

## **Bentleigh West Primary School**

### **Aims of the ILE and the Nature and History of the Innovation: holistic picture of organization**

Bentleigh West Primary School is a state [co-educational](#) primary school located in the city of [City of Glen](#) Eira 15km south of the Melbourne CBD. Founded in the 1930s the school currently has an enrolment of approximately 500 students in Prep to year 6 with continued role growth expected in 2011. The school has a significant number of students with special needs. Students are predominantly from the upper quartiles of the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) scale. While there may be a varied ethnic mix, most students come from English speaking backgrounds. There are slightly less female than male students.

Bentleigh West Primary School has been through a substantial building refurbishment program in the past five years and has worked steadily to establish team teaching and personalised learning initiatives. The teaching and learning culture is based on a shared vision developed through a cycle of in-house professional development conferences during this period.

Approximately 37 full time equivalent teaching and non-teaching staff support student learning. The school has established a transition pathway for kinder children entering prep in partnership with the Glen Eira Council called the Community Alliance and Relationships in Education (CARE) program. The school is located on wetlands with the Elster Creek running through the grounds and has used this resource along with staff expertise to become a leader in environmental sustainability project learning. There are a range of performing arts and media activities available to students as extracurricular activities and woven into inquiry learning throughout the school. The school has its own radio station and television studio.

The agreed shared values are core to all of its policies and drive decision making processes. There is a strong sense of community within the school and the entrepreneurial approach to resourcing encourages engagement with the wider community.

### **Origins and development of Innovative learning Environment (ILE)**

The Principal, Jennifer Small, came to the school mid 2004 and encountered very traditional buildings and approaches to teaching. "There was no whole school vision around teaching and learning." Teaching was curriculum driven and teacher focused, carried out in isolated classrooms with little consistency across teams or innovative leadership. There was a "significant range of teacher effectiveness and parents were very aware of that".

*There wasn't a lot of emphasis on professional learning. There was a large disparity between the teacher and the student and parent opinion surveys. The teacher survey was very high, everyone was very happy. The parents and the student survey was very low and so I wanted to align the thinking in the school obviously.*

### **Creating a Learning Community**

Bentleigh West Primary School is the only government school out of the four schools in the Bentleigh postcode. It is within close access to a bustling shopping strip, a main rail line and an arterial highway that places it within half an hour of the CBD. The predominant language of the area is English with a large ex-patriot community from English speaking backgrounds. Traditionally there

has been a large Greek and Italian community as well as Chinese Asian, most of whom would be second generation Australian. A significant number of students feed into Brighton Secondary College but there is also a selection of private and Catholic secondary school options nearby.

*There was a really strong sense of community which was fantastic in the school but they didn't see themselves as a learning community. It was a social community which is great... and a support community for each other but you know to me the learning needed to be highlighted as a focus.*

The lack of whole school vision of teaching and learning manifested itself in inconsistencies across classroom practices, lack of curriculum and team leadership, a significant range in teacher effectiveness and a limited range of student learning outcomes. Data analysis was traditionally the domain of the leadership team and resources, both human and physical, were limited and limiting in terms of addressing student needs and interests. Teaching and learning was both curriculum driven and teacher dominated with a limited focus on professional development. There was also a large disparity between teacher and student/parent satisfaction data. Students were not independent learners and did not feel motivated or engaged by these isolated learning environments and practices.

In 2005 the staff held their first inhouse conference *Bringing It Together* where they were encouraged to explore questions of pedagogy, first looking at the authoritative VELs pedagogy and then the range of personal pedagogies across the faculty. Exploring ideas around 'What does powerful learning look like?', 'How does it happen?' and 'How do we know it has happened?' the staff began to form a shared pedagogical framework and rationale that would be built upon in subsequent years.

At this time the school was due for a major upgrade and was subsequently invited to take part in the Building School Futures program. The newly created rationale positioned the school well to create something new for the community. The concerns were around creating learning environments in which team approaches could be taken to promote personalised learning and enhance student motivation and engagement.

### **Designing for Pedagogy**

The next staff conference in 2007 focused on what these physical environments would look like so that a clearly articulated vision could be communicated to the architects.

*We wanted 4 micro learning communities. We wanted to team teach. So we really had a very strong sense of where we wanted to go. And this conference was really challenging the teachers about how committed they were to the vision. We did things like we looked at Steven Heppel's table on 21<sup>st</sup> century learning. We unpacked that. Where are we as a school? What does this really mean? How do we have to change?*

*We also talked about different modalities of different learning so that in our learning spaces we would need to address these. The learning houses are just blank learning spaces. If you take everything out of them it's just one big blank room so teachers could create and make and design, with kids, the learning space they want.*

An extensive conversation followed which included looking very thoroughly at the design and manipulating the physical, temporal and spatial elements of the space.

