

THE EARLY YEARS PROGRAM

A Curriculum Framework for PreK-3 to Kindergarten



THINKERS SOCIAL AGENTS COMMUNICATORS SELF-MANAGERS RESEARCHERS

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Beliefs

“Play is the genuine work of young children. It is the collaborative process through which they explore their world, build positive relationships, and nurture their unique and incredible potential. This is achieved through a partnership of support and respect shared between students, parents, teachers, and the broader community.”

-MZS Early Years Philosophy Statement-

Fundamental Principles¹

The child as protagonist

Children are able to construct their own learning because they have valued ideas in the community. Children, teachers, and parents are considered the three central protagonists in the educational process (Gandini, 1993).

The child as collaborator

The children work as part of a community not in isolation (Gandini, 1993). There is an emphasis on work in small groups. This practice is based on the idea that we form ourselves through our interaction with peers, adults, real world objects and environments, and symbols (Lewin, 1995).

The child as communicator

Children are encouraged to communicate through words, movement, drawing, painting, building, sculpture, shadow play, collage, dramatic play, and music. Children are encouraged to use many materials to discover and communicate what they know, understand, wonder about, question, feel, and imagine. The teacher works closely with the children as a guide and facilitator to help them explore their surroundings.

The environment as the third teacher

¹ Gandini, Lella. (1993). Fundamentals of the Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education. Young Children. 49.

The design and use of space encourage encounters, communication, and relationships (Gandini, 1993). Each space has an identity and a purpose. The space is valued by the children and adults.

The teacher as partner, nurturer, and guide

Teachers facilitate children's exploration of themes, work on short and long-term projects, and guide experiences of joint, open-ended discovery and problem solving (Edwards et al, 1993). The main goal for teachers is to listen and observe the children closely. Teachers question and listen to the children and provide opportunities for discovery and learning (Gandini, 1993).

The teacher as researcher

Teachers maintain strong collegial relationships with all the teachers and staff in the center. They exchange ideas with each other which provides training and enrichment. Teachers will prepare documentation of their work with children, whom they also consider researchers.

The documentation as communication

Teachers document what is happening in the classroom by commenting on the purpose of the activity and the children's learning process, they transcribe the children's verbal language, they photograph the activity and show the documentation through online platforms like SeeSaw, or in physical form, in the display boards. Documentation is important because parents are able to become aware of their children's experiences. It also allows teachers to better understand children, to evaluate their own work, and to exchange ideas with others. Documentation is also very important because it shows children that their work is valued.

The parent as partner

Parent participation is considered essential and takes many forms (e.g. guest speakers, reading in class, providing materials and support when needed, participating in workshares and other school events, communicating with teachers regularly). Parents play an active part in their children's learning experiences and help ensure the welfare of all the children in the school. Parents' ideas and skills are highly valued in the community.

Teaching & Learning

Early Years students at MZS are part of the Primary Years Program (PYP). Supporting children cognitively, socially, emotionally, and physically requires that all members of the learning community value these early years in their own right, as a time in which play is the primary driver for inquiry.

At MZS, the Early Years section is organized around the *Primary Years Framework* and are inspired by the *Reggio Emilia approach*².

In PreK3, 4, and most of the Kindergarten year, learning is based on an inquiry approach to *emergent* curriculum (Inan, 2012). The curriculum is shaped according to the time and place, interests, choice, and active participation by everyone. The curriculum is informed by the [Early Years Learning Framework for Australia](#) and, additionally, the Common Core Standards for [Language Arts](#) and [Mathematics](#) in Kindergarten.

The inquiries are built within the Early Years Program Of Inquiry (POI), which offers authentic opportunities to focus on the key developmental abilities that are acquired during this crucial time and that support young students to be self-regulating learners. The transdisciplinary themes provide authentic contexts for students to learn increasingly complex ideas about themselves and the world around them. For example, central ideas related to “*Who We Are*” support young children to learn about identity, relationships, well-being, and what it means to be part of a community, while “*How We Express Ourselves*” relates to discovery, creativity, and the expression of ideas and feelings. Other units may emerge from small or large group interests. Units are paced by quarter, but can vary in length depending on engagement.

Young children’s development proceeds in a complex, and often non-linear, trajectory where individual children follow different pathways simultaneously. Teachers create learning environments and experiences that are both adaptable and appropriate to young students, and they understand the important influence of their personal contexts. As a result, teachers adapt learning goals and intended

² The Reggio Emilia approach is an educational philosophy focused on preschool and primary education. It is a pedagogy described as student-centered and constructivist that uses self-directed, experiential learning in relationship-driven environments.

learning experiences accordingly, based on their observations of young students' learning and development.

