



# Leading the International Early Years Curriculum at Panaga School, Brunei Darussalam

Reflections from Mendaram (Early Years)  
Leaders for Learning,  
Claire Richmond and Louise Ramsden

By Janice Ireland



**Panaga School is a Shell-affiliated school, situated on an extensive campus in Brunei Darussalam, close to the South China Sea. The school has a 70-year history of serving the expatriate community, once operating with both Dutch and English streams, with separate classes, playgrounds and staffrooms for each department.**



*Panaga School was established in 1948. It is situated in the Brunei Shell Petroleum residential camp of 'Panaga', between the oil towns of Kuala Belait and Seria.*

In 1999, the development of the **'International Primary Curriculum'** (IPC) was a catalyst for change at the school with Dutch and English classes collaborating on a trial of the first IPC unit, **'The Olympics'**. This led to full IPC implementation across the school in 2000, followed by stream integration as the Dutch and English departments merged to create an international school. IPC implementation has since gone from strength to strength, with the school being one of the first ever to be accredited at **'Mastering'** level.

Today, there are over 35 different nationalities on roll at Panaga School. The school operates over two adjacent sites, with Mendaram and Rampayoh (for 2-7 year olds) on one site and Teraja and Melilas (for 7-13 year olds) on the other. The youngest children thrive in creatively-designed areas that enable holistic learning and enquiry to flourish. Play areas include grassed areas, climbing frames, bike tracks, sand and water play, mud kitchens, den building and sustainable gardens. In addition, thematic areas evolve each term as learning unfolds and children's interests take new directions.



*Today, Panaga School provides a 'stimulating, integrated, indoor-outdoor environment, which promotes a child's independence, decision making and resilience.'*





Panaga School is at the heart of the expatriate community and it prioritises stakeholder engagement by ensuring that everyone has a voice in new developments. This was particularly evident during the 2017-18 academic year when the leadership team embarked on a review of Early Years provision and a trial of ***'The International Early Years Curriculum'*** (IEYC). The trial was well-planned and involved the Pre-Nursery and Nursery classes implementing and evaluating two IEYC units. The ***'IEYC Process of Learning'*** was shared with parents through learning letters and parents gave staff feedback during ***'Exit Points'***.







*Panaga School  
Principal,  
Cindy Bin Tahal*

The School Board was informed of curriculum implementation of the IEYC by Panaga School Principal, Cindy Bin Tahal, and the decision to move forward with IEYC implementation was the result of a unanimous 'Yes!' from internal and external stakeholders alike. Since those early days, the school hasn't looked back. ***'The IEYC Learning Principles'*** underpin all policy and practice and children's natural curiosity is central to daily provision.

Early Years staff at Panaga School are passionate about the IEYC, believing that it helps scaffold learning experiences that support the development of the school's shared vision.

***'Panaga School provides learning supported by an International Curriculum that empowers children with the knowledge, skills and understanding that will enable them to be productive members of an ever-changing, culturally-diverse world community.'***

In a recent interview, Mendaram Leaders for Learning, Claire Richmond and Louise Ramsden, reflected on Panaga School's IEYC journey and talked about the next steps for implementation at the school.



*Mendaram (Early Years)  
Leaders for Learning,  
Claire Richmond (left)  
and  
Louise Ramsden (right)*



### **Question: How would you describe your setting and your roles?**

**Claire and Louise:** Expatriate numbers in Brunei fluctuate in response to family postings in an industry that has seen both growth and decline in recent years. Whilst we have the capacity for seven classes across the setting, this year, we have two Pre-Nursery and two Nursery classes, leaving three rooms that we use for yoga, music and movement and activities that require open spaces. We have two shaded verandas leading onto garden areas that provide many opportunities for children to enquire and develop personal interests. Outside areas evolve each term and whilst we provide a free-flow ***'Enabled Environment'***, many children choose to spend their time outdoors exploring scaffolded provision where learning pathways take exciting new directions that we respond to.

Play and enquiry are central to our provision and we ensure that all staff have training in this area. Each class is supported by Learning Support Assistants that are fully involved in all aspects of children's learning and development. Our School Principal is a great advocate for ensuring that good staff-student ratios in the Early Years enables us to focus on individual needs at this unique time in a child's life.