*And then the last activity we did was they had to write an ad for what a teacher at Bentleigh West Primary School is, so they could reflect; Am I that teacher?*

The second conference concentrated on playing with design to create the type of spaces and site layout that would support the shared vision for collaborative teaching and personalised learning. Teachers were encouraged to practice team teaching and to experiment with furniture and resource placement prior to the buildings opening in 2008. Action research was promoted across the faculty and a range of visits to other innovative schools was offered. As teams moved into their new learning spaces they were encouraged to experiment with ideas and establish their own programs and protocols within the ethos of student-centred learning and team approaches.

*We looked at protocols and shared norms and beliefs and understandings about teaching and learning in the teams so they had the whole school framework so within that they have to come up with their own protocols. How they're going to work together and actually document them. And what they believed about teaching literacy, teaching numeracy so that they had that real strong alignment before they would move in.*



Figure 1. Site Plan

The first Learning House opened in 2008 for the Level 3/4 students toward the end of the year. Teams were encouraged to move into the space as best as they could and then make decisions about resourcing. The initial learning model was very much based on the independent learning the teachers had seen in other schools but it was not long before it was decided that this was not a workable model for Bentleigh West.

## Structured patterns and characteristics of ILE: layout, sequencing and mix of learning activities

### The Physical Design



Figure 2. Learning House

The development of a whole school vision of teaching and learning which put the students at the centre resulted in a plan for creating Learning Houses where each learning level are taught by a team of educators. The houses themselves are flexible rather than open spaces designed on the metaphor of a family home. Each building has an open central family area which includes a large kitchen and living/learning zones. There retractable walls which allow for partial closure in the space. Around the perimeter of each of the houses are withdrawal rooms (bedrooms) and bathrooms (accessible from inside and outside the space). The houses are bright, colourful inviting spaces with a range of furniture options and a large investment in quality storage/organization which makes resources accessible to students and educators.

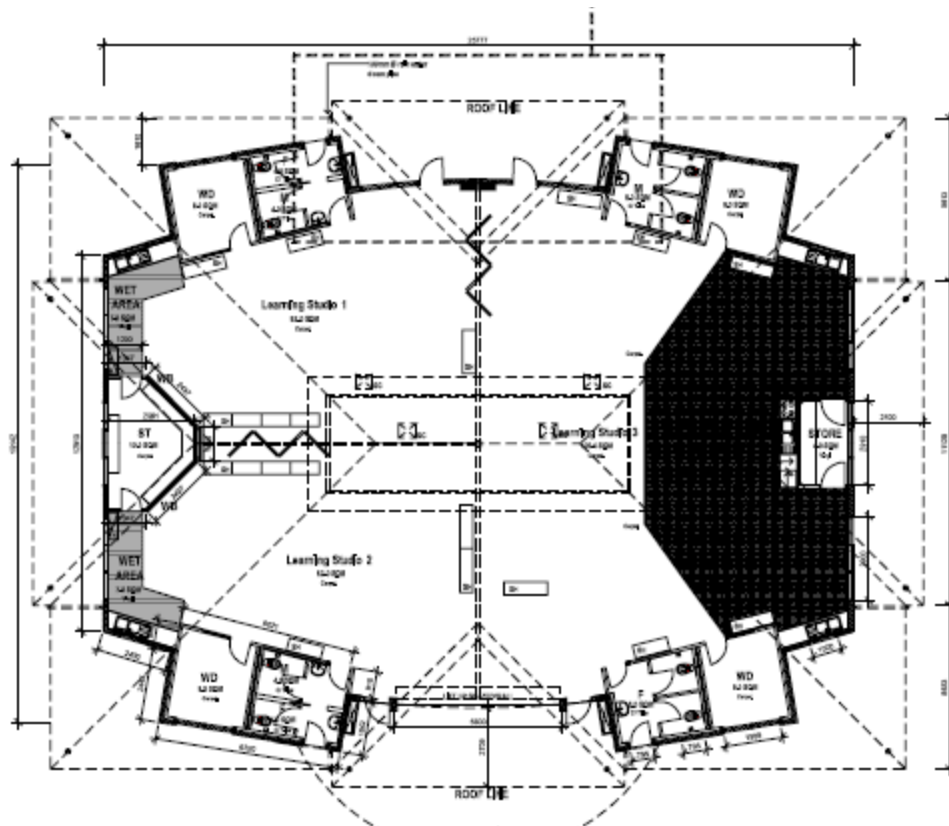


Figure 3. Learning House Floor Plan



Figure 4. Glass Garage Door

Each Learning House has a large central kitchen bench where a class group can easily gather to work. It is common to see students choosing to work at the bench during independent work periods and teachers will often work and meet here as well. The height and furniture for each bench is different for each year level.