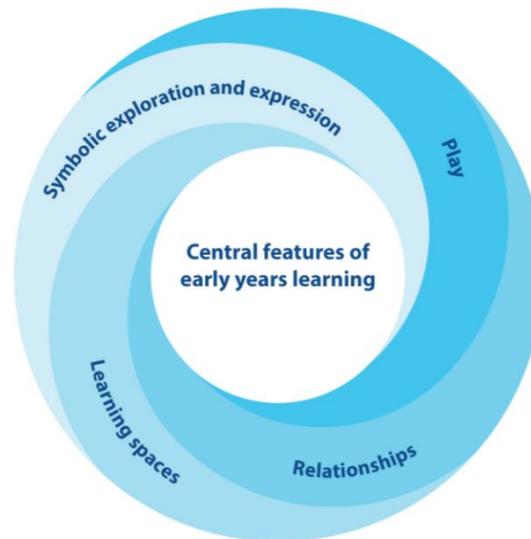
There is a sustained, complex, and dynamic interplay between learning and development that requires a well-considered Early Years educational experience for young children and their families. By actively facilitating a student's meaning-making, the physical and social environment engages the student in rich and developmentally responsive ways.

The processes of learning and teaching are crafted to support students' individual and emergent pathways of development. Teachers support learning by:

- planning uninterrupted time for play
- developing creativity and curiosity through inquiry
- building strong relationships with students and their families
- creating and maintaining responsive spaces for play
- offering many opportunities for symbolic exploration and expression

Each of these elements are mutually supportive and are interwoven with the others in both theory and practice.

Figure EL01: Central features of learning in the early years



³ Figure EL01: Central features of learning in the early years

³ IB (2018). *The enhanced PYP: the learner*. Figure EL01: Central features of learning in the early years. pp.9

Play-based Learning

Young students' development is supported when hands-on learning is combined with student-initiated play. A careful consideration exists between student-initiated play and teacher-initiated experiences. Play provides benefits for cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development for students from all socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, and offers authentic opportunities for students to begin their exploration and development of the IB learner profiles.

Play is highly adaptive, involves choice, promotes agency and provides rigorous opportunities to inquire into important concepts and personal interests. Through play, children actively construct meaning from their interactions with their physical and social worlds. These meanings, models, or ideas are revisited and revised in light of new experiences and further learning. In play, children construct, test, confirm, or revise these ideas by themselves or with their peers, constantly adapting their personal models of how the world works. Teachers interact with students while observing, monitoring, and documenting their learning.

During uninterrupted time for play, teachers initiate a range of intentional learning experiences, offering support and feedback when needed. Teachers in the PYP early years support play through:

- creating and maintaining engaging learning spaces
- scheduling uninterrupted time for play in both indoor and outdoor spaces
- noticing students' emerging thinking processes, interests, and theories, and responding in ways that extend learning
- providing open-ended materials
- monitoring and documenting students' learning and development during play, and offering appropriate scaffolded learning experiences for individual students and small groups

Kindergarten teachers can support young learners' understanding and use of technology by making appropriate technological devices available in order to appeal to their natural curiosity. The aim for young learners is not so much about mastering technology, but about using technology to extend their

investigations through touching, seeing and hearing. During this exploration process, young children develop thinking skills and learn to make connections in subsequent play activities.

Symbolic Exploration, Expression and Language

From an early age, language is the central operating system that generates and supports cognition. Learning language develops exponentially with experience. Teachers understand that becoming literate and numerate are evolving processes that bring students to more sophisticated understandings over time. Effective Language and Mathematics learning and teaching is based on students' developing ability to listen to and speak with others, and to understand and use symbols. The importance of expanding these skills by transferring learning and experiences to other contexts allows students to re-encounter their thinking, develop symbolic competency, explore new connections, and consolidate their understandings.

Language and Mathematics teaching follow students' learning pathways that are connected to personal interests and larger concepts. The development of understandings in Language and Mathematics are interwoven and intentionally explored through strategies such as games, rhymes, poems, stories, play, conversations, mark-making, drawing, problem-solving, reasoning, counting, patterning, and sequencing.

