Introducing a Preparatory Year – an opportunity for pedagogical renewal from P to 3

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Background
A fundamental change to schooling is taking place in a state with a very strong and vocal early childhood community. Prep has been offered before in Queensland schools and a two year preparatory program was discontinued in 1953. Since that time, pre-year one programs have been either preschool or kindergarten programs offered in state, and non-state preschools, community kindergartens and community and private childcare. In recent years, some independent and Catholic schools have introduced a full time Prep program, sometimes in place of a preschool program.

The state preschool program offered across Queensland was introduced in 1974. As a result of the program, a strong early childhood community of academics, teachers and parents has developed. Preschool and kindergarten have been seen as providing quality, child-centred programs for young children. Early childhood educators have generally viewed Year One programs as formal and the transition from preschool to Year One has been one of discontinuity of curriculum and pedagogy. Although some teachers create a negotiated curriculum with their children that continues to promote learning across a range of domains, the traditional approach in Year One has been a formal learning program with a heavy emphasis on early literacy and numeracy learning, and a lesser focus on the other key learning areas, even when both preschool and Year 1 are on the one campus.

The context of recent changes
In 1996, work began on developing new syllabuses for the common curriculum for the compulsory years of schooling. The eight nationally agreed key learning areas comprise this common curriculum. The Queensland syllabuses describe core learning outcomes for students at six levels along a learning continuum. These syllabuses introduced the concept of preparing students to be lifelong learners and the attributes of a lifelong learner are described in each syllabus. Lifelong learners are:

- knowledgeable persons, with deep understandings
- complex thinkers
- creative persons
- active investigators
- effective communicators
- participants in an interdependent world
- reflective and self-directed learners.
The focus on educating for lifelong learning has been taken up by school communities with some schools using the attributes as organisers for the school curriculum framework.

Another construct that contributes to curriculum coherence across the key learning areas is the notion of cross-curricular priorities. Four priorities have been identified and each key learning area contributes in its own way to the cross-curricular priorities that contribute reciprocally to the key learning areas. The cross-curricular priorities are:

- literacy
- numeracy
- lifeskills (personal development skills, social skills, self-management skills and citizenship skills)
- futures perspective.

At the same time as work began on the key learning area syllabuses, the Preschool Curriculum Guidelines was developed for use in schools’ preschool centres, community kindergartens and child-care centres. This guidelines document also used the attributes of a lifelong learner and the cross-curricular priorities as part of its framework. It identified five key components that provide the basis of an effective preschool curriculum — Understanding children, Building partnerships, Establishing flexible learning environments, Supporting play and Exploring content through the Foundation learning areas of Thinking, Communicating, Sense of self and others, Health and physical understanding, Social living and learning, Cultural understanding, and Understanding environments.

While the Queensland School Curriculum Council (later amalgamated into the Queensland Studies Authority) was working on the key learning area syllabuses, Education Queensland began trialing the New Basics as curriculum organisers with 38 schools. These organisers are Life pathways and social futures, Multiliteracies and communications media, Active citizenship, and Environments and technologies. These organisers have similarities to the foundation learning areas in the Preschool Curriculum Guidelines as well as to the attributes of a lifelong learner in the P-10 syllabuses. Another Education Queensland initiative introduced as a focus for curriculum reform in all Government schools was the construct of Productive Pedagogies. The attributes of productive pedagogy are clustered into four groups — Intellectual quality, Connectedness, Supportive classroom environment and Recognition of difference. Another priority established for Government schools was the development of an assessment culture.

Early in 2002, the Queensland Government released Queensland the Smart State — Education and Training Reforms for the Future, a package of proposed education and training reforms spanning the early, middle and senior phases of schooling.
A major component of this reform agenda is the Preparing for School trial which commenced in 2003. Under consideration is the conversion of the current state provision of a year of part-time preschool education for children aged 4 by 1 January to a full-time, universally available, Preparatory Year for children aged five by June 30 (i.e. six months older than the current preschool education cohort). This proposed Preparatory Year would be non-compulsory. Preschool education would continue to be provided in community kindergarten and child care settings, for preschool-aged children who are ineligible for the Preparatory Year.

