



## Case study

# Ithaca Creek State School

Ithaca Creek is a medium-sized Independent Public School located in Bardon, an inner-western suburb of Brisbane. It was established in 1885 and has multi-age classrooms for children from Year 1 to Year 6. Most children enrolled in the four Prep classes live in neighbouring suburbs with high socio-economic profiles. More than 70% of the school population is in the top quartile of the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) (2014).

### Taking action

The recent Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) data showed increasing numbers (24.6%) of Ithaca Creek Prep children were considered vulnerable or at risk in the developmental area of communication and general knowledge. In addition, the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results indicated that children's achievement in writing in Year 5 was below similar schools. Recognising that written language is essential for children to communicate their ideas and emotions and participate in the learning process, the school leaders and teachers decided that improvement in writing should be a school focus, starting with an action research plan for Prep.

Initially, teachers investigated how children felt about writing and recorded their comments. Children's comments were varied with one, for example, thinking it was hard; another saying it was boring; and a third indicating that he loved writing because when he was finished he got to illustrate it. The teachers set about improving children's disposition to writing by considering how they could make writing experiences more playful, agentic and responsive, and by embedding these three characteristics of effective age-appropriate pedagogies in their practice.

Name:	Date:	
<i>How I feel about writing.</i>		
		
Comment (if required):		



### Creating change

The school leaders provided opportunities for the teachers to lead the practice change and take agency in their professional learning. They provided uninterrupted blocks of time off-campus for teachers to develop a shared understanding of the characteristics of age-appropriate pedagogies and to explore ways to implement them in the teaching of writing. Teachers were encouraged to visit other schools to observe the various ways that writing was taught and incorporated into classroom programs. On their return, they had others observe their practice to take note of learning experiences that already contained elements of the identified characteristics and to find additional opportunities to incorporate them.

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Next teachers set about embedding age-appropriate pedagogies in their classroom practice. They encouraged children to continue to use play sessions (referred to as developmental play) to pursue individual and collective interests, and to be creative and imaginative. Within these sessions, teachers:

- led pre-play discussions that involved children planning what they were going to do;
- engaged playfully in activities with children taking on a variety of roles including that of guide, facilitator and director;
- introduced opportunities to write during play;
- hosted after-play discussions encouraging children to reflect on and write about their activities and their learning;
- scaffolded children's writing within classroom projects and science inquiries; and
- used stories, events, puppet play and miniature world play as stimuli for writing.

## Initial findings

After six months, children were asked again how they felt about writing. A comparison with earlier responses indicated that there had been a shift of attitude with many children having a more positive disposition towards writing, expressing intrinsic motivation to write and metacognitive



awareness of how to become a better writer. An increase in frequency of children's spontaneous and self-planned purposeful writing in classrooms was reported along with evidence of increased confidence, tenacity, resilience, engagement, and ability to write. The importance of providing children opportunities for agency in relation to their writing was reinforced by a child who commented, 'I like writing ... when it is about something I am interested in.' In relation to being responsive to children in writing activities, one teacher commented, 'If you listen to children, it becomes apparent what they need to learn.' However, a good understanding of the Australian Curriculum was required to be able to support children in the next step of their learning, at times beyond curriculum expectations for Prep.

## Challenges

The main challenge for both leader and teachers related to the inflexible assessment framework that the school had in place. They acknowledged that age-appropriate learning experiences require age-appropriate assessment opportunities. This means providing Prep children with multiple opportunities to demonstrate what they know and can do over time, and knowing that the evidence of this learning may take a variety of forms, including oral, written, embodied and created artefacts. Teachers need to develop expertise in making judgements based on a variety of evidence supported by guides to making judgements and justify these decisions in moderation sessions supported by evidence.

## Future plans

Future plans will continue to focus on the teaching of writing and building children's writing capabilities. To this end they are developing an induction process for new Prep teachers to understand the implications of age-appropriate pedagogies and will strategically place two of the current Prep teachers in multi-age classes to progress the implementation of age-appropriate pedagogies in the school. The review and modification of existing planning and assessment frameworks that respond to age-appropriate pedagogies will also be a focus.