

Transition to school – are our schools ready?

Beginning school is a time of great excitement and expectation for children and their families. Both need to feel confident that school will be a welcoming place for them, where they will feel secure, respected and supported. A successful transition will occur over time and extend to when the child feels a sense of belonging in the school. In this issue of *Educating Young Children* we explore the ways schools create a sense of belonging by asking the question 'are schools ready?'

Susie Randel Kneipp



Susie is Deputy Principal at Eagle Junction State School.

You would know our school is ready for children by ... the excitement and enthusiasm as we begin to welcome our

2015 Preps and their families into the Eagle Junction State School community. This is a highly valued process that ensures each family an opportunity to personally meet with me and share their child's learning journey to date and also what they are most looking forward to in the next stage of schooling. This time also connects our youngest students to the school and ensures a familiar face as they begin their school transition. We also conduct parent information evenings and most importantly school orientation sessions where our newest students can spend time in the Prep Precinct and start to establish relationships with their peers and teachers.

Our school builds on the experiences children bring when ... we value the learning of the pre-Prep environments by ensuring our students have the opportunity to demonstrate what they know and can do in a supportive environment as their relationship with their Prep teacher and class mates grow. Eagle Junction State School also prioritises the connection to our fellow early years educators

through an established network (Brisbane Inner North Early Years Network). This allows curriculum and learning experiences in both settings to be shared to build continuity and ensure prior learning is recognised and celebrated.

The transition to school for children and their families is positive when ... both children and their parents feel welcomed and supported as they enter the next exciting stage of education. Positive experiences are fostered through quality communication and school/parent partnerships. Both children and their families benefit from transitions from pre Prep to Prep that focus on shared understandings and child centred practices. Understanding individual children and their pre-Prep experiences assists in seamless transitions.

A child and their family would know they belong to our school when ... Becoming part of the EJ family begins long before the first day of school. Eagle Junction State School acknowledges that a sense of community and belonging are essential factors in learning and development. Prior to starting Prep, our new students have already begun to develop relationships and a familiarity with their new school context.

In our school what works well is ... At Eagle Junction State School our vision – *For every child, every opportunity for every success*, clearly articulates the commitment to ensuring each child's learning is prioritised. The wealth of experience we have in our early years teaching team enables us to quickly get to know who students are, what they already know and how best to lead their learning into the future.

Ensuring that children have early learning success at their individual level helps to develop a love of learning that hopefully will carry them through school and beyond.

I would like to see ... the strong professional relationship we have with our local early years educators continue to grow as we share curriculum, teaching and learning expectations from pre-Prep into the early years of primary school. Ensuring strong communication between these professional agencies not only supports the clarity of educational expectations from kindergarten to primary school but also alleviates anxiety in families about school readiness and the next stage of schooling. The Prep year supports strong literacy and numeracy instruction through developmentally appropriate programs that allow children to learn in engaging and stimulating environments. Recognition of prior and individual learning is an important part of educating young children. The ability for all educators to articulate this with confidence ensures the optimism that we want all children and families to possess as they embark on the next stage of the learning journey.

Bradley Clark



Principal,
Samford State
School in
conversation
with Archana
Sinh.

You would know our school is ready for children by ... the enthusiasm we share with the

families and children in starting the learning journey in our school, long before they begin Prep at Samford State School. We support families by providing opportunities to know the school well before the children start in

2015 and share their journey about their child with us. This reduces anxiety and worry that families and children might feel. Our induction for Prep commences at the end of Term 3. During this process families and children get to know us and we get to know them. By facilitating these strong relationships through open days, visits to the local pre-Preps by our teachers and play-dates in our local parks, we encourage families to get to know other families, teachers to understand the practices of the learning environment where the children are coming from and families to become familiar with the environment where the children are going to go. This process minimizes anxiety for the families and the children by creating a physical connection from abstract to tangible where children learn the language of school such as 'I saw the tuckshop today'. This helps children settle in and our staff to understand the needs of children.