**This approach embeds IEYC Learning Principles 1, 2, 3, 4 and 8:**

- 1. The earliest years of life are important in their own right.***
- 2. Children should be supported to learn and develop at their own unique pace.***

***3. Play is an essential aspect of all children's learning and development.***

***4. Learning happens when developmentally-appropriate, teacher-scaffolded and child initiated experiences harness children's natural curiosity in an enabling environment.***

***8. Learning should be motivating, engaging and fun, opening up a world of wonder for children where personal interests can flourish.***

Our roles are new to the school and are still developing. We continuously evaluate what we can do to support staff, how we can improve our learning environment, where we are in our IEYC journey and our vision for the future. Over time, our roles are becoming more defined as we establish where our expertise is best placed going forward.

We are both based in the Mendaram area of our setting, and on a daily basis, we oversee the Pre-Nursery and Nursery classes. We have a good working partnership with Primary 1 (P1) classes which have their own Year Group Leader and are located in the Rampayoh area of the school. All Year Group Leaders ensure there is ongoing collaboration, and this contributes to a smooth transition for children when they move between classes from Pre-Nursery to P1. Having a whole-setting view is important in many ways, especially when it comes to moderating consistency in practice and the expectations Panaga School has for learning and development.

Whilst we have shared responsibilities, our roles differ as Louise is class-based with one day released to work across the setting. During this first year of IEYC implementation, Claire has been primarily non-class based with only one full day teaching and this has helped us transition to the IEYC. Claire dedicates time to different age groups throughout the week, including P1, and also delivers language support, leads assemblies, provides staff cover and forges community links with a local playgroup and library. As a whole, Panaga School strives to include families in children's learning and in our roles we ensure that open dialogue with parents is meaningful and ongoing. Having one Year Group Leader class-based and the other non-class based has been advantageous, as we see things from different perspectives as we observe, support and plan.

We also support Panaga School with forging professional working partnerships with national and international schools in Brunei. Together with the Senior Leadership Team, we've established an Early Years Network which has been excellent for moderation and sharing best practice. Panaga School is fairly isolated and beyond our Network meetings, there is limited opportunity for us to meet with other teachers and leaders. Having a Bruneian International School that implements the IEYC within our Network group provides us with opportunities to see the curriculum in a different context and has resulted in staff reflecting on their own practices.



Establishing meaningful community links is a real strength of Panaga School. From Early to Middle Years, there are many developmentally-appropriate initiatives that help children engage with the host country and put *'The IEYC Personal Goals'* into action. This is key to the development of *'International Mindedness'* and in our roles we are committed to ensuring our setting provides meaningful experiences through the IEYC and school driven projects. For example, we launched a 'Reduce, Reuse, Recycle' initiative for the whole school and our Middle Years students lead the Early Years within this to support and develop their learning opportunities.



*Parents, Middle Years students and the Pre-Nursery worked collaboratively to create our sustainable gardens.*

**This approach embeds Learning Principle 5:**

***5. Independent and interdependent learning experiences create a context for personal development and are the foundation of international mindedness.***

**And, the IEYC Personal Goals of:**

***'Adaptability', 'Communication', 'Cooperation', 'Enquiry', 'Morality', 'Resilience', 'Respect' and 'Thoughtfulness'.***



## **Question: How was the IEYC rolled out at Panaga School?**

**Claire and Louise:** Panaga School was one of the first schools worldwide to implement the IPC Early Years Programme and for over a decade we personalised it to develop our own thematic units. We also used the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) goals to monitor progress and implemented mathematics and language schemes alongside to support learning. Whilst all stakeholders were happy with provision and we were creative in our approach, we recognised there could be better curricular alignment and more consistency in learning outcomes. We were using a lot of different materials and thought:

***'Wouldn't it be great if we had one curriculum that underpinned everything?'***

We were keen to trial the IEYC and decided to implement ***'The World Around Us'*** and ***'Going Places'***, during Term 3 in Pre-Nursery and Nursery, with a view to launching the IEYC at the start of the new academic year if everything went well. Ahead of the IEYC trial, our consultant from Fieldwork Education visited the school and delivered training to staff then led a question and answer session where we looked at the IEYC from the context of Panaga School. This provided us with a 'Big Picture' view of the curriculum, enabling us to start planning from an informed perspective.

Our approach involved a lot of collaboration across the setting. We evaluated the resources we had and the strategies that we needed to keep because they are *non-negotiables* at Panaga School. For example, over the years, the school has invested heavily in embedding a Literacy programme and we needed to ensure that these texts and resources could be matched in meaningful ways to IEYC units. We found the process really exciting and staff contributed with fresh ideas. We were conscious that we didn't want to throw away things that had worked well but equally we identified things that could be improved. The process involved us mapping out IEYC units that would be well suited to our location and we considered new themes that would inspire staff and children.

