

# Introduction to Child Side School

Child Side School is a 'small by design', niche school based in a semi-rural setting in Boyanup, southwest region. We are an independent co-educational, intentionally multi-aged grouped (MAG) school with a specific identity and very clear influences.

**This document is vital in understanding our pedagogy, policies and structures.**

## **Child Side School Influences, Research Base and Inspirations:**

**The child** - each and every child, their starting points, interests, personalities, unique and shared traits, approach to learning and challenge, voices, theories about the world, current conceptual development, choices, ability and willingness to apply their learning, their 'back stories', their social and emotional identities as they transform and grow...

**Early Childhood, Middle Childhood and Young Adolescence** - as fundamentally important stages of development with the understanding that the quality of these phases influences all other stages of the life span....

**Authentic Childhood** - We are determined that education and an authentic childhood can co-exist without separation and duality between work/play. We consider the terminology 'Child' across the span from K-10 to indicate the significance of the immensely developing brain and rapidly developing physical self and self-identity throughout the phases.

## **Other influences and inspirations include...**

**Research into brain development**- shows us the plasticity of the brain, the uniqueness of each individual, the diversity of learning styles, the importance of knowing and doing, the need for self-pacing, the importance of feedback in the learning process, the nature of humans as being lifelong learners and the essential role of dedicated educators who invest in trusting relationships with each and every child and family.

This research manifests in our pedagogy and practice with:

- Children actively, moving, talking, learning through trial and error, valuing mistakes,
- Children repeating and revisiting ideas, theories and skills in order to learn, practice, find patterns and connections, find personal relevance and make meaning
- Skills and knowledge being applied for practical and functional purposes both personally and in community engagement.
- A 'schedule of experiences' providing a rhythmic structure for each day and week, with large blocks of time to plan, investigate, shape, create, experience and evaluate rather than to only passively listen and absorb (researched average length of effective time for direct instruction is 7-10 minutes). Each session has a specific purpose and focus and children are aware of this. They are intentionally taught how to code-switch to meet the needs (including amount of available time) and intent of each session.
- The deliberate multi-age structure of our groups
- The integrated nature of learning (e.g. Big Idea projects)
- Authentic assessment (e.g. exhibitions).
- Howard Gardner, Project Zero, Fraser Mustard, Dr Fiona Stanley, Dr Trevor Parry, Edward De Bono, Robert Winston, Arthur Costa, Bena Kallick, Loris Malaguzzi, Daniel Goleman, Dennis Littky, Elliot Walsh, Steve Seidel, Barbara Arrowsmith-Young, Ron Berger, Piaget, Vygotsky

**Practices and principles of Reggio Emilia**-emphasise the 'image of the child' as an active co-creator of their learning, a social actor and a citizen of today. Children learn in a carefully designed, structured, orderly and aesthetically pleasing environment, both in and outdoors, which is the 'third teacher'. The role of the educator is to co-construct the curriculum with the children, facilitate learning, provoke engagements, create learning

possibilities and to research the children's theories seriously. Learning is documented to support reflective practice.

The practices and principles from Reggio influence our:

- Image of the child as active, social, creative, curious, capable, complex, resourceful, and imaginative, transformative... means we view children as rich with potential rather than an 'empty slate or bucket' to be filled by adults as the experts.
- Respect for the child as an active participant in their own learning.
- Pedagogy of 'social constructivism' underpins our school approach to teaching and learning. Our schedule of experiences and diversity of tasks allows for carefully constructed interactions between children with intent and purpose. Children are expected to work together, and they are viewed as valuable contributors. Teaching is approached as 'a guide on the side' rather than the 'sage on the stage'. Responsive and reflective teaching underpins the educators core work.
- Educator interactions, questions and stimuli which are linked to curriculum outcomes and provoke children's theories about the world, individual theory shaping and theory repair
- Physical learning environment, which is designed to inspire, nurture and support children. Much can be learned and explored through intentionally created environments with open ended materials and access to real equipment and natural resources (not just toys).
- Expectations regarding learning and children's quality of work, raising the bar on what children know and can express.
- Reflective practices consulting children.

Rudolph Steiner- "Head, heart and hands" approach integrates learning with beautiful and natural materials in a homelike environment. Educators and children create shared symbols and rituals and develop an 'attitude of gratitude'. Stories are used as a medium for learning abstract concepts.