The Preparing for School trial is overseen by Education Queensland’s Early Childhood Education Unit, with the Queensland Studies Authority being responsible for the development of a curriculum for the early years. The curriculum will incorporate an Early Learning and Development Framework that can be used by teachers to guide their monitoring of children's progress and preparedness for Year 1 - that is, their 'school readiness'. The draft curriculum will be used by teachers in the 64 Preparing for School trial sites over the next three years. The first group of 39 state, Catholic and independent schools began the trial in January 2003, using the draft Early Years Curriculum Guidelines. Staff from these schools participated in a professional development program in October 2002, to inform their planning for the introduction of a Preparatory Year. A second group of 25 trial schools will join the trial in 2004. The Early Learning and Development Framework will be developed in collaboration with trial schools, using an action research process.

A consortium of Queensland Universities has been contracted to evaluate the trials. This external evaluation will provide information on the key critical factors and their impact on the successful provision of a full-time preparatory year of schooling as well as information on the learning outcomes for children. Parents, teachers, administrators and children will be involved in the data gathering. This evaluation will inform the Government’s decision about the introduction of a Preparatory Year.

Developing the Early Years Curriculum Consultation
The draft Early Years Curriculum Guidelines has been informed by extensive consultation. An external reference group was established in 2002. The Reference Group has provided ongoing advice to the project team during the development of the draft curriculum. It is composed of representatives of education authorities, teachers' unions, principals' associations, tertiary education and early childhood professional associations. An electronic consultative network has provided regular feedback on sections of the document as it was developed. Currently there are close to 700 members of this network. Network members receive electronic copies of draft documents so that they can provide feedback to the writing team. Interested people are invited to join the consultative network to assist with the further development of draft materials. An electronic registration form can be accessed through the Queensland Studies Authority website: www.qsa.qld.edu.au Consultation
through other channels with teachers, parents and academics also assisted the development of the draft curriculum materials.

The research base
The Early Years Curriculum Guidelines was developed against a background of contested perspectives on appropriate curriculum for a preparatory year. The strong early childhood community forecast a ‘too much too soon’ approach of direct instruction while some senior executives believed the formal teaching of literacy was an imperative.

The curriculum project team drew heavily on the current research in the area of early childhood education to inform the writing of the curriculum and assessment framework. The scan of national and international research included longitudinal studies, international reviews of early years curriculum, brain research, critical analysis of programs, indicators of readiness and successful transitions between settings. Only a few of these studies can be reported on in this paper.

The most significant of the longitudinal studies to the project was that by Schweinart and Weikart (1998) assessing the relative effects of the High/Scope, Direct Instruction and traditional nursery school preschool curriculum models. The study presents the long-term benefits of a child-initiated, teacher-facilitated curriculum on the economic and social outcomes for children. Participants in all three models were followed throughout childhood and adolescence with the last comparison completed at age 23. At this age, the High/Scope and Nursery school groups had significantly fewer numbers ever treated for emotional disturbance or arrested for crimes. 70% of the High/Scope group intended to graduate from college compared to 36% of the Direct Instruction group. Other comparisons were favourable to the High/Scope and Nursery education curriculum models, with the overall conclusion that the Direct Instruction group believed that the locus of control over their lives lay outside themselves. The other groups were more likely to accept responsibility for their actions and to collaborate with others.

The burgeoning field of neuroscience elaborated the importance on brain development of children learning through all sensory pathways. The Early Years Study (McCain & Fraser Mustard, 1999), stresses the vital role of play-based problem solving with other children on a child’s brain development and the value of involvement of parents as partners in learning programs.

A number of reviews of early childhood curriculum were analysed to confirm the adoption of a curriculum focused on active, enquiry based learning. The international review by Bertram and Pascal (2002) of the early years curriculum in 20 countries presented some important considerations for curriculum developers. These included:

- the almost universal promotion of an active, play based pedagogy with the encouragement of self-management and independence
- an emphasis on collaborative peer-learning
• the role of the adult to support, scaffold and facilitate rather than to overly direct. (p 2).

It is interesting to note that only three of the 20 countries emphasised early literacy and numeracy within the ECEC curriculum. Curriculum guidelines generally did not promote the linear progression of disciplines but focused on more integrated organisers. Continuity of experience from setting to setting was also stressed as important.