Each of the Learning Houses has a wall of windows which retract like a garage door. This creates an indoor/outdoor flow where student furniture can be easily moved to the outdoor space for learning in suitable weather conditions.

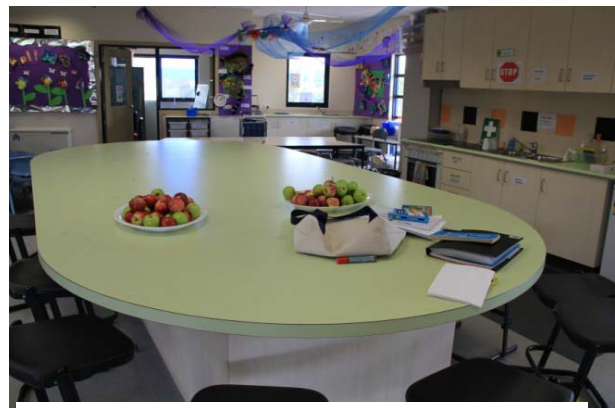


Figure 5. Learning House Kitchen

The exception to the learning house design is the Senior Learning Suite which has the look and feel of an apartment located on the second floor of the original brick building. The Learning Suite is accessed by internal lift and stairs which are housed in a turret design feature. There is still the central learning space with a large kitchen that looks across to magnificent views of the Dandenongs and the sweep across the the Melbourne CBD. Feeding off this main space are four large flexible spaces, two smaller withdrawal rooms (one of which houses the radio station) and a library. The students also have access to toilets on this level. As with the Learning Houses there is colour and comfort in the design and furniture is varied and flexible.





Figure 6. View from Learning Suite

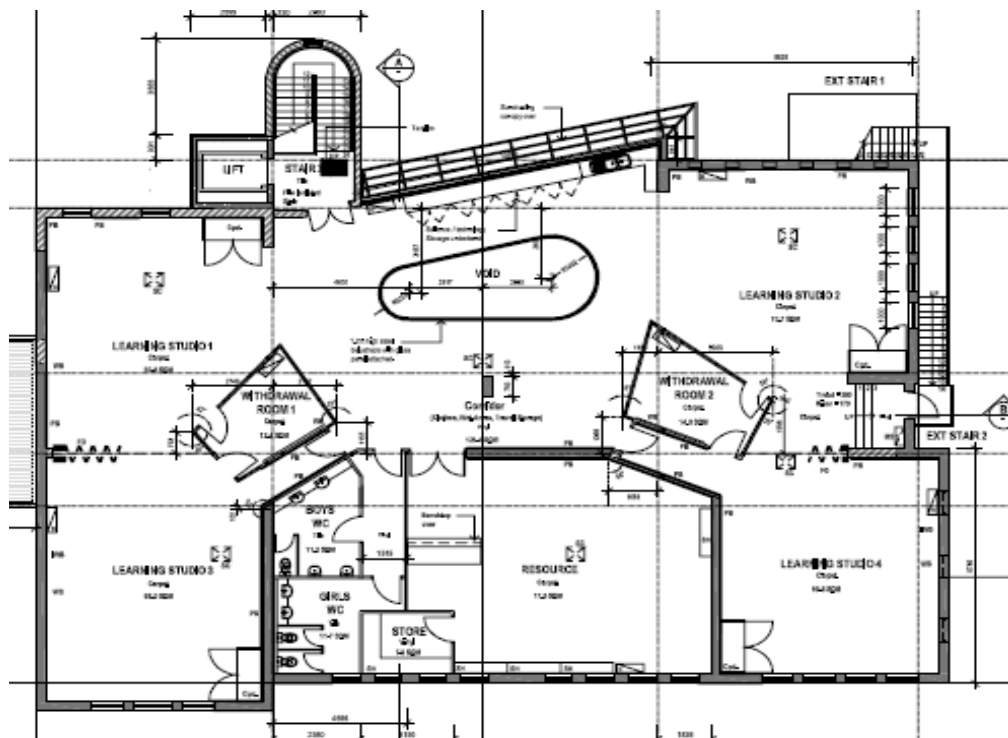


Figure 7. Learning Suite Floor Plan

## Staffing and Resources

Bentleigh West Primary School uses the term 'educators' to cover a broad spectrum of adults who work in and around each learning house. This includes qualified teaching staff, teacher aides and assistants and other specialists. Therefore within each learning house the students have access to and interaction with a number of adults. The extra adults also 'free up' the teachers to work more closely with students as they will often do teacher preparation tasks and update work displays. The principal funds these extra bodies by making use of the total staff allocation for the year, a practice which is not common across schools.

