

Girraween Primary School Success Story

January 2021

Girraween Primary School is in a rural area, 40 km from Darwin. A P-6 school, it has 519 students currently enrolled. Our students live on five-acre blocks; 10% are Indigenous, 10% have English as a Second Language and 35% have identified additional learning needs. The school is known for many successes and this is a story of success in our preschool and transition programs. In the Northern Territory children can commence preschool if they turn four by June 30 of any given year. This means we have children as young as 3 ½ in our preschools and we also have children whose parents have decided to give them a bit more time so that they turn five in the first half of the year. There can be up to 18 months difference in developmental levels and each child brings different, rich experiences to their preschool experience.

Girraween Preschool attained an exceeding rating in the last two National Quality assessments. The main focus of an excellent preschool program is the development of social skills and oral language. We follow the Early Years Learning Framework to plan for our pre-schoolers and our teachers build experiences around the children's interests and needs. Vocabulary is developed as children play in camping scenes, pizza shops, veterinary surgeries, under the sea, and building on the interests of the students.



Within this play our teachers build early literacy capacity through joining in the play and building vocabulary as they model oral language within context. They label different features and provide clipboards and pencils for 'writing.' Children write prescriptions for pets, pizza orders, shopping lists and more. They see themselves as writers and build their fine motor skills and knowledge of letter through play. Vygotsky argued that children are operating at their highest

We have a well-stocked library, and every child visits the library to borrow books to take home. Diverse texts including class made books are shared both at school and home. On enrolment the importance of reading to children is discussed with parents and families are given a brochure from Newcastle Library entitled *Ten minutes a day* (<http://www.tenminutesaday.com.au/merchandise.php>) This helps to set the scene of a reading culture and highlights the partnership between home and school.

Teachers play games to develop phonemic awareness throughout the day. They choose focus children each day selecting students whose names start with the same letter, for example Amy and Alice. As they talk about the names, they explain that letters can make many different sounds, they clap the syllables of the names and count the letters and sounds they hear.

Teachers place toys in a calico bag and sort the toys based on the sound that they start with; teddy and train go together, and ball is the odd one out. They will also play this game with rhyming pairs, placing a cat and hat in the bag. The children then bring things from home and share with each other providing lots of opportunities for highlighting rhyme, syllables and the sounds heard in words. They collect rhyming pairs from items around the room or home and make books showing their pairs, e.g., cloth and sloth, hat, and cat.



Transition is our first year of 'big' school and the focus on play and oral language continues as teachers work with the Australian Curriculum and the Early Years Learning Framework. Preschools in the NT are connected to schools so the flow between the two learning settings is seamless. We have an inquiry pedagogical approach at Girraween PS and our teachers work in collaborative teams to develop engaging guided inquiries. The teachers build on the children's 'wonderings' and outside of classrooms, you might see an easel with a chart with a question and children and parents write their responses to the

question. This shows parents how children can be supported to become early writers through a scaffolded writing experience.

Oral language /play centres are established to compliment the class inquiry which is built around curriculum expectations. For example, a weather station with a TV, weather charts, graphs, and other artefacts. This enables the play to continue and gives the teacher the scope to build on each child's oral language and their early literacy and numeracy skills.



We start the day with cosy reading where families are invited to stay for the first fifteen minutes and to read to children. This leads to every child starting their day with a small group reading experience and the chance to talk about the story and pictures. Teachers model how to lead the shared story, starting with asking questions about the pictures on the cover and predicting what might happen in the story and then reading with expression and allowing the children to join in when they can. From their first day of school, children take home quality picture story books for their parents to read to them; our aim is to establish reading as a pleasurable routine for families. We run workshops for parents to help them learn how to effectively read with and to their child.

Teachers build on the students' phonemic awareness through songs, stories, and games. Teachers play a version of 'What's the time Mr Wolf?' where children move if they have the sound in their names. E.g., 'Move forward if you have the 'f/ph' sound your name'. They clap the syllables of students' names and words found in their books or through the current inquiry.

