become independent, teachers must release responsibility and control to them over time.’ Many teachers are reluctant to move from whole class instruction to small group work for the fear of losing the control. But with time, establishing expectations and routines, focusing on the purpose of the independent learning activities, and balancing the process over products will lead to successful group work. Classroom environments need to be organsied and resources accessible and the teacher needs to model how to work in small groups for workstations to be successful. I saw evidence to this working successfully in all the schools I visited.

I wished to investigate an initiative in Texas very similar to the Best Start Assessment in New South Wales. This was The Texas School Ready (TSR) project, which is implemented by the State Centre for Early Childhood Development, the Children’s Learning Institute at the University of Texas Health Sciences (IES), National Institutes of Health and the US Department of Education to prioritise school readiness for disadvantaged children in Texas. TSR serves a population of at-risk children through public pre-kindergarten and Head Start programs, as well as a mixed population in private child care centres and home-based providers (similar to Family Day Care in Australia).

Fewer than half of students in Head Start and public school programs are meeting related benchmarks for vocabulary and letter naming at the beginning of their pre-K programs.

TSR is a comprehensive preschool teacher-training program that combines a research-based, state-adopted curriculum with ongoing professional development and progress monitoring tools. During the 2013–2014 school year approximately 25,000 students completed assessment in English and 4,200 students in Spanish. Many of the staff in pre-K settings are not trained teachers and this professional learning program gives them the skills and the recognition as trained educators.

TSR staff member Jennifer and I discussed similarities and differences between the Children’s Learning Institute’s-Engage tools and NSW’s Best Start and PLAN platforms. The major difference was our professional development and coaching are not built into online tools alongside PLAN. Our assessments cover similar domains, such as Rapid Letter Naming, Rapid Vocabulary Naming, Letter-Sound Correspondence, Phonological Awareness, Book and Print Knowledge, Story Retell & Comprehension, Speech Production & Sentence Skills, Motivation to Read and Early Writing. Teachers use information from the progress monitoring system to inform instructional decision-making for group and individual lesson planning and to produce reports for teachers and parents

Jennifer then took me to the Rhodes School in East Houston to meet a TSR facilitator and see its implementation. I saw literacy and numeracy embedded into play-based learning in centres thought out the classrooms. The teacher’s role was facilitator, interacting with children to enhance language acquisition and deepen concept understanding. The children were free to choose stations and move from activity to activity with the understanding of how many children are allowed at each centre. They cleverly had a system of using name cards to ‘check in’ and ‘check out’ of centres to keep numbers at each centre at a workable three or four.

*Seattle, Washington*

Hilltop Children’s Centre is a well known and highly publish early child centre that was established in 1971, and moved to a purpose-built space in 2008. In the new centre they were able to incorporate architectural elements such as glass peek-a-boo windows, Reggio Emilia inspired studio spaces adjacent to classrooms, a community studio, a faculty workroom with shared resources, a conference room for meetings with parents and educators, a ‘big body’ room for indoor active play and an outdoor play space located along the shipping canal.

Hilltop uses a responsive curriculum. A ball toss analogy was used to describe the to and fro of child and educator instigations and planning. Emergent curriculum projects grow through many opportunities for children to represent, reflect on, and think critically about what they know. Child-led investigations may last an hour, a day, a week, or may develop into an in-depth investigations that spans several months. In this kind of responsive curriculum, children’s enthusiasm fuels the learning process, while educators offer provocations and activities to extend the children’s work, describe the work through pedagogical documentation and learning stories, and gather parent perspectives on their children’s experiences.

Educators at Hilltop spend time in reflective teaching practices:

* + planning the environment for learning
  + observing as children play and interact with each other
  + designing curriculum based on their observations

I spent the day observing children, teachers and their interactions, reading documentation and engaging in discussions with teachers. Before departing I sat with the pre-K teacher, enquiring about transition practices in the centre. I found this was not a focus of the school as many children will go on to attend many different schools. They occasionally are asked by independent schools to complete a questionnaire; however, they do not formally make changes to their routines to prepare students for the transition. One interesting fact is many students return to the centre from their primary schools for their after-school care and their vacation care program called Big Kids. Big Kids are asked to be leaders, whether in small ways by checking in with their friends to make decisions about what the group wants to do or in larger ways by initiating a long-term project that may involve many members of the community. I was able to see this in action, as it was Spring Break that week.

Visiting Hilltop was a valuable experience to see more examples of student choice and self-directed learning opportunities in pre-K, and the follow through with Big Kids returning as students from kindergarten to Year 5 successfully integrated and engaged through the same learning opportunities and teaching practices.

