

An Interview with Laurence Burgess (Deputy Head Teacher) and Sarah Josefsen (Early Years Milepost Leader) from PDO School, Muscat, Oman.

Shaping the International Early Years Curriculum to Make Learning Visible in Primary 1 at PDO School: by Janice Ireland.

Amidst a boom in the oil and gas industry in Oman during the 1960's, PDO School in Muscat became the centre of expatriate life for families. During these formative years Royal Dutch Shell School, as it was known then, was the only school in Muscat that provided education for expatriate children. Today, whilst there are many other international schools in the region, PDO School is recognised as a market leader in the field of high-quality international education.

PDO School's state-of-the-art building that opened in 2015 has breathed new life and fresh energy into the '*Passion for Learning*' that has driven the school forward for over five decades. The school's Early Years wing provides a safe and secure hub for children to learn and has been carefully planned to make the most of what a new building can offer. Visitors to the setting are immediately drawn into the buzz of excitement and joy that surrounds each learning area. This is a setting that knows how to motivate and engage young children!

Early Years provision at PDO School is recognised by specialists in the field as an outstanding example of child centred best-practice. Staff make choices about new initiatives only after they have been trialled, evaluated and adapted so that they match the school's shared vision of '*Fostering a passion for learning by providing all children with a nurturing yet challenging environment in which they strive to reach for their full potential.*' Parents can be assured that new initiatives at PDO School have an evidence-base demonstrating that they improve learning long before they become part of everyday practice.

Deputy Head Teacher Laurence Burgess and Early Years Milepost Leader Sarah Josefsen invited me to talk to them about how staff at PDO School have shaped and developed their curriculum so that every child is an active learner and thinker, with interests central to teacher's planning. We began by talking about PDO School's curriculum of choice, The International Early Years Curriculum (IEYC) and the ways teachers make Learning Visible for all children. Although many of the approaches highlighted within this article are shared across the whole of the Early Years setting at PDO School, this case study focusses specifically on Primary 1 (P1) provision.

The International Early Years Curriculum

Question: The IEYC suggests that '*learning happens when developmentally-appropriate, teacher-scaffolded and child-initiated experiences harness children's natural curiosity in an enabling environment.*' How did PDO School approach implementation in P1?

Laurence and Sarah:

We first looked at the IEYC when we already had a well-planned and well-resourced curriculum, but we decided to trial an IEYC unit and evaluate its impact on children's learning. Like all new initiatives there were some challenges for staff, but we approach implementation with an open mind and tried to look for solutions rather than barriers. After our first unit '***To the Rescue!***' we saw the potential

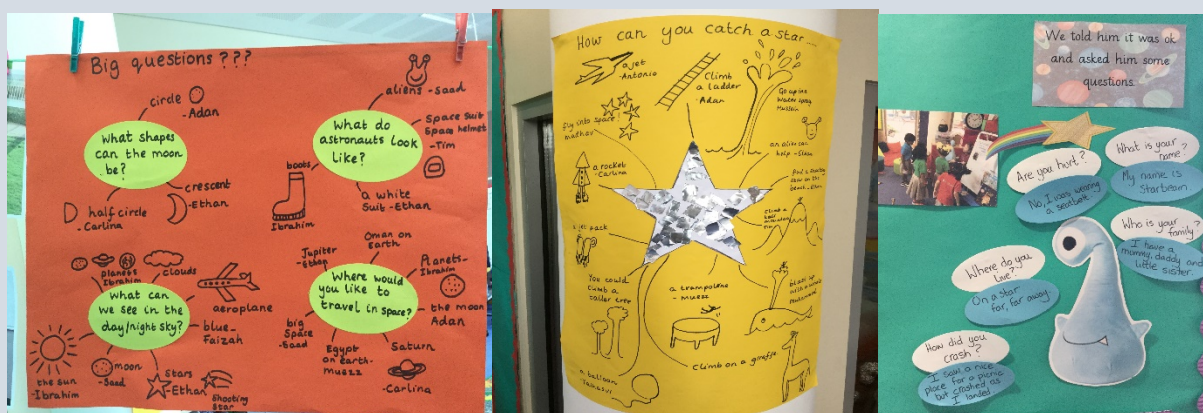
the curriculum offered for inspiring children and as a tool for teachers and decided to gradually roll out implementation.