We found that some IEYC units naturally fit with our setting and children's interests, such as ***'Animal Rescuers'***, which supports the school's commitment to protecting local endangered species, and ***'Going Places'***, which links well to children's experiences and interests. We identified other units that we can 'dip into', for example, ***'Little Movers Make Great Strides'*** links to our PE lessons and ***'Mindful Play'*** links to yoga, massage and mindfulness which we've introduced.

Throughout our IEYC trial, we were really impressed by the positive reactions of children, parents and staff and we knew that we wanted to continue with full implementation.

***'We could see and feel a renewed passion for teaching and learning, and fun learning moments had been reignited!'***

During the trial phase, we kept staff across Panaga School informed by involving them in professional development sessions and parents were invited into school to celebrate our journey and expose them to the IEYC Learning Principles. We used Panaga School's [Pupil Portal](#) to upload *'IEYC Home Letters'* and we also shared ideas to support and extend learning, weekly updates, stories, songs and resources that could be used at home.

Parents provided us with valuable feedback which we used during our planning and evaluation sessions and this contributed to the evidence-base that drove our School Improvement Plan. IEYC implementation is a whole-school priority and the School Board has been supportive of such decision making.

It's very exciting to hear parents talking to staff about children's enthusiasm and engagement with IEYC learning and what they are doing at home to extend it. Since the trial, our *'Learning-Link'* with parents has been further strengthened and this helps us to ensure that IEYC provision is well-matched to both children's interests and their developmental needs.

***'Ongoing observation is at the heart of all that our teaching team do, and through these observations teachers can consider current knowledge, skills and understanding and plan for next steps.'***

Our IEYC journey to date has involved ongoing dialogue and evaluation with parents, the Senior Leadership Team, staff and our consultant from Fieldwork Education. Everyone has been very supportive and provided encouragement; the School Board remains supportive of IEYC developments and we haven't looked back!

**This approach embeds IEYC Learning Principle 7:**

***7. Ongoing assessment, in the form of evaluation and reflection, is effective when it involves a learning-link with the home.***

**Question: What challenges and success have you encountered and what's next for your IEYC journey?**

**Claire and Louise:** On a day-to-day basis, we haven't encountered any major challenges; it's been more about reviewing our provision and practice, identifying what we needed to adapt and recognising what's improving learning and development for each child. There have been a lot of successes and the level of 'fun with our teaching and learning' has definitely been heightened. *'Entry and Exit Points'* have really excited children and increased parental engagement as well as igniting a renewed passion across our setting. As an Early Years team, we're sharing and collaborating more and looking forward to working with our P1 classes when they join us on our IEYC journey in the near future.



Through introducing the IEYC, staff have become increasingly aware of **'Capturing Curiosity'** and even just having this terminology as part of our practice means that we are continually observing where children's personal interests lie. **'Capturing Curiosity'** has become a renewed area of focus for us.

***'We want to ensure that we strike a balance of teacher-scaffolded and child-initiated learning.'***

This approach will enable children to develop independent and interdependent interests alongside IEYC thematic activities. We plan IEYC adult-scaffolded activities, but they can change during the week because of what happens during 'in the moment' learning driven by children's interests. This often results in staff **'Enabling the Environment'** according to where new learning is going on a personal or group level. For example, during the **'Animal Rescuers'** unit, a child became interested in camping in the jungle to search for animals, and before we knew it, we were all off on a 'camping trip'!



***Capturing a child's curiosity in the 'Animal Rescuers' unit led to us enabling our environment and engaging everyone in great learning, teaching and fun!***

We always encourage and invite children to join in IEYC activities, especially when they are new learning experiences, but they are very much tailored to each child's personal needs.

***'We arrange the environment to ensure that certain skills are being developed and to help inspire and create wonder with the children.'***

Our display boards respond to each IEYC unit as it unfolds. We capture children's curiosity on displays through speech bubbles, artwork and the different ways children choose to express their ideas. It's not until the end of an IEYC unit that displays are completed, this means we can't plan how a display will evolve when we launch a unit because they naturally change as interests develop and enquiry grows. Our displays generate a lot of parental feedback and have become a great way to share IEYC learning within our school community.





*Parent information boards help support learning conversations, educate parents and celebrate success.*



During planning sessions, we discuss if children's learning would best link to **'Phase A Activities'** or **'Phase B Activities'**, or a combination of both. In general, Pre-Nursery and Nursery have shared **'Entry and Exit Points'** and we identify common interests between classes so that we can plan for these together.

