

Launching the International Early Years Curriculum at Sakhalin International School.

Written by Janice Ireland

On a cold November morning in Yuzhno Sakhalinsk, Early Years teachers Tricia Hagan and Katy Freeman prepare for the arrival of their classes. Winter arrives early on this Russian island and as Tricia and Katy organise their resources for the first session of the morning the warm glow in the classroom provides a welcoming contrast to the crisp white snow lying on the ground outside.

Soon the playground will be filled with the voices of children - all eagerly waiting to begin today's learning, and the perfect white landscape will be marked with the prints of small snow boots. As Tricia and Katy move around the classroom chatting about their plans for the day, it's easy to see why this school was recently awarded IPC accreditation at Mastering Level, and how the school's shared vision underpins everything that happens each day.

The classroom displays are all about learning and they provide evidence that children's interests and their unique stages of development are central to teachers planning. The 'Curiosity Wall' is filled with children's questions, each sparked by the teacher-scaffolded learning that Tricia and Katy have taken from the International Early Years Curriculum (IEYC) and personalised for each child.

An enabled environment is emerging in response to a new IEYC theme and the ideas that children are independently exploring. Individual 'Learning Journeys' capture accounts of spontaneous and planned assessment opportunities, as well as recordings of what children have particularly enjoyed learning about.

Tricia and Katy sit down to talk about the launch of the IEYC and we begin our interview by discussing how they approached IEYC implementation...



Did the Early Years classes move straight from the IPC Early Years Programme to the IEYC, or are you using 2016-17 as a transition year?

When the IEYC was being developed, we were part of a focus group of teachers that provided feedback and so we had an insight into how the new units had been designed right from the start.

Last term we trialled parts of the first IEYC unit, 'To the Rescue!' and we saw first-hand the potential the curriculum offered to teachers, and just how much the children learned through the suggested activities. During a planning meeting, we discussed how we'd approach the transition from the IPC Early Years Programme to the IEYC and we decided we wanted to go for full IEYC implementation as soon as possible.

With our head teacher's approval, we moved in one go – launching the IEYC in September 2016. We kept parents fully informed both during the trial of 'To the Rescue!' and the launch of our first IEYC unit 'This is Me!'. Parents and the leadership team have been really supportive and so right from the start we had everyone involved on board. We feel we made the right choice, it's working well and we haven't looked back!

How does the IEYC compare to the IPC Early Years Programme?

We feel the IEYC has more depth and it's a far more rigorous approach to learning and development. Having a set of IEYC Learning Outcomes provides us with a lot of guidance, it's something we recognised was missing from the IPC Early Years Programme.



In the past we used the Early Years Foundation Stage Early Learning Goals (EYFS) for guidance, particularly with our Primary 1 children when tracking progress in Literacy and Numeracy. We did this because we wanted to ensure that we had a good bench mark for learning. Now, we use the IEYC Learning Outcomes and this gives us the confidence that we're planning well and helping to move children's learning forward in the best possible way.

The way in which the Communication Learning Strand is broken down into seven areas of learning is particularly useful and helpful to plan from. It's organised in a well-structured way and that makes it easy to use. In the past we had separate plans for Literacy and Numeracy, but now we plan using a 'whole curriculum' approach and this is far more holistic. Having so much content in the Learning Strands gives us a lot of confidence too – we know that we have great coverage of learning experiences right across Pre-Nursery, Nursery and Primary 1.

How do you approach 'Capturing Curiosity' right from the Entry Point, so that children's interests can be developed alongside the teacher-scaffolded activities?

Although children's interests have always been part of our approach to learning, the IEYC makes it very explicit that Capturing Curiosity should be central to how themes are developed. We have responded to this by creating 'learning spaces' where children can develop their own ideas and interest - this helps ensure that enquiry-based learning can take place every day.

We made a conscious decision to take a step back and use more questioning techniques – rather providing knowledge by 'telling' children facts. Now we observe the children more, we ask guiding questions and encourage children to make new discoveries. We provide children with the time and space for rigorous enquiry to happen throughout an IEYC unit.

We've developed 'Curiosity Walls' in our classrooms – each child has their own board where they can pose questions about what they're interested in learning about. We incorporate children's questions in our planning and this ensures children feel their ideas and interests are valued. It's important to let children explore their own ideas – teachers need to develop the confidence to take a step back and encourage children to take their learning in new directions.

How do you 'Enable the Environment' so that children's own interests and ideas are embedded into this ongoing aspect of the IEYC Process of Learning?

Our learning environment is shaped as an IEYC unit develops, for example, in 'This is Me!' the Entry Point involved a surprise suitcase arriving in the classroom and the children exploring the contents for clues about the owner.

From here a role-play area emerged, and the children explored ideas around who they thought the suitcase belonged to, where the person came from and so on. Each IEYC Learning Block has a central focus linked to the main theme and so the environment develops as each Learning Block is introduced.

The learning environment reflects both teacher-scaffolded learning experiences and children's own ideas. This approach gives children more ownership of the direction their learning goes in, and in return it impacts on how the environment is enabled. It's an ongoing process, and we need to be flexible in our approach so that learning continues to be rigorous as well as spontaneous.

