UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENTS.

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Just as we differentiate our teaching for numeracy and literacy because student needs are broad, we also need to consider the range of emotional intelligence within a group of students and their capacity to engage in learning in a social setting. Learning how to traverse the social landscape of a classroom is not easy for some students. Listening actively, speaking with kindness, waiting for others, respecting personal space and ideas, are all learnt behaviours, with many factors either hindering or supporting the development of these skills. These are core skills that underpin learning and are integral to the success of every student.

The below article is a professional inquiry into the social and emotional needs of students and demonstrates how a problem in practice was the vehicle in which teachers developed their knowledge, practice and engagement, through evidence-based research to formulate plans for change. To improve student outcomes, teachers face a problem, reflect on their practice and then modify their practice to achieve better outcomes. Being able to raise questions, discuss problems of practice and address teaching challenges are all skills of an excellent practitioner.

The Department of Education and Training (the Department) acknowledges the impact of professional inquiry with the Framework for Improving Student Outcomes (FISO) Improvement Cycle - an inquiry framework with prompting questions that can be used over various time periods. Whilst the Year 2/3 Team (PLT) professional inquiry ran for several terms, a cycle could be as short as four weeks, with smaller goals set. The structure allows for inquiry in any teaching and learning context or content area, from the whole-school, right down to the classroom.

Professional inquiry at Featherbrook College

> 'Our purpose and endeavour is to support our students to be socially engaged, happy and healthy while growing and learning at school so they may engage successfully in future life challenges and opportunities...'
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> Featherbrook P-9 College, Statement of Purpose

Featherbrook is a new and growing school and it is important to us that we establish a culture of knowing our students as people and supporting them to grow socially and emotionally into successful community members. In 2018, I led the Year 2/3 Professional Learning Team (PLT). We chose to focus on building and maintaining a safe, inclusive, structured and orderly learning environment. This was a goal from the Annual Implementation Plan for the college.

We drew on our reading of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943) and Hattie's research into the power of student collaboration (Hattie, 2012). We knew that if we created a safe and secure learning environment, where students could effectively collaborate and build upon each other's strengths and knowledge, that strong academic progress would follow. A continued collaborative professional inquiry undertaken by all members in our PLT, including two specialist and five homegroup teachers, allowed us to really know our students - as a group and as individuals. We sought to know them as academic learners, as social learners, as developing minds and as successful members of their community.

At the beginning of 2018, the PLT brought their collective observations and wonderings together and began to discuss what we could do to better support our students' social and emotional development. As a team, we discussed and analysed our anecdotal notes related to student wellbeing.

I used these prompting questions with the team:

- Where are we now?
- What do you see, hear and feel in our learning space?
- What are your aspirations for our students?

Student voice was paramount in the collection and analysis of our data. We asked a sample of students what their learning spaces felt like and then, using the same s*ee, hear, feel* protocol, they recorded their thoughts by videoing, drawing or writing about an 'effective learning space and the teachers within it'. The collaborative online tool *Padlet* was utilised and students were encouraged to not only plot their own thoughts, but add to and challenge the points of view expressed by others.

What we discovered from our professional inquiry

Featherbrook College is built with contemporary collaborative learning principles, with both teachers and students, in mind. Learner agency is supported through open areas specifically designed for differing co-teaching and learning models. Peer observation, coaching and mentoring is engrained in our practice, as the design of our learning spaces actively support this, and teachers with a range of experiences come together to use their identified strengths to build capacity in each other. The physical space is designed with small break out areas which allow for students to move into independent and small group learning, whilst large open spaces support students to build knowledge with several teacher's supporting their learning. In our second year of operation, the innovative design was unlike our students previous school spaces.

The collected data showed that routines and structures needed to be strong, clear and consistent. Our students wanted a predictable environment. They needed scaffolding in making decisions for effective

learning and explicit teaching of behaviours related to safe movement in and through our learning spaces, in order to engage successfully with the flexible and collaborative nature of these physical learning spaces. The student responses formed the evidence from which we drew our actions, focusing on what was going to make the biggest impact on learning: consistent expectations for transitions and moving in and between spaces, and co-constructed norms for a safe and orderly learning environment.

With this finding from our professional inquiry, we then needed to do our research on structured lessons and reflect on our school values and expectations to come to a common understanding of how to implement structured lessons within our school context.