Our school builds on the experiences children bring when ... we have built strong relationships with the local pre-Prep Centres in this area. Our teachers visit the pre-Prep Centres from where our children come, and we learn how children interact in their prior to school environment. For example, one of our teachers was visiting a pre-Prep Centre and thought of sharing a story with the group while she was there. However, the teacher of the pre-Prep said that the children never sat as a whole group at any given time and would find the idea challenging. This made our teacher and the school reflect on how they would support the children from pre-Prep in settling down. So they made some changes to their routines for when the children would start the Prep.

We meet every family and during these meetings families share their children's interests and general learning needs. They are also encouraged to share the Transition Statements from the pre-Prep.

The transition to school for children and their families is positive when ... families and children do not experience anxiety or fear and worry about their new environment and what it involves. Families also feel supported

when they realise that we as a school support the learning styles that children are bringing from the pre-Prep environment. We work with the understanding of what a learning physiology of four- and five-year-olds would be like. They learn through experience, structured play and intentional teaching as some of the strategies.

A child and their family would know they belong to our school when ... they walk on their first day in the school with a smile and say 'Bye' without anxiety and worry. To make this happen, we start building partnerships from very early on, as mentioned, from the end of Term 3. We provide many opportunities for the families and the children to visit the school; to meet outside the school with other families; and by building connections with the local pre-Prep Centres.

In our school what works well is ... in our school we build on partnerships with families, children and the pre-Prep Centres from before they start the school year. These opportunities help build stronger relations and a better understanding of how we can support the children and their families. We also incorporate the current understandings of how children in this age group learn best.

I would like to see ... the ability to be able to shape the curriculum to meet social, emotional and cognitive understandings in the way children learn best.

Mathilda Element



Mathilda Element is an early childhood educator, currently providing curriculum support for Pine Community School, a small democratic community in Arana Hills, Brisbane that

provides Prep to Year Six education for 75 students.

You would know our school is ready for children by ... We believe that schools need to recognise and respect children's uniqueness – protecting and nurturing their individual strengths and supporting their developing needs. Further, we believe that families are the strongest and most important centre of their children's worlds and, as such, schools should be designed to support families as the first and most important teachers of their children.

In order to make schools ready for children and families, we must take time to understand those dynamics – their needs, their strengths and their diversity. At Pine we do this through a number of ways. One way is through extensive relationship-building with both families and children in the early days (beginning prior to school). We organise school-holiday casual play-dates in the local park for new families, teachers and students to get to know one another; have lengthy new family interviews prior to school which are repeated after the first four weeks (clarifying expectations and needs unique to each child and family). Teachers send introductory letters home addressed to the children. (These are treasured items we are told!) and most of our new families make several visits to the school (both formally organised and casually arranged) prior to the first day of school. Our genuine open-door policy means visiting students and families are always welcomed and included, for any length of time they wish to stay. (Some children find frequent, short visits helpful; others want to join in straight away.) Further, this continues throughout the child's schooling – families are always welcome in the school as a precious part of the community. Their knowledge of their children informs the teachers' practice and we aim to allow children's unique needs to guide our teaching. (E.g. some children 'build up' to full-time Prep as they can be quite exhausted by our busy, play-based, multi-age learning environment; other children are raring to go from Day One.)

In all things, the important value is respect for diverse needs – all young children and families transition at a different time and pace, and we believe our school needs to cater to that, offering lots of different ways to experience the school culture and community as gently or as deeply as is required at the time. This includes

the notion that transition can be a lengthy process and families may need to revisit their needs (e.g. for more information) at any time of the year.

Our school builds on the experiences children bring when ... We gather as much information as possible about their prior-to-school experience and build on where children are genuinely at – what they are interested in, challenged by and ready for. For this information, we rely mainly on families and children – we ask lots of questions, take lots of notes and make lots of time to listen to children as we work on building genuine, deep relationships. We also try and make connections with kindergarten and other prior-to-school teachers where possible but, as our children come from a very diverse range of prior-to-school backgrounds (including many whose home environment has been their primary learning setting before school), parents (and the children themselves) are the main source of information.

The transition to school for children and their families is positive when ... I think there is a lot of pressure in the modern, wider social culture to make children 'ready' for school, particularly in academic ways. This pressure can unduly stress families to provide experiences that their children may not be ready for, or to 'push' children without the pedagogical skills to make it enjoyable for them. This can have a detrimental effect on the child's love of learning in some instances. Conversely, other children seek deeper investigative and cognitive challenges than they are currently offered and are 'hungry' for the experiences that school can provide.

