

Founder of New Zealand's Little Schools takes her philosophy to the world

Maria Johnson, creator and owner of New Zealand's Little Schools is discovering she's created a world-class educational concept.

Sharon Lapkin

There's a saying that when a door shuts a window opens, but for Maria Johnson—the founder of New Zealand's Little Schools—life's been more about creating her own opportunities. After establishing four preschools in New Zealand, Johnson's intuition and expertise led her to China, where her first international preschool is set to open shortly in one of its oldest cities, Xian. There are plans later in the year, as well, to open two more preschools in China and to take the Little Schools' concept to the Middle East.

Backtrack 12 years, and Johnson—a trained primary school teacher—had four young children of her own. Through her daily experiences as a parent she realised there was “a massive gap in the market for proper preschool education and early childhood facilities that provided ... a nurturing as well as an educational environment for children”. So Johnson, who is now president of the Early Childhood Council in New Zealand, seized the opportunity to work in an area she loved and started her own business.

The first Little School opened in Khandallah, a suburb of Wellington in the North Island of New Zealand, and, despite Johnson's initial plan to operate only one preschool, she soon changed her mind. “The waiting list was so huge,” she said. “It confirmed to me that there was such need for the philosophy and the concept that Little School had—so it was driven by demand of what the parents wanted.” Before long, Johnson was back at the planning board and embarking on a second Little School and a third and fourth. Today, there are three Little Schools in Wellington and a fourth in Auckland.

“Once I'd opened up three schools, I decided to go back and gain my early childhood qualifications so that I had the expertise and was being acknowledged for what I was saying,” Johnson said. So after graduating from Hamilton Teachers College in 1989 and Waikato University in 1990, she returned to full-time study and graduated with her early childhood qualifications in 2006. She also travelled to Australia and studied to become a licensed listening practitioner in 2007.

With a strong academic background Johnson's Little School philosophy was formalised. “We're quite different in the early childhood sector in New Zealand”, she explained, “we're structured and we have a daily routine and a daily timetable”. The coordinated learning environment operates in a similar way to a new entry classroom with four terms a year and comparable hours. The children are also organised into age-appropriate groups, with a two- and three-year-old group and a four-year-old group.

They all have a morning mat time where there is a lot of singing and movement—with the two- and three-year-olds on a different mat to the four-year-olds. The children also discuss daily activities and explore new topics including news items, and number and literacy concepts.

Each child is involved in a sensory motor development program that aims to build a framework for academic learning, and this essential aspect of the Little School philosophy also aims to ensure a smooth transition to school.

“We believe that children need to be academically ready to learn, and to be able

to be academically ready to learn they need to have worked through developmental processes so that their brains are ready to start that learning process,” Johnson said. So, before her teachers commence instructing children in the fundamentals of reading, writing and maths they build on sensory motor development that enables these types of learning.

By the time children in Little Schools are four years old, each of them is on an individual reading program. “What we try to do is to develop a love of reading so they continue to read for a lifetime,” Johnson said. As well as reading to the children, teachers encourage reading for meaning, story prediction and starting to develop the children's imaginations for story writing. “It's really important to teach them about all different types of reading”, Johnson said, “and that reading can come from recipes, newspapers and all different areas”.

Creating a print-saturated environment is essential to Johnson's philosophy. The environments in her preschools are laden with pictures and associated text. There are books out in the sandpits, and books on the carpentry tables. “We don't just have books in the library corner,” she said.

Johnson has created her own maths program, which focuses on number, positions, pattern, shape, mathematical language and games. She also emphasised the importance of music. “Research shows that if you've got music with children it reaches all seven parts of their brain.” She added that creativity, arts, writing, the outdoor environment and sustainability all occupied a place in the Little School curriculum.

According to Johnson, her preschools are important vehicles in promoting a love of learning, and she works with the children's natural curiosity to achieve this outcome. Each child is assessed and has individual goals written for them and then their outcomes are measured. “It's about understanding the child's interests and using their interests as vehicles for their learning, and then being able to incorporate the resources that we've got to help that child reach the goals,” she said.

Johnson strives for a teacher/student ration of 1:7. She also trains her own teachers and incorporates them into the children's individual learning journeys. “We need to be accountable for where the child is at,” she said, “how we can help the child, and where we've taken the child on their early childhood journey”. Teachers' responsibilities are not restricted to their

relationships with the children either, and Johnson invites the parents to be partners in their child's learning. It's important, she said, to keep “the parents informed about their child's progress and about where we think they're at and bringing in the parents' ideas as well—so there is a whole community approach to a child's learning”.

Canvassing a broad spectrum of early childhood theorists, Johnson is not a minimalist when it comes to incorporating theory into her program. “We've got a lot of theorists who sit underneath our program,” she said. Loris Malaguzzi's Reggio Emilia approach is a big influence on both the teaching practices and the Little School environment. Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences influence, not only the environment, but the way teachers plan and teach. Lev Vygotsky resonates greatly, Johnson said, with the Little School philosophy. Lilian Katz's theories underpin the project types and emergent curriculum, and while they're not Montessori-based “some of Montessori's ideas can be seen” throughout the Little School program.

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Johnson is unapologetic about incorporating the work of multiple early childhood leaders. She is a keen scholar of theory and emphasised the need to use it as a base for developing programs. “If you can't sit and look at your philosophy and see the theorists who are actually involved in your program there is something fundamentally wrong with how your program is set up,” she said.

While Johnson was aware she had developed something unique in Little Schools, she didn't realise she had an exportable brand until a few years ago when the Singapore government visited New Zealand. After touring the country and looking at early childhood centres, they selected Little Schools as the concept they wanted to take back to Singapore.

The Singapore option didn't prove financially viable, but it prompted Johnson to investigate further afield. “I basically packed up my business proposals and disappeared off to China and started knocking on doors,” she said. The result is a centre that is due to open shortly in Xian, and two more planned to open in China later in the year. “We're coming in with a



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very different philosophy”, Johnson said, and despite the cultural differences in teacher education, the Chinese teachers love the idea and the concept of Little Schools. International teachers will be brought in to work alongside the Chinese teachers, whose training is taking longer than anticipated, and this has prompted Johnson to consider establishing a teacher training institute in China to service her preschools.

A strong part of Johnson's success is her ability to build a strong management team and to delegate responsibilities. “I have an amazing management team that helps me with my staff,” she said. “My job as a leader has been to empower my staff to do their jobs, and it's about continually offering them new opportunities to grow and develop.”

In 2011, Johnson won the Best Small/Medium Business award in Wellington. In the same year she was selected as the Wellington Businesswoman of the Year, and in 2012 she was a finalist in the Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year, as well as an Education Finalist in the Pandora Awards.

There is no doubt that Johnson is a leading light in the international early childhood sector, and her advice to anybody considering setting up an early childcare centre is indicative of her philosophy. “To become involved in early childhood you need to be passionate about children,” she said. “If you believe in your program and children are at the centre of your program, then you can only succeed.”

But Johnson saved her final words for those who implement her program. “Our teachers compliment our program; they're incredibly dedicated. They are my asset—they help me carry out my dream.”

Photos: Maria Johnson, creator and owner of Little Schools.