Resources we used in the professional inquiry

In our professional inquiry we used a number of Department resources to assist us to analyse, reflect and improve our practice. From the FISO Improvement Model, we used empowering students and setting expectations as part of the Positive Climate For Learning. From the Practice Principles for Excellence in Teaching and Learning we concentrated on Practice Principle 2 which focuses on building quality relationships anchored in respect, enhancing self-confidence and developing collaboration. We also used the High Impact Teaching Strategies (HITS), specifically examining the topic of Explicit Teaching and Collaborative Learning. The team audited our capacity and practice within the Continuum's of Practice for both of these HITS, quoting evidence from our planners and practice. From this, we were able to set clear manageable and measurable goals. The agreed focus was checking for understanding and making steps clear, transparent and predictable.

The strategies implemented to improve student outcomes

The School Wide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS) framework includes a range of systemic and individualised strategies for achieving social and learning outcomes in schools while preventing challenging behaviour. At Featherbrook we used it to assist us with developing daily routines, visual timetables and a project-based learning model.

Daily routines

Daily routines were co-constructed by teachers and students within School Wide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS) framework. Teachers collectively agreed upon shared expectations and norms, and students helped plan routines around these. For example, one shared expectation in our college is that students wait, seated at their classroom door at the end of break times. An issue that we faced was that students didn't know what lining up at the door looked like and therefore could not be successful.

Before taking this to the students, the PLT discussed a few options for a set routine for lining up. The students and teachers then discussed what this would look like: would it be one, two or three seated lines? If it was three lines, why was this better than two? Which side of the door was better and why? Would there be a spot for individuals who needed a little extra space? Would there be line leaders? Students and teachers justified their responses and negotiated a clear routine that would fit the needs of the group. The discussion was anchored on paper, time was allowed to explicitly teach, and students

practiced the new clear and consistent routines or transition. This student co-design protocol was followed for other transitions and learning times. The result was a co-owned set of cohort wide expectations and routines that were transparent and predictable.

Visual Timetables

The SWPBS framework focuses on movement in and through physical spaces, respectful conduct, interactions, feedback and play. Predictable and consistent routines can help students to support students' growth in self-regulation by ensuring they know what is coming next, where to find things and who to go to for help. At Featherbrook we implemented visual daily timetables systematically across all homegroups. This small change made a big difference to how students interacted with their physical space. Knowing where to go, what was coming next and who they would be learning with throughout the day, negated anxious behaviour and allowed students the ability to forward plan and organise themselves for learning.

Project based learning model

A project-based learning model, with strong focus on social learning, was used to support the explicit teaching of social skills in the SWPBS framework and digital tools were employed to engage the students. Teams of students were challenged to design and build an obstacle course. They were then required to code a Blue-Bot robot to navigate the course. Each lesson had success criteria with both content and social learning referenced. When reviewing their own learning, students assessed themselves and their peers on team collaboration from the college's School Wide Positive Behaviour Support Expectation Matrix. These social learning goals were also assessed by teachers and the data was discussed at PLT meetings. A trend within the student goals and anecdotal notes taken during the project was found. Although students had best intentions to work alongside others and be kind, they did not have the skills to actively listen, take turns and negotiate towards a common goal. This became a major focus for the remainder of the year. (a larger version of this image will be available as a download)

Click here to download this image

Revised by Featherbrook College students, staff, families and community members December 2018

Prioritise time for social and emotional teaching and learning

Time was prioritised for teachers to spend purposeful time with students. We used flexible team teaching and release time to enable further support in the form of regular small group focus sessions. Within focus groups, individuals had goals which they were working towards and students learned about choices and practiced skills and techniques to be successful with these goals. A group of Grade Two boys whose goal was to actively listen and take turns, focused on making proactive positive choices and planning for play in the yard. Before heading outside, they would meet with a teacher and plan the 'where, who and what' of play – 'Where are we going? Who are we going with? What are we doing?' The planning session drew on the college's School Wide Positive Behaviour Support Wheel of Choice (used as a structure for helping students to solve problems). As a result of this planning time, the boys were able to move towards playing positively in the yard, taking turns and listening to others, and then calmly transitioning into the learning space after break times.