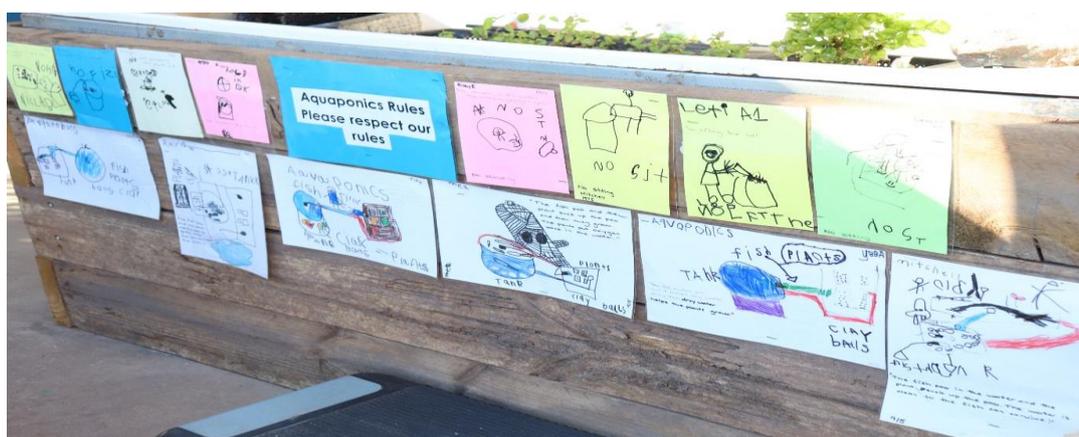
We have a shared scope and sequence for the development of word knowledge which includes the use of sound, visual and meaning strategies. Phonics are introduced commencing with sounds that are significant to children; in particular, the initial letters of their names. The conversations that ensue as children learn that Aa starts Amy and Ashley and Aemon and Arlene help children to build understanding that letters can make many different sounds depending on where they are in a word. Teachers teach children about sound/symbol relationships using games, books, songs, and craft referring to the school developed scope and sequence to ensure all combinations are covered. The class undertake investigations into different sounds; what words

do we know that have the 's' sound in them. Word noticing charts are created that show the focus sound in different parts of the word. This will often lead to conversations about the different letters that can make the same sound, e.g., circle, sausage sound the same but have different letters making the 's' sound.

Using big books, teachers work on developing concepts about print and monitor that students understand what words and letters are. They look for common sight words in their big books as they join in the repetitive phrases. They build their bank of sight words and begin to use them when reading and writing independently.

In shared reading sessions, teachers explicitly teach reading strategies using quality texts. Students will predict, question, infer, consider the main ideas, and discuss characterisation and more. Sequencing is a skill that is used in a range of ways; sequencing sections of the story by using pictures or sentences from the story or words into sentences.

Teachers create authentic experiences for children to practice reading and writing using real world literacy practices and opportunities for their work to be showcased. Through our inquiry units the students are exploring concepts through big questions, teachers explicitly teach vocabulary as the children learn about the world. They seize teachable moments and create literacy opportunities. For example, we arrived at school one morning and found a chicken missing. The children created Wanted and Lost and Found posters, they wrote what they thought had happened to the chicken. They searched the school and put up their posters for all to see. Sadly, we found a rather large python in the cage a week later, he had decided our chicken pen was a takeaway shop; of course, this created even more great writing.



Teachers regularly review their observational notes and formative assessment to guide the learning experiences for children based on individual needs. Some children receive additional support to master sound/symbol relationships, others work in guided reading groups to extend their reading. In writing, some children work with the teacher in a guided writing session while others work individually and use the bump it up wall to assess and modify their own writing.

Our beliefs and practices in the Early Years classes at Girraween PS are based on the research and practice of Lev Vygotsky, Donald Graves, Kath Murdoch, Christine Topfer, Lee Galda, Marie Clay, Katie Wood Ray, Matt Glover and Debbie Miller.

The Foundation for Learning and Literacy congratulates the Principal and staff of Girraween PS and thanks them for sharing their story. They put the Foundation's Touchstones into action, in particular, the following five Touchstones:

2. Oral language is the foundation for all meaningful reading and writing.
3. Reading and writing are both pleasure and power. They allow us to participate in the real world, escape from reality and imagine alternative worlds. These purposes should be at the heart of teaching children and young people to tell stories, read and write.
4. Creativity and imagination matter in ongoing literacy learning.
5. 'Making sense' is the beginning, middle and end of learning to read and write.
11. When parents and carers read to and with their children, everyone benefits.