

New School: Building Better Outcomes.

Abstract

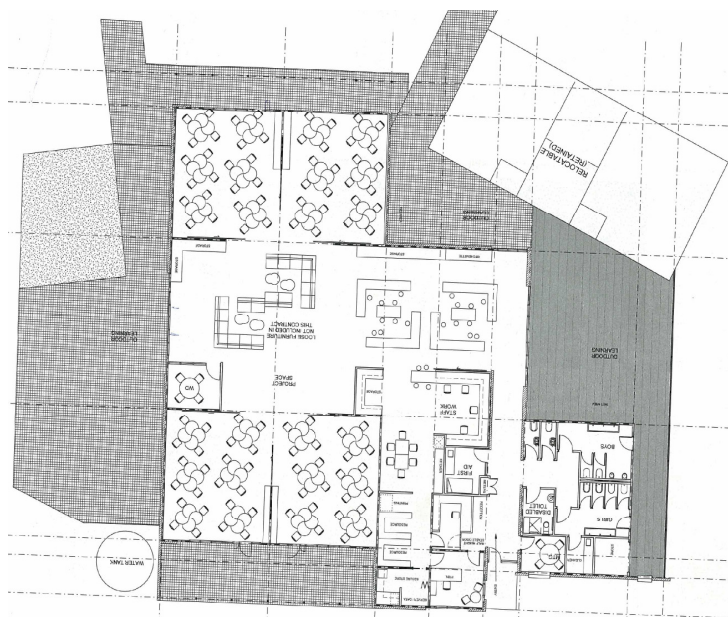
This project investigated new ideas for improving teaching and learning by using flexible groupings and creative use of spaces.

In the Junior School the focus was on team teaching and Discovery (Play based) Curriculum.

In the Senior School the major foci were the development of Negotiated Learning tasks, creative timetabling and the engagement of boys.

Overall, we wanted to trial and develop New Ways of Learning that would have greater appeal to students but still achieve the outcomes we desired.

Harcourt Valley New School Classroom plan



Introduction

In early 2009, Harcourt Valley PS was completely rebuilt in a flexible open plan design.

Teaching staff were aware that teaching styles and classroom organization would be challenged by this new environment. Therefore, it was imperative that staff explore and investigate teaching options that would maximise student learning in the new buildings- and to begin the journey into the future together. It is of utmost importance, in moving into our new school environment, that teachers and students are

confident in operating within a flexible, open plan arrangement. If nothing changes, children and staff may suffer stress and anxiety, resulting in negative impact on learning outcomes. This includes the ability to engage in independent, negotiated learning tasks, as well as functioning within appropriate behavioural guidelines.

As well as addressing the environmental considerations of our new school, our trend data indicated that Student Engagement, particularly in the Senior School reflected disengagement with current teaching practices. A large cohort of boys and children with special needs also influenced the need to stimulate learning and school connectedness from a new and different direction. This was seen as a whole school problem because, to be successful in Negotiated Curriculum (which was one of the approaches to be trialled to try to engage and improve student outcomes), all children P-6 needed experiences in making appropriate learning choices and planning of independent tasks.

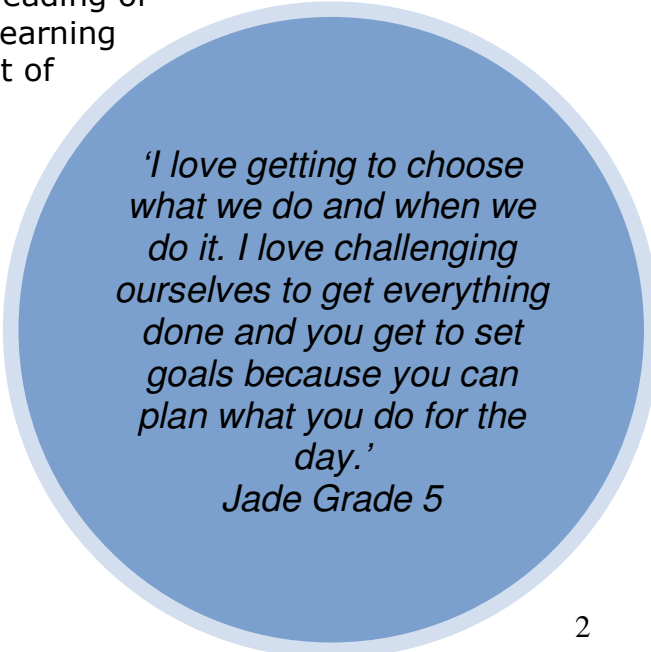
*With thanks to schools visited:
including: Wooranna Park PS,
Essendon Nth PS, Silvertown PS,
Echuca East PS and The Lakes P-9
School, Mill Park.*