Students use play to make meaning and understandings of the world, and to develop oral language and symbolic competence. They share personal experiences and understandings through talk, play, shared stories, and collaborative exploration. By listening attentively, teachers discover students' language expertise and mental models. Using this knowledge, teachers plan and create learning experiences that extend students' language capabilities. Teachers support language learning by providing opportunities for physical movement, imaginary and cooperative play. Young students are naturally curious about the world; by interacting with different kinds of materials, they develop the language needed to share their understandings of the properties and behaviour of the physical world. Teachers model language around these explorations through talk-alouds, and use observations about students' expressed interests to ensure a responsive learning environment. Stories, songs, and rhymes provide particular opportunities to develop language comprehension and the foundations of literacy.

Learning Environments

At MZS, we believe that the environment is the *third teacher*. Students learn best in a safe, stimulating, and inviting learning spaces that promote exploration, wonder, creativity, risk-taking, and learning through play. These are spaces where opportunities for authentic learning experiences are of utmost importance, and where students are valued for their knowledge, strengths, and competencies as individuals and as part of a larger group. Deliberate attention is paid to the structure, purpose, and function of these spaces as contexts that support play-based, transdisciplinary learning, collaborative learning of knowledge, conceptual understandings and skills, and opportunities to take action.

Teachers create a safe, stimulating, and inviting learning spaces by:

- offering a range of open-ended materials
- arranging and rearranging materials as invitations for learning
- creating accessible areas for role play, block play, mark-making, expression through the arts, and so on
- considering a range of choices and opportunities for group and individual play
- involving students in the design and construction of play areas
- creating *at-their-level* displays and furniture that reflect the process of students' learning and show respect for the student's work and independence (e.g. framing, organizing materials)
- including accessible multifunctional furniture
- providing warm spaces with natural and decorative lighting, textures, and neutral colors

The physical features of the learning environments at MZS are, whenever possible, organized in the following main spaces:

- the classroom: an environment that is suited to the students' interests and developmental stages. It is a place that is welcoming, authentic, aesthetically pleasing, culturally representative of community, embraces nature and is filled with purposeful materials. The layout of the environment promotes relationships, communication, collaboration, and exploration through

play. Materials are thoughtfully added to the environment to promote creativity, thinking and problem solving skills, questions, experimentation, and open-ended play.

- the atelier: a place of research, invention, and empathy, expressed by means of “100 languages”. The ateliers are constructed in partnership with other professionals of various competencies (e.g. artists, engineers, musicians). This space is supported by the figure of the *atelierista*, a “teacher” with an arts background, that supports and extends students learning through his/her area of expertise. Together with the other EY teachers, the atelierista plans learning engagements based on students' interests and developmental needs.
- the outdoor space and the playground: the outdoor space is a feast for the senses; full of smells, sounds, sights, textures, changing light, air quality, and temperatures. Children should have permanent access to the outdoors. Planning and design of the outdoor environment should support inclusion and meet the needs of individuals, offering a diverse range of play experiences. Properly equipped and laid out, the environment invites children to engage in gross motor, messy, and active play. It is a space for parents, different grade levels and classrooms to interact and socialize.

Relationships

The role of the teacher

Teachers take on many roles and identities, including facilitator, researcher, participant, provocateur, navigator, observer, documenter, and reflective practitioner. Through these flexible lenses, teachers plan, facilitate, and scaffold, as well as reflect on students' learning and their own teaching. Teachers carefully balance the planning and documenting of the learning and progress of the group by monitoring and responding to the learning development of individuals. Moment-by-moment teacher actions, reactions, and interactions with children are key to their cognitive development (Copple, Bredekamp 2009). PYP teachers create stimulating learning spaces, listen deeply to students, and craft exciting avenues for inquiry. They ensure a balance between listening to individuals, shaping shared investigations, and ensuring overall intentions for learning. Using a repertoire of strategies, tools and understandings, teachers work closely with students to co-construct inquiries and reflect regularly on their practice.

Teachers also support children in developing social-emotional competence because this connects to children's emotional well-being and their ability to adapt in new environments and to form successful relationships throughout life (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2004). For example, by positioning play as central to children's development, teachers are creating a non-threatening environment for children to learn about the world at their own pace (Rushton, Juola-Rushton 2010).

