

Learning is fun at Katikati Primary School

by Jeannette McCallum

Katikati Primary School is a large Year 1-6, decile 5 school with 520 students. It is situated in a small rural town near Tauranga, Bay of Plenty in New Zealand.

In the morning, teachers meet children, with soothing baroque music playing; they are all in their classrooms to greet children and set the scene for the day. When the bell goes there is fifteen minutes of uninterrupted time for classes to develop a caring bond. Often classes start with a sharing round or 'I feel like...' round in which children can talk about what is happening in their lives. If children are stressed they are unable to learn so it is important for them to be able to share and receive support. During the first part of the day our 'Caring and Values Programme' also takes place throughout the school.

There is one values focus per term that links with our STAR School Model

- Term 1: S = Self-worth: The value is Responsibility
- Term 2: T = Team work: The value is Respect
- Term 3: A = Achievement: The value is Honesty/Truthfulness
- Term 4: R = Reflection: The value is Consideration



NAVIGATING UNIQUE PATHWAYS IN LEARNING

Teachers find that brain gym works well at the beginning of the day. They report that using brain gym in the morning encourages calmness and more effective learning. It stimulates the brain for effective working and learning. Smiles appear on children's faces and it is obvious they enjoy the movements. Brain gym is also used for a short break to refocus students when their attention wanes, so they can return to learning with greater concentration. For a five-year-old, five minutes is the average length of time they can focus and class programmes recognise this.

The curriculum is integrated where possible to give more relevance to children's learning. Katikati Primary School uses Inquiry Learning as a school wide approach. We are learning skills for life long learning after deciding as a staff what our shared values are and what skills we would like our children to have when they leave school.

As the day proceeds new concepts are introduced acknowledging left and right brain processing preferences, for example, 'right brain learners' prefer the big picture with an anecdote to begin with that they can relate to. Left brain processors prefer small sequential steps with constant feedback throughout the lessons.

Multi-sensory learning with choice makes learning fun and more likely to be remembered, whereas learning that is taught via one mode is more likely to be forgotten. It is the teacher's task to individualise learning so it is effective for each child. This means it becomes the teacher's challenge to know how children learn best, whereas in the past children had to learn in the way the teacher chose.

The classroom environment is important for effective learning. At Katikati Primary we have set up our classes so that children can have choices about how they learn best. With this comes responsibility that their learning is improved and their learning does not interfere with any one else's learning. There is lots of shared decision-making and choices in a learning style classroom because if children have ownership in decisions they are more likely to abide by them.

Kinesthetic learners may learn to spell by 'air punching' of 'taking the long walk' (a long walk is a dance with a letter for each step) or throwing a Koosh ball while their partner checks the spelling is correct.

Tactile learners may use playdough or sand to form words or build words with magnetic letters. Visual learners may use lots of different colours when writing out words and auditory learners may test their partner or sing or rap the words.

New concepts are taught through all the senses (auditory, visual, tactile and kinesthetic). An example of multi-sensory learning at Katikati PS is Letterland for Year 0 to 2 children. Each alphabet letter is a character who lives in Letterland and there are songs, rhymes, dress ups, stories, games and puzzles to learn from. Last year a research project found those children learned sounds and letter names better than the children in a control group who did not participate in Letterland activities. The teachers notice a huge shift in reading and writing skills since Letterland has been introduced. Another programme introduced at Katikati PS is the PMP (Perceptual Motor Programme) that the three youngest classes participate in. This programme teaches children perceptions and understandings of themselves and their world through movement.

If you visit classes you will see a variety of workspaces. Children choose where to learn. It may be on beanbags, kneeling at a low table, sitting on cushions or sitting at desks. Some prefer to work on their own with headphones and others prefer to work with a buddy or in a team.

To keep brainfit children enjoy snacking on healthy food and sipping water when they wish to. You will probably hear Mozart or baroque music playing in classrooms as children learn. Teachers report that snacking on healthy food not only means learning is improved, but children are learning to bring more fruit and vegetables and bread based foods instead of junk food.

After breaks relaxation gives children a chance to get back into learning mode. Peaceful baroque music plays while they relax. Baroque music also plays before school when the teacher greets the children in classrooms. A relaxed body and alert mind is the state children need to be in for effective learning.

From the age of 5, children are guided towards thinking about how they learn best. A learning style poster is in every classroom and teachers encourage each child to reflect on their learning, using the poster as a graphic guide. In Year 4 every child has their LS analysed and the results are shared between child, caregivers and teacher. Parents report that the LSA is useful for them to understand how their child learns best when doing homework.

ICT is a focus as a tool for higher thinking skills across the curriculum. To enable children to become global learners they need to acquire skills to learn independently and effectively using modern technology. ICT provides many different ways that cater for individualised learning and children who learn differently.

High expectations and consistency combined with the LS approach means we are noticing an improvement in behaviour and achievement, especially in literacy and numeracy.

Changes at our School

There have been lots of changes at Katikati PS over the last four years. There is considerable expertise among our colleagues and we pooled our knowledge to work towards our shared goals to prepare children for our global society. We sought out other educators, networked with other schools, visited schools as part of our professional development programme and developed partnerships with the University of Waikato.

An action plan for the change effort was developed and at the end of the first year we reviewed the LS and ICT innovations in depth. From the review came recommendations that then formed the strategic and management plan. The review surveyed parents, staff and students responses, which were then collated. Budgets were prioritised for professional development and resources to support each innovation to bring about change in the school's culture.

Emotional response to change had to be acknowledged and understood and we had to accept that everyone is at different levels of understanding and expertise. For some, the change can be uncomfortable and some teachers needed to be encouraged to step outside their comfort zone with an open mind and take a small step at a time. Change is taking time because there has to be time for consolidation and reflection and sharing. One of management's tasks is to listen and pace the change so it can be effective. It is important to celebrate the positives and to reflect on how far we have come.

An understanding of how teachers learn is important. When teachers learn something new there seems to be an 'Implementation Dip' when people agree to undertake change and during their initial attempts there is a decline in performance. This needs to be understood and followed through that teachers need collegiality, support, good quality resources, effective supporting systems and appropriate equipment.

Once the LS innovation was underway we shared leadership to set up collegial systems for teachers to share openly about their practice and to support each other. We have LS and ICT mentors. These mentors are those who embraced these new concepts and are now teachers prepared to model good practice. Sharing is encouraged at Team Area, Management and Staff Meetings.

Anchoring the innovations in shared philosophy, policy and embedding practice into daily life, which then becomes the school culture is another important step. This is done in many different ways, for example: developing a school wide common language; the fifteen minutes of uninterrupted time for every classroom at the beginning of the day; relaxation after lunch, brain gym as part of our day, interactive staff meetings, publicly celebrating good things

happening in classrooms; bringing parents on board with our changes; making sure systems are in place so all Year 4 children have their LS analysed and shared with parents, teachers and other students.

Catering for staff changes has been challenging, although the new staff have all come with open minds and an awareness of the need for individualising learning. We are now in our fourth year of change. Children are more settled at learning. Classrooms are showing evidence of LS, MI, higher thinking skills and inquiry learning. Katikati Primary School is continually reflecting and adapting and internalising our methodology to suit the needs of our children and we see the journey as the important part, not the destination.