Prepared for school
Since the Minister for Education had requested the development of a ‘Learning and Development Framework to report on each child’s readiness for Year One’, considerable time was spent in identifying what made children ready for school. Although there was some consensus that Year One should be ready for the children that arrived, there was much consultation and research on what made children ready to learn in the school setting. The National Goals Project in the United States proved a useful starting point with the report from the Goal One Technical Planning Group on the dimensions of learning that enable children to enter school ready to succeed. (NEGP, 1991 b) These dimensions of success are described as:

• physical well-being and motor development
• social and emotional development
• approaches toward learning;
• language development
• cognition and general knowledge.

After further analysis of important dimensions of learning, the Early Years project team adopted the following as dimensions of success for use in the curriculum guidelines:

• social and emotional competence with a focus on social learning and independence
• health and physical wellbeing, particularly in making healthy choices and gross and fine motor development
• language development and communication focusing on oral language and early literacy
• early mathematical understandings with emphasis on early numeracy
• active learning processes with a focus on thinking, investigating, and imagining and responding
• positive dispositions to learning.

Building continuities
An important aim of the Preparatory Year is to build continuities between children’s prior experiences and their future learning in schooling contexts (Dockett & Perry, 2001). As children make the transition into preparatory settings, and later as they move into compulsory school, they need well-planned support. Preparatory settings can help to establish continuities between children’s diverse prior learning experiences and future learning by:
• building continuities in curriculum
• establishing positive relationships
• valuing and expanding the diversity of cultural resources that children have developed
• managing transition processes between settings.

The draft Early Years Curriculum Guidelines therefore builds on children’s learning in their families and communities and on their preschool and child care experiences and at the same time provides a foundation for the key learning areas in Years 1 to 10.

Curriculum decision-making
Curriculum decision-making is at the centre of the draft Early Years Curriculum Guidelines. The discussion of decision-making draws on a socially critical perspective of curriculum enactment. It recognises that curriculum decisions are made within multiple, interrelated contexts. For example, organisational, community and personal contexts are situated within and affected by broader historical, social, cultural, economic, and political contexts. These contexts may result in tensions between competing agendas and priorities that impact on decision-making. The decisions that are made as these competing demands are negotiated can have an effect on:
• what becomes accepted as high-quality curriculum
• how teachers categorise and talk about curriculum, children, learning, and teaching and assessment
• what becomes included and excluded within the curriculum.

It is essential that teachers recognise that they share responsibility for curriculum decision-making with other partners. Teachers are encouraged to reflect on the contextual demands and personal perspectives that help form their own and partners’ views and that may cause tensions between partners. Teachers play a pivotal role in building relationships and supporting partners including children, parents and other staff in the process of making informed decisions about preparatory curriculum.

In preparatory settings, decision-making involves four interactive processes:
• planning for learning, teaching and assessment
• interacting in the learning environments and learning contexts to promote and monitor learning
• monitoring and assessing children’s learning
• reflecting on learning, teaching and assessment practices and underlying assumptions.

Decision-making is a dynamic, non-linear and integrated process that involves consideration of the five key components of an early years curriculum.
The five key components of the draft Early Years Curriculum Guidelines promote the consideration of five key components as teachers make curriculum decisions. These components are closely related to those in the Preschool Curriculum Guidelines and are:

- Understanding children
- Building partnerships
- Establishing flexible learning environments
- Creating contexts for learning
- Exploring what children learn.

The focus of each of these components is described in the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key component</th>
<th>Brief description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding children</td>
<td>Discusses characteristics of young learners and ways that teachers develop understandings about children’s prior experiences and respond to diversity including:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The following table describes the relationship between the indicators of preparedness for school, identified in the reviewed research, and the early years learning areas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicators of preparedness for school</th>
<th>Specific focus within the early years learning areas</th>
<th>Related early years learning areas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social and emotional competence</td>
<td>Social learning Independence</td>
<td>Sense of self and others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and physical well-being</td>
<td>Making healthy choices</td>
<td>Sense of self and others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language development and communication</td>
<td>Oral language Early literacy</td>
<td>Communicating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early mathematical understandings</td>
<td>Early numeracy</td>
<td>Investigating and understanding environments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active learning processes</td>
<td>Thinking Investigating Imagining and responding</td>
<td>Investigating and understanding environments</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Through the early years learning areas, the draft Early Years Curriculum Guidelines builds on the current Preschool Curriculum Guidelines and provides a foundation for the core learning outcomes of the key learning areas in the Years 1 to 10 curriculum.
The draft Early Learning and Development Framework
The writing brief for the Early Years Curriculum required it to include an Early Learning and Development Framework. The intention of this framework is to help teachers:

• plan for, monitor and make judgments about children’s learning in partnership with others
• build an overall picture of a child’s learning and development as they make the transition to Year 1.

The draft Learning and Development Framework is informed by the curriculum decisions teachers make, and the curriculum they develop, in relation to the learning statements from the early years learning areas. The central components of the Learning and Development Framework are learning statements, the individual folio and the early learning record.

A continuum of learning using four phases- Becoming Aware, Exploring, Making Connections and Applying is used to describe children’s progress against each learning statement. This continuum is being written to lead to Level I of the key learning area syllabuses. This allows the ELADF to continue to be used in Year One to monitor children’s progress.

During 2003, the Project Team has been involved in an action research project with trial teachers to inform the writing of the phase descriptions for each of the early years learning areas. Using information from individual folios, teachers wrote descriptions about four children’s learning in two focus areas of the ELADF and identified the learning phase they thought best fitted their description of each child. These descriptions have been collated and analysed and are being used in the writing of the phase descriptions. These will be trialled by teachers in fourth term for reporting on children’s progress.

Key messages about the pedagogy of the Early Years Curriculum
Interwoven throughout the draft curriculum document are a number of key messages — the importance of:

• developing positive relationships
• acknowledging and building on prior knowledge
• negotiating the curriculum
• involving children in planning and reflection
• monitoring learning as part of teaching
• teacher interactions
• using appropriate teaching-learning contexts
• holistic curriculum.

Developing positive relationships
Relationships are central to the construction of a community of active, cooperative learners in preparatory settings. Strong, positive relationships are
established through mutual interest, trust and care for each other, and the
teacher plays an active role in establishing and maintaining these
relationships. While positive relationships between teacher and children are
essential, they need to also include parents/carers and respected community
members such as Elders.

Acknowledging and building on prior knowledge
As active constructors of their own understandings, children draw on their
prior experiences to help them make sense of current experiences. Teachers
assist by acknowledging the variations in children’s prior knowledge and
providing a variety of learning opportunities that can form links to particular
children’s past experiences and understandings. They help children to build
connections between home, community and new experiences and situations
in the classroom. They reflect with children on what has been learnt and the
connections with other experiences.

Negotiating the curriculum
Children are capable young people who are able to take part purposefully in,
and contribute to, various learning contexts. Children have a role to play in
decision-making processes and can be involved in negotiating learning
experiences and assessment opportunities, when it is practical to do so.
Participating in decision-making processes and negotiating learning
experiences helps children to take on responsibility and independence in
learning. Negotiating learning contexts helps ensure that learning is
meaningful to children.

Involving children in planning and reflection
Involving children in planning and reflection is a powerful tool for learning
and for developing self-management skills. Children develop ownership in the
program when they are involved in planning their learning, taking increasing
responsibility for carrying out their plan and are supported to reflect on their
learning. Teachers scaffold children’s reflection by using photographs,
diagrams, comments and questions. They model and verbalise thinking and
language used for reflecting. They develop children’s interest in sharing ideas
about learning with others and provide opportunities to share reflections and
responses in a variety of ways, such as drawing, painting, talking and
roleplaying.

Monitoring learning as part of teaching
Monitoring learning is an integral part of the learning – teaching process and
is not a separate activity. Teachers observe and analyse what the child is
doing. They listen to, reflect on and respond to what the child says. They
identify elements that enhance learning or barriers that may hinder learning
and they reflect on the amount and types of assistance and scaffolding
required by a child and how this can be provided.
Teacher interactions
Teachers' interactions with children play an important part in building the intellectual quality of learning experiences. Interactions help promote connectedness between prior and future learning, as well as building continuity between home, community and classroom learning. Teachers' interactions with children can draw their attention to social issues and possible positive responses. Interactions also provide information that enables teachers to ensure that the use of time and the physical and social environments support learning. Interactions can include facilitating learning, collaborating as a learning partner, making learning explicit, building connections and challenging children’s thinking to develop deep understanding.