School, parents, and legal guardians

Encouraging and nurturing positive relationships between home, family, and the school provides a strong basis for learning, behaviour, health, and wellbeing. The significance of relationships in the early years is a fundamental part of establishing important skills and dispositions that centre on trust, agency, and belonging. When the importance of relationships is reinforced, the foundations for an effective learning community are established. Teachers support the development of relationships through:

- regular conversations with parents and legal guardians
- acknowledging and respecting each student's individuality
- connecting with individual students throughout the day by having conversations, listening to and documenting their evolving questions, and acknowledging their efforts and achievements
- recognizing opportunities for students to learn to self-regulate during play and offer support and feedback when needed
- including parents in the school life

Collaboration

It is important that Early Years teachers and artelieristas communicate regularly about students' progress and plan together to maximize learning in the classroom. Weekly meetings are held as a team to discuss the progress of the units, share ideas and strategies, and redirect the direction of the units based on the assessment gathered.

Parents are included in their children's learning and teachers view them as partners in the learning process, inviting them to be active participants in the classroom life.

Agency and Self-Efficacy

Agency “enables people to play a part in their self-development, adaptation, and self-renewal with changing times” (Bandura 2001).

Early Years students with agency use their own initiative and will, and take responsibility and ownership of their learning. They direct their learning with a strong sense of identity and self-belief, and in conjunction with others, thereby building a sense of community and awareness of the opinions, values, and needs of others.

Efficacy refers to an individual’s belief in their “capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (Bandura 1997). This belief is integrally connected to agency because the stronger the sense of self-efficacy, the greater likelihood that the individual will exercise agency. Self-efficacy influences the choices students are confident in making, which, in turn, influences the degree of ownership and impact they have in their lives.



⁴Figure LA01: Agency

In the Early Years, teachers support agency by creating opportunities for agency in the classroom and by involving students in the following activities:

⁴ IB (2018) *The Enhanced PYP: the learner*. Figure LA01: Agency. pp. 2

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- establishing a respectful and welcoming culture
 - collaborating with students to create shared agreements about how to interact with others to create a culture of respect and trust where all students feel welcomed, significant, and emotionally safe
 - creating shared routines, by asking for students' input into developing routines around arrival, transitions, communication signals, meetings, clean up, and dismissal
 - setting up the learning spaces, by asking students to help set up and arrange learning spaces that make them feel safe physically and where they can access learning materials, make choices, and take risks
 - making decisions about learning by involving students in making decisions about what, why, and how they learn — as co-collaborators in the learning community
 - allowing time to respond to students' ideas about action
 - communicating expectations to clarify what knowledge, conceptual understandings, skills, and dispositions the students are learning, and why

The Standards

Teachers refer to the '[Belonging, Being and Becoming](#)' *Australian National Early Years Learning Framework* to guide their teaching, and to monitor and assess the Early Years students' progress against the following outcomes:

Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity

Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world

Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing

Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners

Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators

Additionally, Kindergarten students are assessed against the following appropriate and relevant standards: [Common Core Language Arts](#), [Common Core Mathematics](#), [Next Generation Science](#), and [AERO Humanities](#). Teachers use selected power standards from the documents above to guide their planning and teaching.

Transdisciplinarity

It is a fundamental PYP belief that the Early Years learners' continuous integration and connection of prior and new knowledge as well as experiences is the most meaningful way to broaden the students' understandings about the world. Transdisciplinary learning refers to learning that is not confined within the boundaries of traditional subjects but is supported and enriched by them.

Units are built within the Early Years Program Of Inquiry (POI), which offers authentic contexts for students to learn increasingly complex ideas about themselves and the world around them. For example, central ideas related to "*Who We Are*" support young children learning about identity, relationships, culture, well-being, and what it means to be part of a community, while "*How We Express Ourselves*" relate to discovery, creativity, the arts, and the expression of ideas and feelings.

Effective teaching, Albright (2016: 532) believes, "is implicitly transdisciplinary", and, by design, multiple elements of the PYP bring to life transdisciplinary learning and teaching. These elements provide the foundation for students to develop transdisciplinary thinking, to explore real-life issues and to effect change. They support the development of "internationally minded people who recognize their common humanity and shared guardianship of the planet" (IBO 2017: 2).

