

## **Research projects inspire kindergarten communities**

### **Michelle Clarke – Kindertartens South**

A programme to encourage innovation in early childhood services motivated New Zealand's southernmost kindergarten association to create their own inspiring initiative.

In 2003 the government started the Centre of Innovation (COI) Programme, aimed at promoting a deeper exploration of innovative teaching and learning processes already underway in early childhood services.

About the time the first research was coming out of the programme, Kindertartens South reckoned they could do something similar on a smaller scale. And so the concept of Special Focus Kindertartens (SFK) was born.

Kindertartens South Senior Teacher Michelle Clarke said two of the first three SFKs worked in partnership with Sports Southland looking at the benefits of active movement on children's learning. The third did research on how to make a genuine commitment to the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi in a Pakeha community.

"I was in that kindergarten at the time, in Otatara in Invercargill. It was an exciting time in terms of having support around innovation in the kindergarten," said Michelle.

In 2010 four kindertartens involved in action research disseminated their findings through meetings like the Dunedin Research Hui. After the Senior Teachers presented their work at the Senior Teacher Hui, some other associations asked them to go and present to their teachers.

The research covered: How can we actively engage boys in early childhood education? What impact does taking children into nature have on their wellbeing and holistic development? Does having a farmyard at kindergarten have an impact on children's play? How can utilising Museums and Art Galleries enhance children's complexity of learning?

By far the most famous SFK has been Fiordland Kindergarten in Te Anau. Their Nature Discovery programme involves taking four-year-olds into the bush to climb, splash, take risks and explore while gaining a love for the environment. The kindergarten has featured in newspaper articles and TNVZ's Sunday programme, and head teacher Claire Maley-Shaw has presented her team's findings as far afield as Scotland. Their research has also become a book.

While the COI programme was cut in 2009, Special Focus Kindergartens are still going strong and sharing their findings with the association's 24 kindergartens and beyond.

"Teachers become known as 'experts' in that area so other teachers will network with them and seek support. We have some formal dissemination. They might present at a professional learning hui or a staff meeting, or wider at the Dunedin Research Hui," said Michelle.

"We've got a kindergarten currently setting up an innovation around nurturing and how they could support attachment theory in kindergarten through nurture. Another kindergarten that has applied is looking at active movement and transitions to school."

Funding for SFKs comes from the professional learning budget. It doesn't cover resources and is mostly used as research release time, or at the end to write up their findings.

"We don't want the work to be on top of current teaching workload. However, most teachers do the research within their teaching workload because it's part of what they're doing as a team and with their communities already," said Michelle.

"We don't have a set timeframe about how long that takes. Generally it's around a two-year cycle because it takes a few months get things in place then to do the research, analysis and dissemination."

"Teachers have found it inspiring, those who've gone and listened. Even now when I'm working in kindergartens, people will be talking about some initiative they've got that came from hearing a SFK presentation. The people that were involved, I think they've all found it a very positive experience."