The Child Side Way incorporates aspects of Steiner's philosophy:

- Respectful approach to nature and working with children.
- Respectful and thoughtful approach to food and celebrations.
- The creation of shared symbols and rituals meaningful to the school community depicting its 'soul' (school mission, ethics, vision).
- Approaching technology in context and in relation to age-stage of development.
- Use of stories to help connect with abstract concepts, particularly in mathematics.
- Consciously slowing down and interacting thoughtfully with all that is done.

Early Years Learning Framework-reflects contemporary theories and research evidence concerning children's learning and early childhood pedagogy. Secure, respectful relationships, partnerships with families, high expectations and a belief in the capacity of all children to succeed and respect for diversity are supported by educators who reflect on their practice and are committed to continually building their professional knowledge.

In keeping with these principles, the Child Side Way promotes all children's learning across K-10 by

- Adopting holistic approaches recognising the connectedness of mind, body and spirit
- Being responsive to children's strengths, abilities and interests
- Planning and implementing learning through play opportunities which enable children to learn as they discover, create, improvise and imagine
- Intentionally and actively promoting children through worthwhile and challenging experiences and interactions that foster high-level thinking skills
- Creating physical and social learning environments that are vibrant, flexible, cater for the different learning capacities and learning styles and invite children and families to contribute ideas, interests and questions
- Valuing the cultural and social contexts of children and their families
- Providing for continuity in experiences
- Assessing and monitoring children's learning to inform provision and to support children in achieving learning outcomes
- Viewing all outcomes as fundamental building foundations and imperative for each and every child regardless of age. When we enrol new children (any age) we are committed

to working at this fundamental outcome level to ensure all other learning can grow from this solid base (regardless of how long it takes or other prescribed curriculum year level expectations).

UNICEF "The Convention on the Rights of the Child" sets out the rights that must be realized for children to develop their full potential, free from hunger and want, neglect and abuse. It reflects a new vision of the child. Children are neither the property of their parents nor are they helpless objects of charity. They are human beings and are the subject of their own rights. The Convention offers **a vision of the child as an individual and as a member of a family and community, with rights and responsibilities appropriate to his or her age and stage of development**. By recognizing children's rights in this way, the Convention firmly sets the focus on the whole child."

The Child Side Way is in keeping with The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizing:

- play as one of the basic human rights of children (Article 31). Play is fundamentally about protecting children's freedom to explore, discover and interact with the physical and social world around them.
- the right of children to be heard and valued intellectually, socially and emotionally at their stage of development without the pressure to conform to structures that are economically defined to suit the school or structures to make the profession easier for the teacher. The educator is part of the learning community and is afforded the same rights and has adult responsibilities in relation to duty of care and carrying out the described roles of the educator the Child Side Way.
- the right of a child to understand at their level and be included in their own learning process.
- the right of a child to experience trusting, respectful work relationships outside of their home in a place they are required by law to attend 5 days per week for up to 14 years of their young lives (K-12).

Safe Schools Hub (Student wellbeing Hub): underpins our workplace culture and along with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and being a Choose respect School sustains the well-being of our staff and the children, enabling them to thrive rather than just survive. National Schools Safety Framework:

- affirm the rights of all members of the school community to feel safe and be safe at school
- acknowledge that being safe and supported at school is essential for student (and staff) wellbeing and effective learning
- accept responsibility for developing and sustaining safe and supportive learning and teaching communities that also fulfil the school's child protection responsibilities
- encourage the active participation of all school community members in developing and maintaining a safe school community where diversity is valued
- actively support young people to develop understanding and skills to keep themselves and others safe physically, emotionally, socially, intellectually, on-line (cyber safety)

Big Picture Education-Big Picture Education schools (BPE) are defined by their commitment to educate "one student at a time" in a community of learners. Underpinning this approach is the belief that each student has a unique set of interests, needs and capabilities around which learning can be personalised. The key to success in BP schools lies in fostering students' individual passions, encouraging active ownership of the learning process and developing the ability to apply knowledge and skills to real life experiences and challenges. Each learner has a 'right' to be known. The 'core of personalisation' involves 'doing what's best for children', pushing and pulling at the right time, not dictating or punishing, but problem-solving and mediating. Overall, the educator's job is to know children well and provide the right measure of challenge and support for each child in each activity to promote growth. Key enablers are the

'small by design' principle and 'Education is Everyone's Business (responsibility/right to be involved)'.