Two of the [High Impact Teaching Strategies, Strategy 6 Multiple Exposures and Strategy 10 Differentiating Teaching](#) were also used to develop our approach to social and emotional learning. This meant that all students regardless of social ability or emotional intelligence benefited. By prioritising social and emotional learning, the students were able to form respectful relationships with their peers and teachers, whilst students who needed it were provided with additional targeted assistance.

What did we learn as a team?

The measured success of this approach can be directly attributed to the level of student voice, teacher collaboration and commitment by all parties. Every teacher in the team, homegroup and specialists, were active participants in the roll out of expectations. Teachers invested time in professional conversations. Teaching and learning put student data, need and voice at the centre and a consistent approach across the cohort meant that all students were clear about expectations. Every social learning expectation, routine, transition and structure was drawn from the [SWPBS framework](#) and school values.

As teachers, we learnt about explicit teaching, data collection, clear instructions, visual cues and anchors, worked examples and engaging students as drivers in their own learning and assessment. These are all things that my colleagues and I are fine tuning continuously in our repertoire of teaching. The analysis of the research, and the depth of professional conversations grew as the year unfolded. Teachers understood the needs of the students at a level that went beyond the superficial. Team members were working together to understand student triggers, referencing their social learning and behaviour management research and then giving practical examples of how to negate issues. Teachers were not just managing behaviour, but becoming teachers as researchers, and learning more about the students they were teaching. This was our positive climate for learning.

What did I learn as a teacher?

My journey leading and undertaking professional inquiry has had its challenges. Initially I found it frustrating that not everything worked when I tried it. Sometimes it would work one day and then not the next, or with one group but not another. I found that a new problem would arise from the changes I

had made. With each problem of practice, I learnt more about different aspects of teaching and learning including the timing, explicit teaching, goal setting and student voice.

When I started asking students questions and listening attentively to their voices, including non-verbal cues, I found a few things were missing. I thought that because I taught it, that my students understood it. This was not the case. I wasn't checking for understanding. I learnt that it is OK to revisit and explicitly teach again.

I learnt to ask students for their thoughts and opinions. Without ownership, most students do not see the value in the expectations set up for them. At first, I found a fine line between allowing students the choice to do what they wanted, and still getting them to do what they needed to do. You set the non-negotiables or boundaries and the students are given choices from there. Students need to feel heard and when their thoughts are acknowledged and appreciated, they feel respected. Students who are respected are more likely to engage in and drive their own learning.

I will continue inquiring and developing my practice. I will ask students for their thoughts, involve them actively in their learning, give them choice and always keep them at the centre of everything I do. If you follow that rule - keeping your students at the centre of everything you do - you cannot go wrong.

As a graduate teacher how do you implement a professional inquiry?

As teachers, we know the importance of curiosity and critical questioning. Professional inquiry simply begins with a question. If you are fortunate enough to work with a team of teachers who are passionate about collaboration, then take your questions to them and start from there. Most questions come from a problem that you have already noticed. Think about the problem and then the best outcome for that problem – this is your aspiration. Take this aspiration and problem and find out some more about it. Talk to experts in your school community and the wider school network. What are your school's values and current expectations? Take your research to the next level with professional reading and professional learning. Then create a small manageable goal and work from there. Ask others with a similar problem of practice to join you and regularly debrief and swap observations with these professionals. One small goal will then lead to another and the cycle of inquiry will continue.

As a graduate teacher how do you cater for the social and emotional needs of your students?

The questions you have in your mind now about how to meet the social and emotional needs are your beginning point for an inquiry. Just start. Take your question and seek the answers, knowing that there are publications, research and resources at your fingertips to guide you. If you are interested in beginning a professional inquiry about student social and emotional needs or about another part of your classroom practice, think about the focus of your inquiry and speak to your mentor, team leader or principal about your focus and how to begin.

I began this inquiry with the questions that I ask myself at this stage of every year:

- what have I noticed?
- who have I noticed?
- what are the structures I have in place to support my group and are working for every student?
- what could be better?

A key takeaway

As a teacher, if you are wanting to complete a professional inquiry or want to help develop students social and emotional development then start by talking it through with colleagues. In my first year of teaching, I had a sounding board in my mentor, a leading teacher, and another first year teacher, and we would gather to discuss challenges, look for best practice and suggest answers. You could also complete this as part of your inquiry process to gain full teacher registration with VIT.

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