



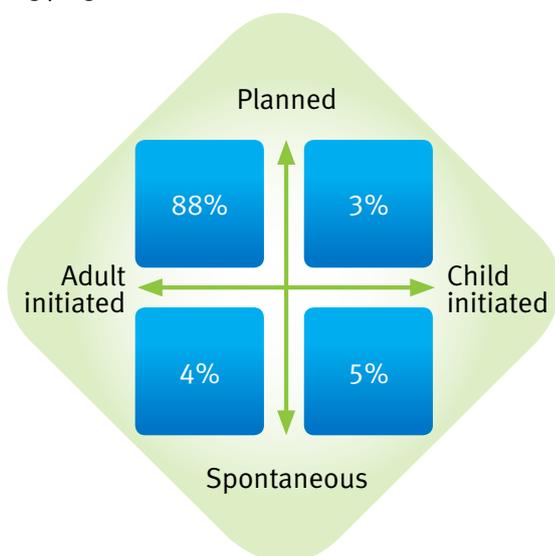
Case study

Nundah State School

Nundah State School is a large metropolitan school located in a northern suburb of Brisbane. The school, established in 1865 on its current site, is one of the oldest schools in Queensland. The school has five Prep classes within a stable, whole school enrolment of approximately 700 children. More than 70% of the school population is in the top two quartiles of the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) (2014). A third of the school community speak English as an additional language or dialect.

Taking action

Nundah State School audited their teaching practices and realised that 88% or more of their pedagogies were teacher planned and initiated; whilst less than 5% were child planned and/or initiated. There was little opportunity for spontaneous teaching and learning. Teachers had been concerned for some time that their approaches to teaching the curriculum were not sufficiently engaging children or meeting all their needs. Consequently, the Prep team developed an action plan, which set out how they would achieve a balance between adult-initiated and child-initiated learning experiences. They also planned to provide opportunities for spontaneous learning as a way of engaging children. This would be done whilst maintaining rigour in the teaching of the curriculum, and maintaining children's learning progress.



Creating change

Teachers framed the action plan around four Cs (curious, creative, collaborative and courageous) and collaboratively planned to embed the 11 characteristics of age-appropriate pedagogies into their classroom practices using a blend of inquiry and project approaches. For example, one class engaged in problem-solving, research and discussion as they created a classroom zoo. As part of this work they considered the needs of animals in the habitats they constructed. Another class co-designed a new playground, mapping existing topographical features, documenting environmental factors that needed to be considered, and imagining an ideal playground space for themselves and their peers. Children developed a report with drawings for the architect so that their ideas could be incorporated.



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As the inquiry projects progressed, teachers met regularly to reflect on their progress. They realised that established processes in teaching and learning had caused the Prep children to become reliant on teachers and other adults for decision-making, and reluctant to take initiative or risks in their learning. Some children exhibited avoidance behaviour, claiming a “sore tummy” or a headache when activities were challenging, new, or in areas where they did not feel confident.

As changes were implemented, children were at first confused when offered choices in relation to the way they might engage and demonstrate their learning. Teachers noted they needed to re-teach the children how to ask questions and make their own decisions. One commented that she assisted this by “stepping back”, realising that children did not need her constant input which may have made them more anxious to achieve rather than to focus on setting and achieving their own goals. Others introduced Six Thinking Hats (de Bono, 1985) in structured, inquiry-based learning experiences, in order to scaffold and encourage children to think “outside the box” and problem solve.

Initial findings

Over time, the teachers found it easier to embed the characteristics in their practice and children responded very positively to the changes in the classroom climate. The teachers and the school leaders noticed higher levels of engagement and a much greater capacity for collaboration and positive relationships amongst children, and between children and their teachers. One teacher commented that they noticed that the children respond better to explicit and structured work when there is a balance throughout the day. The children no longer used avoidance strategies because they were so engaged in activities. Children were also reported as retaining knowledge over time and gaining deeper understandings in science, evident in improved science results from Semester 1 to Semester 2.

Challenges

Teachers from Nundah found moving from an established mindset and curriculum decision-making model challenging. One teacher found making time to engage children in extended conversation a challenge. However, she quickly realised the value in doing so when she noticed an improvement in her relationship with children and their willingness to participate generally. The teachers indicated that it is important for relief teachers and teacher-aides to “be on the same page” also, in understanding and implementing the approach to achieve consistency and continuity.



Future plans

Future plans will focus on the essential life-long learner skills that children need to be successful. What these look like within the Australian Curriculum and how the curriculum can be re-framed within classrooms to create different but authentic contexts for learning and teaching is required. The next stage will also focus on documentation and reporting on children’s learning and progress in age-appropriate ways, including providing children multiple opportunities and multiple ways to demonstrate what they have learned.