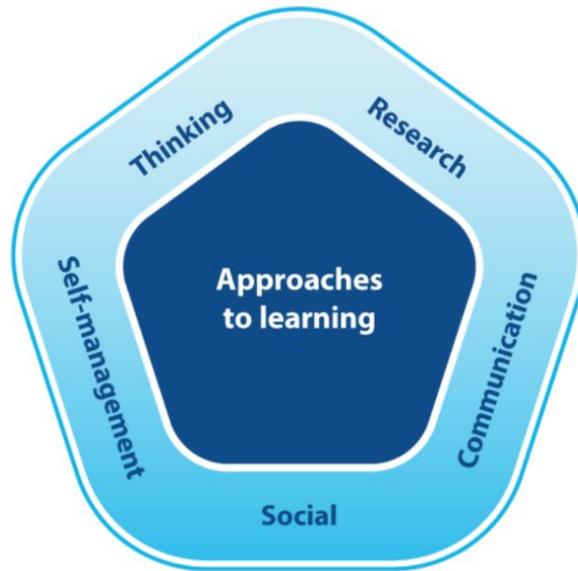


⁵ Figure 5: The transdisciplinary elements of the PYP

Approaches to Learning

At MZS, the Approaches to Learning (ATL) align with the *Schoolwide Learner Outcomes* (SLOs) and define the kind of students we want to see develop throughout MZS’s learning journey. ATLs complement the learner profile, knowledge, conceptual understanding, and inquiry. These skills are grounded in the belief that learning how to learn is fundamental to a student’s education. Five categories of interrelated skills aim to support students of all ages to become self-regulated learners, who know how to ask good questions, set effective goals, and pursue their aspirations with the determination to achieve them. These skills also help to support students’ sense of agency, encouraging them to see their learning as an active and dynamic process (IBO 2017).

⁵ IB (2018) *The Enhanced PYP: Learning & Teaching*. Figure 5: The transdisciplinary elements of the PYP. pp.10



⁶ Figure ATL01: The five interrelated approaches to learning.

MZS Early Years teachers support the development of the *Approaches To Learning* when they:

<p>Thinkers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Model the language of thinking, such as “I wonder”, “I noticed”, “I inferred”. <input type="checkbox"/> Ask open-ended questions. <input type="checkbox"/> Provide sufficient thinking time to respond to questions, and so on. <input type="checkbox"/> Offer open-ended materials. <input type="checkbox"/> Provide time for reflection at all stages of learning (before, during, and after inquiries). <input type="checkbox"/> Co-create and reflect on individual learning goals within the zone of proximal development.
<p>Researchers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Ensure sufficient time for uninterrupted play (in responsive learning spaces) to practise and develop research skills. <input type="checkbox"/> Provide activities and materials in which the children are left to discover and experiment in a group with minimal teacher guidance. <input type="checkbox"/> Collaborate with, for example, the librarian and technology specialists to build research skills and to help students identify sources of information. <input type="checkbox"/> Model academic integrity by acknowledging where materials and ideas came from.
<p>Communicators</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Plan opportunities for students to practise and apply these skills in meaningful contexts (including play, class meetings, and small-group learning engagements). <input type="checkbox"/> Encourage students to consider potential opportunities and challenges arising from shared ideas. <input type="checkbox"/> Encourage physical cues. <input type="checkbox"/> Model appropriate, respectful, and rich language use. <input type="checkbox"/> Encourage communication using different languages. <input type="checkbox"/> Ask open-ended questions. <input type="checkbox"/> Put thinking ahead of knowing.

⁶ IB (2018) The Enhanced PYP: Learning & Teaching. Figure ATL01: The five interrelated approaches to learning. pp.27

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Have informal conversations. <input type="checkbox"/> Encourage students to explore a variety of perspectives and modalities
Social Agents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Provide explicit opportunities for students to practise and develop these skills, including (dramatic) play and games. <input type="checkbox"/> Provide opportunities for students to reflect on their social skills. <input type="checkbox"/> Reflect and provide feedback on different interactions and other moments they observe. <input type="checkbox"/> Offer students opportunities for taking perspective. <input type="checkbox"/> Use the language of the learner profile in conversations and discussions, and in the development of essential agreements. <input type="checkbox"/> Model the social skills and language needed to greet, solve problems, share resources, and so on.
Self-managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Ensure sufficient time for uninterrupted play. <input type="checkbox"/> Support children with transitions by sharing a visual timetable and by counting down reminders. <input type="checkbox"/> Provide opportunities to meet as members of a learning group. <input type="checkbox"/> Involve students in planning and organizing learning spaces (including cleaning up). <input type="checkbox"/> Create an atmosphere where learning is viewed as a process of gradual improvement. <input type="checkbox"/> Continually reflect on how they are supporting student agency as an intrinsic motivation for participation. <input type="checkbox"/> Develop their skills in supporting students with developing their ability to self-regulate (including focus, working memory, managing emotions and making choices).

Conceptual Learning

Teaching and learning include concept-based inquiry as a powerful vehicle for learning that promotes meaning and understanding, and challenges students to engage with significant ideas that are transdisciplinary or subject-based. These concepts help to build understandings across, between and beyond subjects.