"In this 21<sup>st</sup> century, knowledge is expanding at such a rate that a content based, discipline driven curriculum is overcrowded, quickly outmoded and inflexible... In a climate of increasing globalisation and interdependence, the economic and population shifts taking place require a reinvention of processes for building social cohesion and citizenship to 'recognise diversities and still enable shared activities and interpretations.'" - Futures- Marie Brennan. ACT DEYFS 2001/2.

Through BPEA The Child Side Way:

Understands that "the essential role of education is to give people the freedom of thought, judgement, feeling and imagination they need in order to develop their talents and remain as much as possible in control of their lives." ANSN 'Australian National Schools Network' and CES (Coalition of Essential Schools US network)

- Seeks to promote higher student achievement (than may ordinarily be possible in a traditional school setting) and to develop more nurturing and humane school communities.
- Acknowledges and values the profession of teaching, ensuring staff have access to quality professional learning (both through the 'real world' and education) and actual in-class support and networking with colleagues/mentors about **their work in their context and in the context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century world**. Educators, as per professionals in other fields, are not expected to work in isolation or in separate boxes/curriculum areas. Their focus is the learner. They teach 'real live' children in a community context and the curriculum must always be considered through both the child's eyes and the long-term authenticity to the contribution and value to the wider society in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century across the spectrum.

Maggie Dent-sees emotional resiliency as a tool kit for life, isolating the ability to 'bounce back' as being a crucial indicator to well-being and sustainable relationships. Mental and emotional well-being are the core to successful learning and satisfaction. Emotional intelligence and resilience impact on the individual's decision-making and the ability to intellectually reason. Youth need the support of a 'tribe', a community group sharing common interests and goals so that they can 'act, belong, commit'.

The Child Side Way

- Values emotional intelligence (Daniel Goleman) to enhance learning and to make personally relevant connections to facts and figures, knowledge learned. When combined it often is a catalyst for real change, growth, self-motivation... leading to action (text to life).
- Develops life skills and a sense of competence, creating confidence in our young people, enabling them to care of themselves, provide for themselves, give back to others and live fulfilling lives.
- Emphasises the importance of strong, healthy relationships and self-esteem.
- Supports families to create a network with shared common goals to work towards.
- Emotional intelligence and resilience are considered, intentionally taught and nurtured both on an individual level with each child and within the community of learners. This takes significant time, energy, skill and knowledge.

Dr Louise Porter and Prof. Donna Cross- 'Guiding Children's Behaviour' focuses on behaviour as a set of learned skills that need to be explicitly taught, modelled, shared, discussed and noticed. Children are not born considerate or knowing the consequences, they need to be mentored and taught over a long period of time. They are not mini-adults and will need continued social and emotional support throughout their development at Child Side K-10.

The Child Side Way

- Develops children's sense of responsibility (to self, others and the environment) as opposed to requiring children to conform or obey without thought or reflection.
- Views conflict as an inevitable part of the learning process, removing the concept of 'naughty' and seeing children's actions as purposeful.

- Tries to view the situation from a child's perspective.
- Appreciates that from a child's view much of school –any school- is an adult's agenda and often the purpose or even the task expectation is invisible to the child who may just be going through the 'motions'.
- Removes the concepts and actions of rewards and punishments, using 'natural' consequences and intrinsic motivation to develop work skills and ethics with a sense of purpose and pride.
- Approaches conflict in a 2 pronged manner, giving both sides a 'voice' and strategies to cope rather than focusing on changing or removing the catalyst.
- Uses restorative justice strategies, ensuring children and families are part of the solution-based approach.
- Is conscious of the 'by-stander' effect of bullying and acknowledges that deliberate bullying takes place in many forms in a workplace and adults are part of this 'unbalance of power' too. A happy, healthy, productive workplace begins and ends with the adults (staff and parents) demonstrating emotional resiliency and respectful work relationships.
- Views conflict resolution as a long-term outcome that may well have to 'agree to disagree'.
- Acknowledges that educators cannot 'fix' or wave 'magic wands' to 'make' someone else...
- Considers the health of the community, not only the individual.
- Supports children to develop impulse control and share resources and adult attention as a key indicator of satisfaction and success in a group environment.

