

Children's learning journeys at Monkton Primary School Nursery Class

Staff at Monkton Primary School Nursery Class introduced responsive planning and children's learning journeys. This practice was highlighted as a strength during a shared inspection by Education Scotland and the Care Inspectorate in 2013.

Introduction

Monkton Primary School and Nursery Class is located in the small village of Monkton, South Ayrshire. The nursery operates with 20 places in each session, morning and afternoon. Each session is staffed with a nursery teacher and an early learning and childcare practitioner.

Aims

Through self-evaluation, it was agreed that the nursery should reconsider its current practice of delivering a 'traditional' topic-based approach every three weeks. It was felt by staff that topics were arrived at through contrived consultation with children, where the children were responsible for choosing their resources or, within reason, learning themes.

Instead, the staff wanted children to choose their own learning path through planned experiences that were more responsive to the interests shown by children. To do this, the nursery planning and tracking needed to be changed so that they supported learning experiences as well as documenting coverage of the experiences and outcomes of the Early level.

As a result, a new style of children's profile was developed, which is now known as the 'Learning Journey'.

Process

Taking the indoor experience outside

The process began with looking at how outdoor learning experiences could be provided for the children. Staff wanted to take the indoor experience outside. However, through evaluation of the experiences provided outdoors, it became obvious that some learning was contrived and that more could be done to increase the impact of planned learning experiences.

The staff looked at good practice in other early years centres. Following this, they introduced changes to their own outdoor area to creating a stimulating space over which the children had real ownership. The changes included: introduction of a mud kitchen with pots and pans, a bug hotel, and addition of lots of natural building materials. To support this further, the staff identified and used resources within the local community, including going on learning walks and using public transport to go farther afield.

Adopting a framework that supports responsive planning

At this time the authority's Early Years team introduced a planning framework that supported responsive planning, allowing evidence of learning taking place across the curriculum to be recorded. This also allowed the opportunity to plan for focused time on literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing, as well as the flexibility to allow more depth and coverage of other curriculum areas.

The new planning framework assisted greatly in contextualising learning, with children and parents clearly able to see a child's learning journey. In addition, observing and responding to what children are saying and doing has resulted in there being a diverse range of learning experiences on offer, which are no longer confined to set topics or time barriers. The planning framework supported a sense of freedom and created an excitement for staff.

Impact

The impact of the various changes can be seen in a number of ways. Children are now more engaged in their learning. They can discuss what they know and also, more importantly, can discuss next steps in learning.

Children have a greater desire to develop literacy and numeracy skills as expectations are now higher. They now find writing opportunities throughout the nursery and write with a greater sense of purpose.

Children are experiencing a broader range of experiences. In particular, science and technologies have been given a greater focus. Visits to places in the community are now far more relevant and serve to enrich learning.

Natural resources are used more routinely within the nursery, which has allowed children to learn about assessing risk. The use of natural resources has also stimulated learning and facilitated opportunities for a higher level of imaginative play.

Staff have greater motivation and are more confident about sharing ideas with others. They also recognise how to progress learning through carefully observing and listening to children's ideas.

Children's profiles or 'learning journeys'

The improvements to planning and tracking have impacted on the quality of children's profiles, now known as the 'learning journey'.

As a result of their active contribution and ownership of the process, children are more engaged in their 'learning journey'. Children use their 'learning journey' to confidently talk about their experiences. These now give a better range of evidence, which has evolved into bespoke files for each child. There is potential for a smoother transition through the Early level as a result of there being more evidence of where significant progress has been made for each child.

Parents are far more involved with children's learning and the use of the 'learning journey' has enabled a better level of staff-parent discussions at target-setting meetings, which have replaced the traditional parents' night.

Further developments

Although very excited about the creation of a richer learning environment, staff realise that there is always scope to improve. An extension of wider learning in the community will include 'Thursday Wanders' where, with parental support, children will take train/bus trips and generally make use of the local resources.

The focused work done within numeracy and literacy will continue to be built upon using outdoor and contextual learning as support. 'Thursday Wanders' will also be used to extend this.

Children and staff are continuing with their learning.