Assessment

Assessment is an ongoing process of gathering, analysing, reflecting, and acting on evidence of

student learning to inform teaching. It involves teachers and students collaborating to monitor, document, measure, report, and adjust learning. Students actively engage in assessing and reflecting on their learning, acting on feedback from peers and teachers to move forward to the next steps in learning. Fostering an assessment culture involves the development of assessment capability among all members of the learning community. Learning goals and success criteria are co-constructed and clearly communicated. Both learning outcomes and the learning process are assessed. Assessment design is both backward and forward looking.

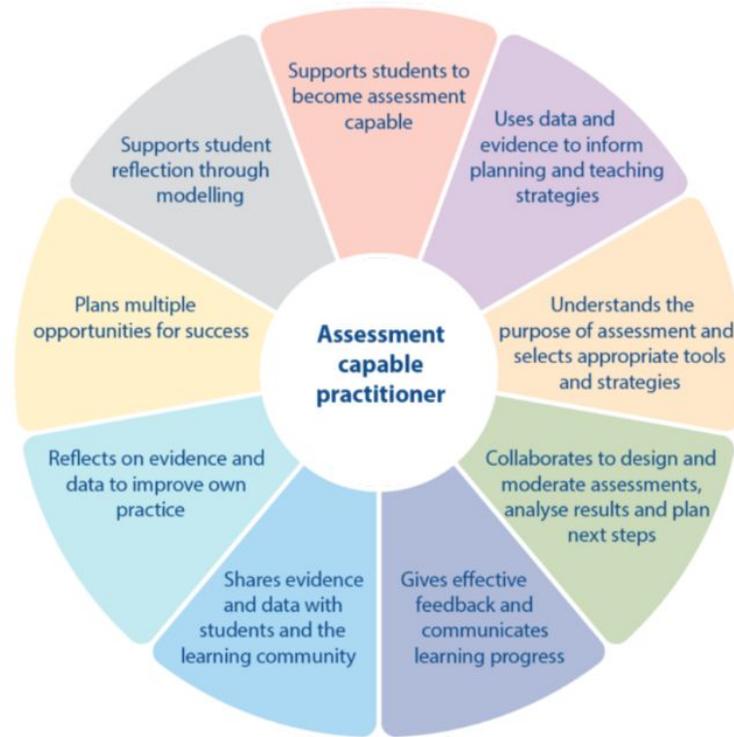
Assessment in the Early Years is done through the documentation of learning during play and active participation in projects. Teacher use electronic platforms like Seesaw or printed evidences, and align these observations with the learning outcomes in order to provide evaluative statements.

Documentation of learning:

- highlights children's play by examining their intentions during and after times of play. It also takes place at different stages of completion. Much like a story, a project may have a beginning, middle, and end that develops over time.
- highlights children's play by examining their intentions during and after times of play.
- takes place at different stages of completion. Much like a story, a project may have a beginning, middle, and end that develops over time.
- can be written as in taking observation notes on what you observe the child doing, or through dictation as you transcribe what the child explains about a picture, event, or experience. Other forms of documentation can include photography, tape recording, and videoing.
- is used to make a portfolio in which the student, teacher and parents can easily look back and see growth in their child's thinking and learning.
- is done for the purpose of identifying a child's strengths and their thinking at the time. Teachers use this documentation to scaffold a child's learning.
- is displayed or easily accessible to teachers, children, and families to:
 - provide a record of the learning process
 - reveal connections between events
 - review past experiences
 - plan future experiences
 - make learning visible to children and families

- honour children's words.

Teacher display capable practitioner assessment skills by:



⁷Figure AS02: Assessment-capable teacher

There are multiple opportunities for parents to learn about their child's progress. Semester reports are sent home twice a year. Additionally, parents are invited to attend workshares, parent-teacher conferences, and student-led conferences throughout the year. Seesaw portfolios are connected to families and parents receive immediate updates once an item has been posted, allowing for timely feedback.

Resources

A wide variety of resources are available for students to explore and engage with. In the learning spaces, resources are always accessible and, as much as possible, of an open ended nature.

⁷ IB (2018) *The Enhanced PYP: Learning & Teaching*. Figure AS02: Assessment-capable teacher. pp.69

Teachers utilize our unique environment to enhance learning by planning and carrying out field trips, invitings guest speakers, and by connecting with other schools (e.g. YPJ integration).

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