We use IEYC **'Reflective Practitioner Questions'** on an ongoing basis in our roles and they are becoming part of our daily feed forward discussions within our teams.

We look for ways to make the **'Reflective Practitioner Questions'** visible across the setting, for example, on whiteboards, on our desks, and we refer to them when we talk to our Learning Support Assistants. During meetings, we reflect on what learning experiences went well, which need to be reviewed and what children's next steps are. We've found the **'Reflective Practitioner Questions'** particularly useful during planning meetings and 'Mid-Point' reviews. Our reflections feed into action plans and raise awareness of areas that need further development and time invested.

IEYC activities provide children with many opportunities to **'Explore and Express'** ideas in multiple ways. For example, through mark-making, telling stories, discussions and by integrating technologies such as 'Green Screening' and 'Music Padlet'.



*Green Screen pictures were created to support learning during an 'Entry Point'.*



We've set up creative areas that enable children to freely express ideas through a variety of mediums and our gardens are proving inspiration for learning moments. We are fortunate to have parents that have been instrumental in helping us to shape the gardens by responding to children's interests. They've helped to create fairy gardens, cosy nooks, planting beds, shaded areas and areas where we can set up challenges that support physical development. Our **'Friends of Mendaram'** parent group, which was established during our first full year of IEYC implementation, has supported us in many ways, for example, through international events and focused curriculum days. We are very lucky to have such supportive families across the school!



*Garden initiatives, cultural celebrations, Science Day and World Nursery Rhyme Week are just some examples of learning opportunities that are enhanced and supported by our amazing parents!*

Colleagues across the school have also enhanced IEYC implementation by involving us in their projects and sharing their skill-sets. For example, we have an ongoing collaboration with our Middle Years classes, and this is underpinned by the development of the **'United Nations Sustainable Development Goals'** which the whole school has adopted. In addition, teachers, parents and outside organisations with expertise in specific areas have dedicated time to supporting us. Being able to draw from skill-sets in the Panaga School community helped us become more creative, for example, the children have been involved in Batik making and environmental projects, and we've participated in *Forest School* professional development.



*Learning the skills for creating Batik was fun and we are so proud of the final Batik created by the children!*



Since we adopted the IEYC, we've had discussions about new directions that we need to consider. For example, we'd like to introduce a planning format that is effective, user-friendly and flexible. We've considered if we should introduce retrospective or an 'in the moment' planning that responds to the learning and development that we observe, or if we should annotate IEYC units and adapt them on an ongoing basis, or if we should produce an IEYC planning template that allows for change. There has been a lot to reflect on! In the past, we used the EYFS goals and a planning format that everyone was familiar with; our challenge has been to let go of what became our 'security blanket' and embrace ***'The IEYC Learning Outcomes'*** with a view to using them as a child-centred process of monitoring learning and progression.

We're working with our consultant from Fieldwork Education and exploring ideas for developing an evidence-based format to record observations that are completely linked to each of the 52 ***'IEYC Learning Outcomes'***. It's a very exciting time in our IEYC journey and we are aiming to achieve a three-year account of each child's development of knowledge, skills and understanding through the IEYC. It's something we have started to trial, review and adapt, and even at this early stage, it's generated a lot of discussion, motivation and enthusiasm.

**This approach embeds IEYC Learning Principles 4, 5 and 8:**

***4. Learning happens when developmentally-appropriate, teacher-scaffolded and child-initiated experiences harness children's natural curiosity in an enabling environment.***

***5. Knowledge and skills development lead to an increasing sense of understanding when children are provided with opportunities to explore and express their ideas in multiple ways.***

***8. Learning should be motivating, engaging and fun, opening up a world of wonder for children where personal interests can flourish.***

We've learned so much along the way and are keen to keep up the momentum – and take others along with us. We are planning to develop an ***'Early Years Shared Vision'*** that is unique to the 2-5 age range and naturally feeds into the current ***'Panaga School Shared Vision'***. This process will help us reflect on each of the eight ***'IEYC Learning Principles'*** and help all stakeholders appreciate that:

***'The earliest years of life are important in their own right!'***



**About the author:**



***Janice Ireland*** provides education consultancy across the group of Shell and Shell-affiliated schools. In 2016, Janice was commissioned by Fieldwork Education to research, design and write the IEYC Framework and continues to lead professional development and quality assurance in this area.

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