If society as a whole worked towards a deeper respect for children's individual needs, and innate desire to learn and grow in their own way and own time, it would take a lot of stress from parents, who are genuinely trying to equip their children for life, but who are often bombarded with pressure to 'push' earlier and earlier into formal skills. Reducing the anxiety load of modern families would be a very positive step in managing school transitions, and we do attempt this by valuing and respecting these truths:

parenting is complex, rewarding, difficult and empowering.

Families do the best they can and it is the job of schools to respect them, genuinely include them as learning partners and support them in any way possible in their noble task of raising their families.

I personally believe that transitions would be more positive overall if these values were included as routine in all educational settings and experiences.

A child and their family would know they belong to our school when ... As a teacher and a curriculum support worker, I have witnessed the moment when a child decides they 'belong' to Pine many, many times and it is a thing of beauty. For some children, it is the first time they speak up in a democratic meeting and have their voice heard by the wider community. (Our school holds weekly whole-school meetings run by the children, where they decide on issues of relevance to them in the running of the school, as well as lots of class meetings and small group consultations.) For others, it's when they tell their parents they need to 'call a meeting' to discuss a rule or issue of conflict in their family sphere. (Internalising the values of school and applying them to home often bemuses our families and it can be an extremely empowering sign of belonging.) For many, it's just the first time they call themselves a 'Pine kid'. I have asked different children what that means and, for lots of children, it means someone who climbs trees; plays games; hangs out with babies to teenagers; is aware of social justice and conflict resolution; experiences lots of interesting curriculum; is listened to and learns to listen. The children have an innate knowledge of the school culture (as they do in most schools) and it's interesting to hear that culture being verbally and intuitively 'passed down' from our older students to the younger ones (including our many former students, now in high school or university, who visit frequently and use these types of phrases).

'Belonging' is, however, an extremely deep process – it takes time and it also ebbs and flows. Children and families can 'belong' to a school community, but also experience times of discord and these times need to be guided and managed – with information, time for questions, connections and support. Understanding this is important, for everyone within our school community.

In our school what works well is ... as stated previously, lots of time to get to know children and families as individuals, and lots of different opportunities for connections (through interviews, letters home, play-dates and school visits, etc.) help our teachers create real relationships with the children. Helping children feel safe, excited and empowered as school learners is our main goal and we believe that all learning stems from this place of positive feeling. Our school motto *Happy Children Learn* is deeply ingrained in everything we plan, including transitions. Some other practical tools include offering home visits by teachers to families, particularly where a child is struggling with connection. This is not forced, but is offered when parents and teachers think it might be helpful. We find that children are excited to share their space with their teachers and that one-on-one time is extremely valuable in relationship-building.

I would like to see ... Those key words 'connection' and 'relationships' at the heart of everything we do.

This tends to work well for us in providing the kind of education we strive for.

Louise Hart



Louise Hart is Deputy Principal at Wellers Hill State School.

You would know our school is ready for children by ... the buzz circulating around the school. Our

new students will have completed their orientation program and feel excited and comfortable to begin their Prep year. The Parents will have also participated in an orientation program and be well informed about our school, its values and philosophy, and what their child will experience in Prep. The teachers will feel well informed about each child's strengths as they will have gathered information on each of their children from a variety of sources.

Our school builds on the experiences children bring when ... teachers plan to discover what children already know and can do and then explicitly develop learning episodes that connect and build onto their knowledge and experiences.

The transition to school for children and their families is positive when

... we see happy smiling faces everyday as the children come to school, the level of engagement throughout the day is high, and there is positive chatter about the day as the children leave. Parents are engaged in the school community both inside and outside the classroom.

A child and their family would know they belong to our school when ... they walk into the school on their first day and parents, teachers and students take the time to acknowledge and greet them warmly.

In our school what works well is ... Our school community is very supportive of the staff.

Our teachers work very closely with parents placing the children at the forefront of all decisions to ensure each child is moving towards achieving their full potential. We are very proud of our collaborative staff culture, and the introduction of our pedagogical coaching program.

I would like to see ... our connection to the pre-Prep settings in our surrounding area grow and develop into a strong professional network.