**Nature- based and whole body learning:** Well planned and well-resourced outdoor experiences allow for progression in a child's thinking and understanding. Outdoors is an equal player to indoors and should receive planning, management, evaluation, resourcing, staffing and adult interaction on a par with indoors (Principles of Outdoor Learning in the Early Years – Helen Bilton). Outdoor spaces allow and encourage children to relive their experiences through their most natural channel – movement. They provide the opportunity for assessed risky freedom, where children can play and socialise freely and use their own imagination and initiative. A healthy, active movement to learn approach is consistent across the whole school K-10. Movement is one of the four vehicles through which children can learn. The others are play, talk and sensory experiences. Physical development is the pre-requisite for children's growth. It:

- enhances the development of motor skills (gross and fine);
- develops co-ordination, balance and body awareness
- keeps the body, heart and other organs healthy; and
- develops a life-long good habit of daily exercise
- boosts brain function and health, benefitting executive functioning and control
- boosts academic achievement, reaction time and concentration
- moderates the effects of low-level daily stress
- assists with self-regulatory behaviours, motivation and self-discipline

The Child Side Way incorporates a planned, managed, evaluated and resourced outdoor environment recognising that:

- All the areas of learning can be achieved outside while the children's long-term social, emotional and mental health are being enhanced.
- Exercise can affect emotions allowing for relaxation and calmness and a heightened sense of wellbeing (Armstrong 1996).
- Young children's basic need for well-being and involvement, and their urge to explore and make sense of the world, is developed through high quality learning in an outdoor environment.
- Children need to have experiences which heighten emotions such as wonder, joy and excitement, and children need adults who will use the natural resources to bring out and develop these emotions. (Outdoor Play in the Early Years Management and Innovation – Helen Bilton)

- “If you make an environment hazard free it becomes challenge free, and then children have less experience in making decisions on their own, less opportunity to assess their own personal frontiers and less opportunity to gain confidence and self-esteem through coping independently” (Physical risk taking; dangerous or endangered? – Stephenson A. 2003 Early Years 23; 1 35-43)
- Physically the area has to be safe but still allow risk and challenge. “Safeness is about enabling things to happen, not shutting down opportunities.” (Playing Outside – Helen Bilton)
- Children need versatile equipment and environments.
- Children need to be able to control, change and modify their environment.
- Staff have to be supportive, interested and educated toward outdoor learning.
- Opportunities need to be created which give children and young people the freedom to play creatively, and yet still allow them to experience risk, challenge and excitement.
- Engaged Play (any age) is essential to the healthy development of children and young people – not just their physical development, but their social and cognitive development too.
- Playful learning allows children to develop a sense of well-being, develops their emotional responses and improves their interpersonal skills. It involves exploration and creativity, helping children think in a flexible manner, developing the creative process, language skills, and learning and problem-solving skills. (DCSF: 2008a)
- ‘We should not prevent children and young people from doing things they enjoy because of risks that can be managed. Children and young people themselves recognise that ‘you can’t make everything safe’ and that a balance is needed between risks and fun. Children recognise that knowing about risks and how to manage them is an essential part of growing up.’ (DCSF: 2007b) Managing Risk in Play Provision: Implementation guide (DCSF and Play England, 2008).
- Risk awareness and risk management is an essential life skill and is a high need/propriety in particular during Yr 7-10 Young Adolescent Phase of Development. This age group needs a focus on taking learning risks and physical challenges, with support to manage any risk-taking ‘fall out.’

**At Child Side School our practice process cycle (observe, plan, implement, assess, reflect, respond) is fundamental to everything we do. We have personalised (Child Sided) these influences, inspirations and their research bases within our context after taking regular ‘reconnaissance flights’ (Loris Malaguzzi- Reggio Emilia) over our human and physical resources, our current cohorts of learners and families, our school and national expectations. Then we just ‘do it’ as the smallest action is worth more than the greatest intention’.**

### **Our Origins and History:**

“Increased student disengagement with schooling has been blamed on the failure of conventional schooling to have real-world value and connection. Curriculum delivery has often required the passive submission of students with little opportunity for negotiation in the identification or development of learning tasks. Assessment has failed to reflect adequately the true level and value of student achievement. A change of approach, a redefining of what is essential, a rethinking of school structure, curriculum, assessment and pedagogy has become necessary to engage students at a higher level and to better prepare them for the future.” ACT DEYFS 2001/2 ANSN.