To begin our journey of discovery, we needed to firstly collect and analyse our baseline data. This included the collation of whole school achievement data. Staff designed and completed an Achievement Summary proforma that outlines

student progress, interventions, medical problems and testing results, over their seven years at primary school. This allowed us to highlight trends and areas of concern within particular subjects and cohorts of children. We also looked at School Level Reports, such as the Student Opinion Survey, to ascertain levels of engagement of senior school children.

Once we had a clear picture of the needs of our students, we were able to target the areas we wished to improve. These were: Student Engagement, Negotiated Learning Tasks and Thinking Skills. Research undertaken included the reading of information on teaching in flexible learning spaces, team teaching, engagement of boys and play based curriculum.

Visits were made to other schools to observe and investigate how they used learning spaces/building and structures and how they work, possible uses that we could implement, combinations and groupings of children, different curriculum deliveries etc.



*'I love getting to choose
what we do and when we
do it. I love challenging
ourselves to get everything
done and you get to set
goals because you can
plan what you do for the
day.'*
Jade Grade 5

In depth discussion followed after each school visit, which helped to build up our vision for changes in pedagogy for our new school. It was clear from our data that what we were doing was not working and we were keen to develop curriculum that stimulated student centred learning, accountability and responsibility but also met or exceeds outcomes for essential learning. We felt that a move away from traditional classroom layouts and curriculum delivery were appropriate in best meeting the needs of our students.

An Action Research model was adopted where alternative teaching styles were adopted and trialled in each classroom. Planning days at the end of each term allowed teachers to reflect on and evaluate the strategies used and to further develop the strategies to be trialled in the following term. In the P-2, strategies to be trialled included team teaching, experimentation with the flexible use of learning spaces and negotiation of curriculum through the introduction of a developmental play based sessions. In the Grade 3/4 classroom, strategies to be trialled included negotiation of curriculum in some areas and the improvement of 'thinking skills'. In the Grade 4, 5 and 6 classroom, strategies to be trialled included Student Negotiated Learning tasks and experimentation in the use of learning spaces.

A Powerpoint produced by the Junior school staff that highlights the journey taken, with emphasis on the introduction of play based developmental sessions. This includes organisational issues, samples of assessment and administrative forms, children's work and future directions.



A Powerpoint by Grade 3/4 highlighted many great ideas for 'thinking tools' and their use within the classroom.

The Senior School produced a number of sample documents that reflect planning linking VELs to Negotiated Learning Tasks, student work samples and student responses to the strategies trialled.

The movement away from traditional curriculum delivery- in terms of groupings, spaces and actual teaching styles- was the most innovative aspect for our school.



Grade 4, 5, 6 used the flexibility of the sandpit to plan and build a model of the freeway as part of a group research activity

Children in the 5/6 now follow personal timetables that indicate targeted teaching sessions and independent learning tasks. At the beginning of the week, children set individual learning behaviours that they will focus on for the week.

At the end of the week they fill in learning reflections to critically analyse achievements made each week. When the children are purposefully engaged, the behavioural issues are greatly reduced.



'I love that you get to choose what you work on, you can manage your own learning, you can do as little or as much of one thing at a time, you can go ahead and move to the next level even if others are way behind.'

Darcy Gr 4



Children in the 3 /4 focus on building and extending skills by using thinking strategies to develop their awareness of themselves as learners, with a developing focus on independent learning tasks. Discussion shows that children now have the words/language to describe their learning. Rubrics have developed to support peer and individual evaluation.

Children in P-2 are focused primarily on developing basic skills. There are opportunities through Discovery Curriculum (play based) to make choices in learning and to articulate their understandings through reflection and sharing time.

Celebrations of achievements are highlighted to ensure children see their own progress.

There have been dramatic changes in student attitude and senior students have stated vehemently that they do not wish to return to the "old ways" of teaching. This is supported by anecdotal records and the Attitudes to school Survey, which indicates improvement in Engagement and Student Connectedness to School.

'The further you get into it the more excited you get and the more you want to try!'

*Pauline Grigsby
Grade 4,5,6 Teacher*

Teachers' attitudes to the action research have indicated significant levels of rejuvenation and motivation. Teachers are excited by the experimentation and evolving ideas. This has been expressed through discussion.