Our approach is to be flexible in how a unit develops and this often means we extend some 'Learning Blocks' beyond the recommended implementation timings, depending on children's enthusiasm and how their interests develop. We have nine Early Years classes and so sharing resources and joint learning areas needs careful forward planning – working as a team is essential!

We always begin a new IEYC unit with an 'Entry Point'; this is an exciting and memorable event that launches a new theme and is aimed at encouraging children to think and become motivated about the experiences that will follow. For example, when we launched 'Blast Off!' we set up an area where an imaginary alien spaceship had crash landed. This really captured children's curiosity and acted as a catalyst for child-initiated learning. Children generated ideas about living in space and they designed and built new space rockets whilst adults observed and recorded ways to scaffold and extend learning at group, class and individual level.



When we launch a new IEYC unit we pose some 'Big Questions' linked to the central theme and staff encourage children to express their ideas. Thoughts are recorded through words, illustrations and by adults scribing, in this way all ideas are used and valued, no matter what developmental stage a child is at. Throughout an IEYC unit we revisit the initial Big Questions and evaluate how ideas and new learning has progressed. On our original Big Questions sheet, we add details about the knowledge and skills children have developed and generate new ideas and questions. This really helps children see how their learning is developing throughout the theme, and for teachers we're building a picture of children's development and interests. This helps teachers move forward with our planning in a way that supports children's interests and learning needs.



On-going observation is central to Early Years practice at PDO School. Through observation teachers discover so much about a child; what they can do independently, their next steps in learning and what they enjoy learning about. Observation is key to ensuring that we 'Enable the Environment' so

that we can harness children's natural curiosity and child-initiated learning can take place. We do this by reflecting on our observations, evaluating children's next steps and providing appropriate resources and space so that children can explore and extend their ideas. We've found that children's ideas grow and usually have a snowball effect, other children want to join in and explore collaboratively.

We encourage children to develop their personal and social skills by embedding the '**IEYC Personal Goals**' into all aspects of learning. For example, when the children are using shared spaces such as role play areas we talk about '**Respect and Cooperation**' and this helps to promote teamwork and helps children see things from different perspectives. Children at PDO School come from many different cultures and pre-school experiences and having a consistent set of Personal Goals has really supported the development and value of '**International Mindedness**'. We encourage children to learn and shared ideas with children from other classes. For example, in our shared corridor areas children can see that other classes are involved in developing ideas linked to the same theme. This helps them to develop '**Respect**' and '**Thoughtfulness**' as they observe ideas of others and often they join in and extend learning together.



We've really strengthened our '**Learning-Link**' with the home through the IEYC. At PDO School we use online Class Pages to share information with families and we add details about IEYC learning. This has been a great way to involve parents and extend curiosity at home. When we introduced children to the *Blast Off!* unit we encouraged parents to look at the moon at night and talk to their children about it. This was a great way to extend and deepen children's new learning.

We always look for ways in which we can make relevant and interesting links between the IEYC and language and mathematics development. We have a high proportion of children who are learning English as an additional language and so it's important that the curriculum is accessible to everyone. With *Blast Off!* we encouraged children to use spaceship and astronaut checklists that involved identifying numbers, shapes, letters and words – some children even designed their own checklists. This enabled all children to learn at their own level and it brought language and mathematical development to life. *Blast Off!* provided a relevant context for children learning to count forwards and backwards, some children built a ladder to get to the moon and there were many other exciting challenges such as mixing the right colour of rocket fuel for our resident alien '*Starbeam*' to get home!