These issues as outlined as above and the need for a personalised place of education were the catalyst and impetus to create a different vision of what a place of education could be, based very specifically on research and a specific teaching methodology as a **whole** school approach (not just on an individual teacher level). The intent was to create a place of education defined by philosophy and practice that could stand in its own right (as does a Steiner or Montessori school) with its own educationally credible and legitimate identity. It was created in a region where there was/is a great deal of choice for families regarding government schools or independent schools based upon a religious identity, but nothing based upon a pedagogical identity. Further down south and in Perth there are/were Steiner,

Montessori and community based small schools and a wider range of choice for families. Child Side was created to be 'on the child's side, side by side' to offer a pedagogical choice for families independent of individual teacher approach – on a whole school basis.

This playgroup and school originated through a quest by a small group of dedicated parents (who were also educators) to create a child-friendly, family-friendly place of education that was small by design and personalised (for children, families and staff) in a quality learning culture based on research into the developing brain, emotional resilience and life skills in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The founders collated research and their own professional experience, which determined that the quality of the learning culture was as important as the physical learning environment in impacting upon children and their long term education. In particular, a culture where children's voice and choice were honoured and academically developed in a real life context and where relationships were the key to connecting children, learning, families, staff, life...

Child Side School began as a playgroup in 2002 in an old house in Joshua Brook on loan to us while we awaited registration as an independent school. The school began officially in 2003 in the same house with 7 children. In 2006 the playgroup and school moved into its permanent residence in semi-rural Boyanup with the families physically providing the labour and funds for our first building. Parents support the school through 'in-kind' donations of their skills, effort and time to maintain the environment and fulfil roles such as the Governing Council (GC), the Parents and Friends committee and support our playgroup and school K- Year 10. This 'whole' is the opportunity for families and children to stay intellectually and emotionally connected and to act, belong and commit together as a positive educational community.

### **Overview of the Child Side Community:**

Our long term committed core of families tends to own their own business, endeavour to have a parent available (morning work etc) and to find ways to actively participate in the school according to their individual personal circumstances. They communicate their current and changing circumstances with the school and are aware that long term commitment and the personalised nature of education underpins the outcomes. They are aware of the school expectations of their family and of their child developmentally as an individual AND as part of the children's learning community. They are aware that the 'whole' (K-Year 10) is the 'opportunity to gain maximum benefit for a holistic education'. They choose Child Side as a first-choice school that aligns with their core belief of being actively involved with their child's living and learning and that 'Education is everyone's business' BPEA. They actively seek the 'small by design' and personalised learning focus that underpins Child Side.

Another part of our school population consists of families who may come and go due to work or overseas family commitments outside of the school's scope of responsibility or reference. We cater for these as best we can and manage any impact positively within our ability and what is considered 'reasonable' as a school community.

In the initial years of operation, we have also had a portion of transient families who stayed short term, enrolled for various reasons and left for various reasons, which we try and make sense of within a learning context for school management and sustainability. Our base line is respect for each family's decision and our energies are towards minimizing any negative impacts. We have noticed that almost every family that has moved on from our school (aside from financial reasons, long term work commitments elsewhere, family breakdown reasons) have been referred by educators to the school-based support system (eg: school psychology service) or requests for further investigations into their child's developmental progress eg: hearing checks, paediatric assessments or discussions about social/emotional support. This also seems to coincide with the family's misalignment with our philosophy and pedagogy, in particular wanting educators to 'fix' any issues with a lack of willingness for the family to be part of the solution.

We also noticed the impact of the decision for Year 7s moving into a secondary school setting and its filter down effect. We responded to family need and direction of acknowledging the importance of continuity and cohesion of education pedagogy, especially for the vulnerable

years of the early adolescent phase. We endeavour to find aligned ways of supporting our Child Side families through our Young Adolescent Cluster and Big Picture Education approach to keep this age group engaged.