“The IEYC 'Communication Learning Strand' is particularly helpful when planning Literacy and Numeracy experiences”

The IEYC promotes 'Reflective Practices' and contains guiding questions to use during each Learning Block. How do you use this approach?

Sakhalin International School is passionate about adopting reflective practices and so we were already using a school-wide approach, in particular during our whole-school 'Reflection Weeks'. Since implementing the IEYC, we've noticed that we are being more consistent on a daily basis because the guiding questions provide an ongoing focus within each Learning Block.

Our approach is to think about the guiding questions at different times, they're always in our mind during lessons and this is when we have 'informal' reflection time. We also use the guiding questions in a more structured way – usually at the end of a Learning Block, and this helps us plan next steps in learning. Reflective practices are an important element of the IEYC and we've embedded them into how we teach every day.

The IEYC promotes personalised learning. Are you able to adopt this approach by being spontaneous in your choice of IEYC units, or do you need to plan using an IEYC Route Map?

During our trial period and when talking to the IEYC team, we realised that if we were going to follow the eight IEYC Learning Principles a Route Map wouldn't work because it would tie us into units that might not reflect our setting, the children's interests and their unique stages of development.

Year-by-year no two classes are the same and no two Early Years children learn and develop in the same way – so having something fixed didn't make sense and didn't reflect the IEYC Learning Principles. The school's main concern was that if we abandoned a Route Map approach we might not be able to make learning links with the IPC units that have been planned across the school and this is something that has worked well in recent years.

However, we knew that to make the IEYC a success we needed to choose units that were relevant at specific times. So, after discussions with our head teacher we dropped the Route Map and it's working – and we find we can still make great learning links with the rest of the school! We now choose IEYC units that are responding to the interests of the children and the learning experiences our setting offers, for example, 'Weather Wonders' is perfect for both our setting and children's interests this term!

How do you approach IEYC assessments?

We've always used both informal and formal approach to assessment in our Early Years classes. Informal assessments are ongoing; we observe, listen and 'catch' learning and development and then record these moments as daily observations. They help guide how we plan next steps for individual children.

The method we're using for more formal assessments involves looking at the four IEYC Learning Strands and choosing one aspect from each Learning Block. We ask children questions such as, 'what can you tell me about ...? what can you do ...?', and then make a record of children's responses.

Midway through a unit, we have a clear idea of the areas we need to focus our assessments on and we keep parents informed. We also use children's Learning Journeys for assessment - we ask questions such as, 'show me something you learned about... would you do anything differently... could you do anything better now?',

in this way we include the child's voice in all our assessments. Some settings may need more guidance from the IEYC, but for us we're provided with what we need and we feel we have the right approach for our children.

Your school is approaching the end of your first term of full IEYC implementation. How have parents responded?

We knew that the IEYC involved developing a 'Learning-Link' partnership with the home and so during our trial period we provided parents with a lot of information about the IEYC and what we were planning to do. We also asked parents to complete a questionnaire about their observations of their child's learning.



The feedback was very positive – parents liked the family inclusion aspect of the IEYC and commented on how the new units had inspired their children. When we launched ‘This is Me!’ we involved parents in making a family scrapbook at home and from this activity we had amazing feedback – it was a great way to involve families in a constructive way. For some schools, involving parents in such a proactive way might involve a change in mindsets, but the benefits are enormous.



How do you approach IEYC assessments?

Having a clear focus on an Enabled Environment is something we think is important and the IEYC has provided us with a lot of guidance in this area. We like the focus on children’s curiosity and following their own interests too, this is so important in the Early Years.

The way in which IEYC units are divided into Learning Blocks is working well for us, we can spend as much or little time as we need on each and there’s no expectation that Learning Blocks should last for a specific amount of time.

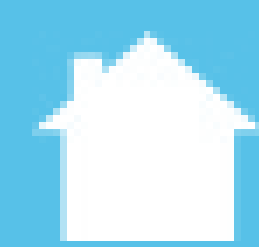
One activity in a Learning Block really grabbed our children’s interest and we spent a whole week just on that area because the children were getting so much out of it! Our Russian teacher has found that having Phase A and B Learning Strands and activities has been very helpful when planning differentiated tasks. As a non-native English speaker, she feels that the units provide her with the guidance she needs in a way which is easy to follow.

When you first see an IEYC unit, it may appear that there is a lot of information – but once you trial it you quickly realise it’s a very flexible tool. Like anything new, it takes time to adapt to a new approach!

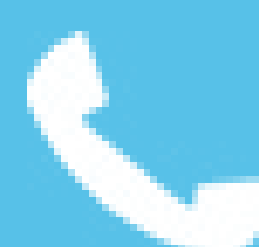


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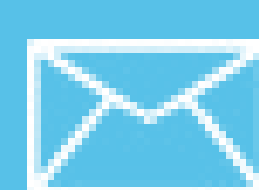
**capturing
curiosity**



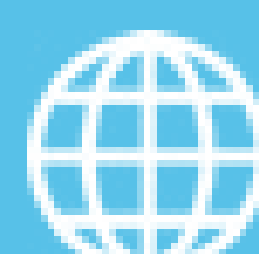
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