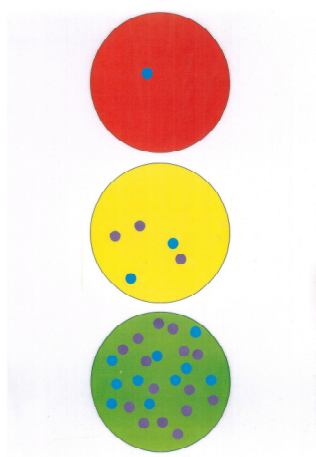
Academic improvement has been significant in the Senior and Middle School. OnDemand online testing results have shown that most students have improved in core skills. Reading has been an area of improvement across the board, including boys, and we have attributed improvement to greater interest in the Negotiated Learning Tasks. Junior school benchmark testing in Reading has indicated that children are generally achieving at or above the expected levels at this time of the year.

Individual Student Achievement Summaries demonstrate improvement and this will be closely monitored over the ensuing year.

One of the greatest changes achieved has been in the students' ability to reflect on and articulate their own learning. P-2 students are learning to use Reflection Sticks to focus on ways to talk about and share their learning. Older students are using more formal methods, such as Evaluation of Learning Goals, Weekly Programs and Thinking Tools.

The younger children have also expressed a positive attitude to participation in Discovery Curriculum sessions. The children used the visual aid represented below to place them on the appropriate colour. The one red dot required some clarification because upon questioning, the child had been responding to his frustration in not being able to access the group he wished to

Survey of P-2 Children (at right) shows their response to the question
 "How did you feel about working through the Developmental activities today?"



Red- I did not enjoy working through the activities

Yellow- it was ok

Green- I really enjoyed working through the activities.

Although teaching staff were highly motivated/ impatient to start we very quickly realised that this needed to be a gradual and measured process rather than immediate radical change. There was also an uncertainty about what we were going to undertake and how it would be put into practice. We discovered that children needed to be taught how to use thinking and reflection skills and to establish a language to articulate their learning before they could focus on individual learning tasks.

After initial trials, we were able to adapt each stage in the action research to better suit the requirements of our cohorts of children. ie. changes to timetabling to reflect targeted teaching sessions for particular groups or individual. It has been surprising that change has been so significant in the extension of the more able students, from the top of their appropriate VELs range to well above their VELs levels. The personal conversation that takes place shows that scaffolding occurs from child to child at the point of need, ensuring that learning opportunity is maximised.

One Grade 5 child's behaviour has also improved significantly as a direct result of his engagement in learning.

It would also have been easier to narrow our focus to one grade level or cohort to make it easier to track changes in outcomes. However, having said that, it has been wonderful to be able to experiment with a variety teaching strategies across the whole school. The discussions that followed have led to significant personal growth in teaching and learning across the school.

Future Directions: What Now?

We are now in the stages of planning for next year and the strategies trialled this year will form the basis of much of our curriculum delivery in the future. Some of the decisions we have made include:

P-2 – Intensive skill building\ Discovery Curriculum

We will be ensuring that children engage in choice/reflection/thinking about their individual topics. Grade 2 will be given modified Independent Research Projects to stimulate their development of individual Learning Pathways. Children will also be required to make personal timetables and goals that they will follow during the Discovery Curriculum sessions. They may also negotiate additional activities to meet a specific personal goal. In Literacy, children will be encouraged to make choices about the tasks chosen over the week or session.

3-4 Continue to build and practise basic skills. Independent research topics will be a part of the overall program to extend thinking skills and opportunities to extend learning. There will be extension of thinking tools and vocabulary introduced, and how they can be applied to a variety of problem solving situations or open ended tasks.

5-6 Continue to build basic skills through targeted teaching sessions/ focus on independent learning pathways to engage. Allow boys to use strategies that support their literacy i.e. learning technologies.

Movement of students with special needs (e.g. handwriting/spelling/maths skills etc) to other classes as required for targeted teaching. Timetables need to be available across the school to show target teaching sessions.

The tracking and monitoring of children's results through the Achievement Summary have been formalised. It is an expectation for teachers that these will be updated regularly to ensure that we have a complete picture of each child's individual progress.

Readings-

Wooranna Park PS 'Lynne Surman article'- www.woorannaparkps.vic.edu.au

Developmental (Play Based) Curriculum- Kathy Walker

<http://walkerlearning.com.au/info/australian-developmental-curriculum-key-principles>

Engagement of Boys- Me Read? No Way? <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca>