

Negotiated curriculum beyond prep

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Kathryn is an early childhood teacher with experience in multi-age settings. She has taught Prep, Year One and Year Two and is currently teaching Prep and Year One at St. Patrick's School, Allora. Kathryn uses the Early Years Curriculum Guidelines as a basis for teaching and learning and presented a seminar on 'Prep Projects in a Multi-age Context' at the Queensland Studies Authority Early Years Conference in 2007. She also presented a seminar on 'Contextualising Assessment in an Early Years Program' in 2009. Kathryn is interested in the use of negotiated projects to achieve learning outcomes through children's specific interests and needs.

My philosophy of teaching and learning is summed-up in this quote from Dockett and Fleer (2002, p. 197):

The value of a child-initiated curriculum is twofold. On the one hand, children become engaged in content that is of interest and relevant to them. The focus is on content that children consider "worth knowing" and, because of this, intrinsic motivation and the commitment to the experiences are likely to be high. On the other hand, it is empowering for children to have adults take them, and their interests seriously.

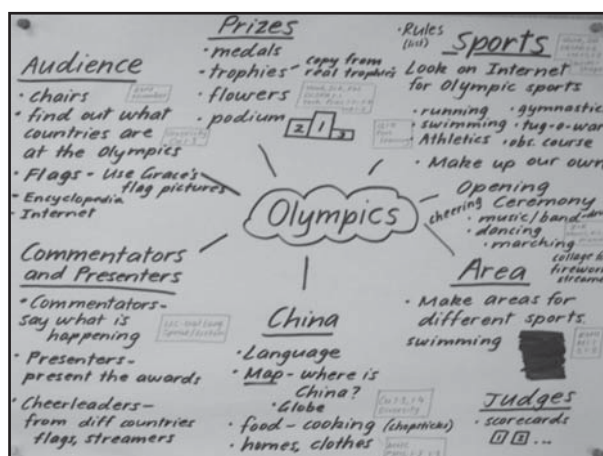
My own journey of bringing a negotiated curriculum into the classroom has not been without challenge. Beginning my teaching career in a multi-age Preschool-Year One classroom initiated me into the realities of teaching very quickly. Fortunately, with the support of an excellent mentor* and a growing understanding of the Early Years Curriculum Guidelines, I learnt that my curriculum could be developed with the children in my class. The purpose of this paper is to share an example of how the negotiated curriculum 'looks' in our classroom.

Much of the learning and teaching in our classroom occurs through negotiated projects, using the 'plan, do, reflect' cycle outlined in the Early Years Curriculum Guidelines (Queensland Studies Authority, 2006). These projects may be whole-group, small-group or individual in nature. They may also be child-initiated or teacher-initiated but are always negotiated. This means that the children are very much involved in planning the direction of the project and the

experiences that will be involved. The 'Olympics' project is an example of one such project that was initiated by the children.

The Olympics Project

The extensive coverage of the Olympics in the media created much interest among the children.



The 'Olympics' project plan



A depiction of swimming

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One of the children suggested we have our own Olympics at school and the idea was very popular. We spent a very lengthy planning session discussing and recording ideas for our Olympics. We also represented our favourite sports using self-selected visual arts techniques.

During fitness time, we practiced a variety of sports for the Olympics. This included discussions about the rules and the equipment needed. Some of the children wrote the rules for each sport to be read out at the Olympics before the events began.



Recording the rules for tennis

After deciding (through voting) which teams would be in our Olympics, we researched their flags. Quite a lot of time was then spent making flags and streamers for each team.



Making the Russian flag

We also made trophies and medals to use at our medal ceremonies. There was a lot of discussion

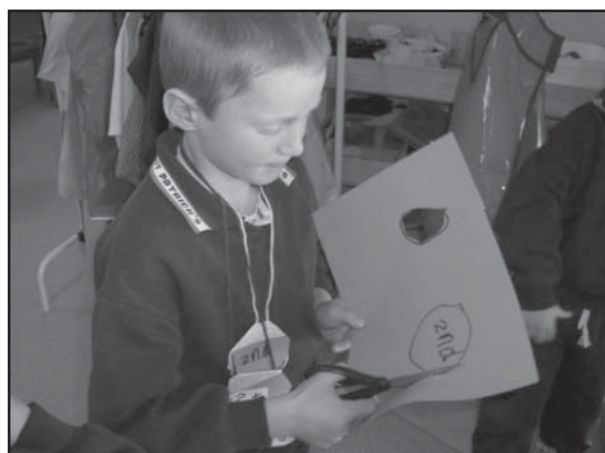


Making streamers for Madagascar

about what colours the medals should be and what should be written on them. We also had to work out how many of each medal we needed – we had to have enough for every sport (including multiple copies for team sports).



Working out how many medals were needed



Making medals

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Making trophies

We did a lot of research on China while we were organising our Olympics. We learnt about things such as food, homes, language and location. Our understanding of these things was reflected in the diary entries we wrote as part of the reflection process.



Researching China

We read about how Chinese people value shared meals together as a family so we cooked fried rice and stir-fry and shared a meal together as a class. We also had a go at writing our names in the Chinese written language.

The day of our Olympics finally arrived and we began with an opening ceremony where each team marched with their flag to the beat of the drum. Before each event, the rules were read out and the teams announced. A medal ceremony was held after each event to recognise the winners and place-getters.



Sharing a Chinese meal together



Writing our names in Chinese

During the Olympics, we kept a medal tally for each team. We also did this for the real Olympics, using a picture graph to record the medal tally each morning. When our Olympics were over, we reflected on the process, discussing the successes and difficulties and our proudest moments. We also planned and reflected daily throughout the project to keep us on track.

Conclusion

The 'Olympics' project is one example of how the negotiated curriculum works in our classroom. It is important to note that, while the focus and content of projects is always changing, the underlying process of 'plan, do, reflect' and negotiation with children underpins them all. The way children are involved is summarised by Tinworth (1997, p. 25) who explains the child's role within this type of curriculum:

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The Opening Ceremony



A medal ceremony



Noodle hockey

The child has an active role in the initiation of interests, questions and hypotheses and remains a collaborator in the process and form of subsequent inquiry, exploration and creative expression.

It has been my experience that when children are active collaborators in their learning, and when their ideas and opinions are valued and acted upon, they are empowered to take responsibility for their own learning.

*I would like to acknowledge Anne-Maree D'Abadie whose dedication to early childhood education and value of children has been, and continues to be, a source of inspiration for me in my career.

References

- Dockett, S., & Fleer, M. (2002) *Play and pedagogy in early childhood: Bending the rules*. Australia: Nelson Australia Pty Ltd.
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- Tinworth, S. (1997) Whose good idea was it? Child initiated curriculum. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood* 22(3), 24-29.

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