*San Francisco, California*

While in San Francisco I attended four days of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) conference. I attended workshops and keynotes of mathematics researchers and educators I have read and used in professional learning for many years. Keynote presentations by Dan Meyer and Jo Boaler were inspiring. Jo Boaler’s work on growth mindset in mathematics had me reflecting on the power of quality feed back to students in our classrooms. The conference also coincided with the release of her paper, ‘Why Kids Should Use Fingers in Maths’, a topic often discussed in Targeted Early Numeracy training.

Other presentations I attended were by James Burnett (Origo, Australia), Jessica Shumway (Utah, USA) on using number lines for number sense and problem solving, Kathy Richardson (USA), Kristin Hilty (USA), Marilyn Burns (USA), Jane and John Felling (Box Cars and One Eye Jacks, Alberta, Canada) and Stuart Murphy ( Boston USA). The highlights were meeting Marilyn Burns and Dan Meyer; however, having conversations after the presentations by Sherry Parrish and Doug Clements were the most influential to this study. Doug Clements and Karen Fuson presented a session on the developmentally appropriateness of early mathematics, discussing mathematical competencies in preschoolers and kindergarten students. Much was linked to the Common Core and Doug gave evidence of how young children can learn mathematics concepts through play and intentional learning opportunities.

I have always been passionate about allowing students time to articulate their mathematical understanding during lessons. I had the immense pleasure to hear and meet Sherry Parish, author of *Number Talks: Building Mental Maths for Computation Strategies*. The book assists teachers to use her number talks to build accuracy, flexibility and efficiency. Since that workshop I have reflected on the session and presented number talks at the NSW Mathematics and Numeracy Conference K–12 in August 2016 and will again at the Mathematical Association of New South Wales, Primary Association for Mathematics in April 2017.

*Boston, Massachusetts*

My last stop was Leslie College at Harvard University, Cambridge, to see Irene Fontus and discuss the work of the Centre for Reading Recovery & Literacy Collaborative, an initiative to build capacity through professional learning and in class mentor support for improving literacy achievements for all students. The rigorous curriculum is based on a comprehensive language and literacy framework written by Gay Su Pinnell and Irene Fontus that includes a wide range of individual, small group and large group reading, writing and word-study activities guided by ongoing assessment.

The foundation of the model is long-term professional development provided in schools. School-based literacy coaches are trained in the curriculum, provided with ongoing professional development as they continual implement research-based approaches in their own classrooms, and supported as they provide on-site training for the teachers and principals in their schools. I visited one of their students, Mark Johnson, at his centre, Shattuck Preschool in Jamaica Plain. Literacy coaches have a similar role to NSW L3 trainers. Literacy coaches are expected to teach the literacy block in one classroom in their school. They videotape teaching, and complete assigned readings, case study assignments, and reflection papers. They also provides in-school professional development to teachers. During a literacy coaches’ first year, they receive two visits at their schools from a Lesley University faculty member.

*Sydney, Australia*

Since my return I have concentrated on developing the local network between the prior-to-school centres and Wahroonga Public School. After a learning walk with the directors from two centres, KU Wahroonga and Beehive Childcare, to John Brotche Nursery School, the talking transition project began. A loose parts room, inspired by Boulder Journey School in Denver, has been set up at Wahroonga. I ran a professional learning session for kindergarten teachers and sent information to parents to ask assistance for its resourcing and links to the STEAM focus at Wahroonga Public School.

The inaugural Talking Transition network meeting was held at Wahroonga Public School in September 2016, attended by 14 prior-to- school educators to hear from kindergarten teachers how Best Start assessment influences kindergarten classroom practices. I received very favourable feedback, with a unanimous decision to make these sharing sessions a regular event in 2017. Other local kindergarten staff from the Department of Education and from Catholic and independent schools will be invited to the subsequent sessions now that the network is established. Our next session will be at Turramurra Pymble Preschool, where kindergarten teachers will hear about the Early Learning Years Framework.

Opportunities to visit each others’ settings have been organised to support transition of students. Kindergarten teachers have each visited a different preschool and read a ‘coming to school’ book and met the staff and children. Preschool staff will visit our school in the first weeks of kindergarten in 2017 to observe morning routines and classroom activities to assist their knowledge of Early Stage One pedagogies.

Conclusion

Learning Environments are one of the eight key practices contained in the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF). ‘An active learning environment is one in which children are encouraged to explore and interact with the environment to make meaning and knowledge through their experiences, social interactions and negotiations with others.’ (EYLF, p. 45)

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*The most powerful mathematics for a pre-schooler is usually not acquired while siting down in a group lesson but is brought forth by the teacher from the child’s own self-directed, intrinsically motivated activity.*

— David Clements, 2001

*Don’t do for the child what the child can do for himself.*

— Marie Clay, 1994