Using appropriate teaching learning contexts
A balanced curriculum provides opportunities for children to engage in active learning through play, real-life situations and investigations, interspersed with meaningful routines and transitions, and short, appropriate, focused learning and teaching. Children are also likely to shift between contexts as learning progresses — for example, initial investigations using art materials may lead to play with materials and processes and then shift towards real-life art-making. Children may engage in these learning contexts as individuals or in small groups or as a whole class, both indoors and outdoors. Learning within these contexts may arise spontaneously or be child- or adult-initiated. It is essential that teachers recognise the learning embedded within each learning context and use teachable moments to make learning explicit, challenge children to consider new ideas, test current thinking and develop deeper understandings.

The final message about pedagogy that runs through the draft Early Years Curriculum Guidelines is that the curriculum as experienced by children is holistic.

These messages about pedagogy echo the advice about productive pedagogies in the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study. The productive pedagogies are described under four categories:

- intellectual quality — with a focus in the Early Years Curriculum Guidelines on engaging in learning within a range of contexts with time for sustained exploration and substantive conversations about thinking, understandings, capabilities and dispositions
- connectedness — with a focus in the Early Years Curriculum Guidelines on building connections between prior knowledge and new knowledge and between aspects of knowledge both inside and outside the classroom
- supportive classroom environment — with a focus in the Early Years Curriculum Guidelines on creating a supportive classroom environment that promotes children’s agency and their participation in learning experiences
- recognition of difference — with a focus in the Early Years Curriculum Guidelines on recognising and engaging with the diversity of children’s
The introduction of a Prep year as a vehicle for pedagogical change in Years 1 to 3
An unexpected outcome of the first year of the preparatory year trial has been the commitment by many trial principals to continue the pedagogical approach in the curriculum into the early years of schooling. In this era of evidence-based reporting of learning outcomes, Principals have seen the progress of children in the Preparatory year as compared to those in many Year One programs. This has led to discussions with teachers about the continuation of the curriculum and pedagogical framework into Year One and perhaps to Year 3. The focus of discussions has included questions such as:

- What can the Prep children know and do?
- What partnerships need supporting?
- How can the Key Components of the curriculum be addressed?
- How flexible can environments be in Year One?
- Which of the early years learning contexts will be considered suitable in a Year One classroom — play, real-life experiences, investigations, routines and transitions, focused learning and teaching?
- How can teachers continue to promote the achievement of the indicators of success throughout the early years of schooling?

One network of schools is asking teachers to talk about the ways in which they use the key components of the Early Years Curriculum Framework in their primary classroom — understanding children, building partnerships, establishing flexible environments, creating contexts for learning as well as exploring what children learn.

At another school, teachers participated in a workshop on the Early Years Curriculum. Two of the four Year One teachers approached the principal the next day with ideas they had for continuing the pedagogical approach in Year One. One teacher, for example, decided to alter her planned unit on healthy food to incorporate a restaurant within the classroom.

The interest and excitement at the grass roots level about the continuation of an active learning approach across the early years of schooling results from trial schools’ experiences that confirm the effectiveness of such a program for promoting young children’s learning in terms of the indicators of success in school. At this time, there is an intention within schools and school authorities that the Early Years Curriculum Guidelines will be used to review curriculum and pedagogy in the early years of schooling.

What we are witnessing is both teachers and administrators becoming change agents within their schools and across networks of schools. Fullan (1993) describes four ‘core capacities’ for building change — personal vision-building, inquiry, mastery and collaboration. The teachers and administrators in trial schools have started the inquiry process and are moving into personal vision-building by asking the question, “What difference am I trying to make personally to children’s success in school?”
The draft Early Years Curriculum Guidelines is available on the Queensland Studies Authority website, www.qsa.qld.edu.au The draft Early Learning and Development Framework is currently only available to trial schools

References