Making Learning Visible

Question: *PDO School has embedded Harvard University's 'Making Learning Visible' across the school and in the Early Years teachers engage children in 'Thinking Routines' from the program. Can you describe how you approached this in your team?*

Laurence and Sarah: As part of our Professional Learning, PDO staff were invited to participate in Harvard University's online '***Making Learning Visible***' course. As our new learning progressed, we trialled and evaluated some of the '***Thinking Routines***' that form the core of the program. We found some of the Thinking Routines best suited to older children, but our Early Years staff recognised the value of adapting them for younger children by integrating them into our classroom practices and linking them to the IEYC.

We began by identifying potential barriers in the Thinking Routines that might prevent us reaching children's developmental needs. Teachers considered that for most children it would be more of a confidence issue, and so we broke each Thinking Routine down into small steps and adopted a staggered approach to each. For example, we looked at how we could make '***See, Think, Wonder***' a tool to provide an insight into children's curiosity, as well as something children could use for reflection purposes. We began by '*seeing*' one day, '*thinking*' the next day and then finally '*wondering*'. We practised regularly and helped children to see that all their ideas are good ideas and that there are no wrong answers! This approach really helped both staff and children, teachers were able to adapt planning according to children's needs and interests, and children were able to see their ideas put into practice. From this starting point we've built Thinking Routines into the IEYC as well as literacy and numeracy, and in doing so we've developed an approach that brings makes children's visible in the classroom.

With the IEYC, we often link Thinking Routines to the '***Teacher-Scaffolded Tasks***' that are suggested in the units and we also weave Thinking Routines into '***Child-Initiated Enquiry***' when it's appropriate. The IEYC recommends that teachers '***Capture Children's Curiosity***' right from the launch of a unit and routines such as '*Zoom In*' and '*See, Think, Wonder*' are great tools for providing an insight into what children are thinking about, interested in and want to learn more about.

We've found that children really enjoy seeing their own thoughts recorded through Thinking Routines because adults are giving value each child's contribution. When we scribe thoughts for a child we always praise them and say, '*this is your thinking, thank you for sharing it!*', this makes a real difference and boosts children's confidence. We've found that since adopting Thinking Routines children are more willing to share ideas and as a result they contribute more. Embedding Thinking Routines into the curriculum has enhanced how children learn and how teachers plan. As a planning tool we evaluate the skills children develop through each Thinking Routine, and then build on them accordingly. Our Role Play Area is a good example of how children use Thinking Routines in practical ways. We started by asking children what they'd like to have in a Role Play Area and scribed their ideas. Children were involved in setting the area up and each time an idea became a reality they evaluated the outcome and then acknowledged when something had been achieved. Thinking Routines provide a useful structure for children and making their learning visible means that learning grows. Plans often take a new direction when children see their ideas develop – learning never stands still and our children have become very reflective learners!

Reflective Learners

Question: You describe Early Years children at PDO School as *'reflective learners'* what does this look like in practice in P1?

Laurence and Sarah: Providing children with opportunities to ***'reflect and evaluate'*** their learning begins right from the Early Years at PDO School. We always ask children questions such as *'how could things be improved ...'*, *'what would you like to add ...'*, *'what would you like to make ...'*, and in this way children are encouraged to see things from different perspectives as learning develops. When children are constructing models and designing new learning areas we make initial plans together and display these near where children are working. When something on the plan is completed children mark it off with a 'completion sticker' so that they can reflect on their progress. When children generate new ideas, we encourage them to add these to their initial planning documents, and at the end of an IEYC unit we spend some time reflecting on how much we have learned.

In technology we designed a 'Make Do' construction kit which includes things children need to develop real-life skills for planning and evaluating their learning. Over time, Early Years children at PDO School become expert planners, confident in selecting resources and they use reflection skills as part of everyday learning, these are life skills that everyone needs!

Our IEYC and Making Learning Visible journey has been an exciting and rewarding one and we are looking forward to building on the successes we've had so far!