Each learning community monitors their own budget and is encouraged to trial ideas within the specific construct of improving student learning outcomes. Educators plan together at a macro level to look at shared protocols and practices; in pairs or subgroups which is an opportunity to group children across level; and then they plan activities and content for their specific groups at a micro level. This allows student needs to be addressed and targeted and students to work at their pace. The importance of adult to student relationships is emphasised in the approach that each Learning House takes, for instance, there are 7 class groups in the 1/2 Learning House so they have split into two teams while the 3/4 Learning House operates as a single team of 5 groups but does not attempt to do ability or interest grouping across all of those groups for Literacy and Numeracy.

*...we found trying to group across the whole 5 grades, 140 children, especially in reading, we didn't feel like we knew the kids well enough...you know there's only so much you can write down on a page. You know if I know the child and their interest, and their background, and their family life, and they're likely to have done on the weekend and their past experiences, I get a good picture of a reader. So we tried to break it down a little bit further. (3/4 Teacher)*

Time in each Learning House is structured according to the needs of the level but within the broader shared timetable of the school. Each level has a distinctive literacy and numeracy block with an inquiry block structured for the needs and abilities of the level. From this point of view there is nothing particularly unique in the temporal structure of the day, however, the spaces allow each level to structure within these explicit learning blocks to allow students to work at their own pace and interest. This is a structure that is constantly being reviewed and refined in line with refinements in pedagogy, protocols, processes and programs.

*It's still happening now, even as teams changed, you know people might go or move levels and then you find dynamics change within your team and not that it's drastic, massive overall changes, but things do change with the dynamics of teams and also with children as you get a new cohort coming up. You find that what you were doing last year may not be as well suited to these kids and so you're constantly reviewing what you're doing and you'll try new things, and yeah we've certainly tried lots of different timetables and groupings, and teacher combinations, and who works well together, what kids work well with different teachers.(Jessica 3/4 Teacher)*

The first Learning House to open was Years 3 and 4 at the end of 2008. Initially students were allowed to create their own timetables, students were ability grouped across the entire level, teachers would conduct student conferences and students would sign up for workshops according to needs and interests. These initial experiences led to a review of practices within this particular Learning House which became a template for other levels waiting to move into their new spaces.

*I think the biggest concern for everybody was time teaching and time on task with kids. So when kids were doing independent work we felt there hadn't been enough time developing independence in these kids and teaching them what that behaviour looks like. How do you keep check of your work? How do you know what you have to do next? So we agreed we needed to go back and develop that more in the kids before we jumped into having blocks of independent time. (Jessica 3/4 Teacher)*

Each Learning House also has a double portable classroom that they have access to throughout the day. Again each Level makes use of this space differently with the Level 3/4 team choosing to keep the space relatively flexible in terms of its use while the larger 1/2 team has two extra spaces which they have chosen to set up as Numeracy spaces. This means that they have most of their numeracy resources within this space and most of the numeracy teaching and learning takes place in these spaces. This leaves the Learning House itself as a more Literacy focused space and the teams access

these two general areas accordingly. Inquiry learning takes place in all of the spaces. The Prep Learning House has only opened in Term 4 2010 and the team are allowing the students to settle into one space rather than making use of both spaces. The Learning Suite does not have a portable space but makes use of a range of other spaces available in the school including the multipurpose Void on the first level of the main building.

Beyond these explicit 'owned' learning spaces are a range of specialist and outdoor learning spaces. There is a specialist environmental science room which is located near to the school Vegetable gardens, the chicken coup and the Wetlands classroom. Within this building there is also the TV studio and another classroom which will be set up as a specialist Science laboratory in 2011. A large gymnasium is being constructed at present

which is capable of housing the entire school for assemblies that also has an attached performing arts facility which will allow for general classroom music, itinerant instrumental music and will eventually house the radio station.

The Learning Houses each have their own library in the main living/learning area with comfortable furniture and range books appropriate to the level and interests of the



Figure 8. Prep Learning House Library

students. These are tracked through a central library database so that books can be transported across the school as needed. In this system the library staff work in each of the Learning Communities as needed and students have immediate access to resources instead of waiting for an allotted library time to fulfil their reading needs.

There is not a dedicated art room in the school, however, each of the communities is well-resourced for art activity and this is integrated into learning units by the teaching teams. Each team has a member who has a strong interest and skill-base in visual arts and a Visual Art Executive, made up of these teachers, pursue professional development, share ideas and procure resources for their community. Similar constructs exist for other disciplines so that staff are able to pursue their professional development needs and interests for the benefit of the community.



Figure 9. Learning House Library





Figure 11. Environmental Science Room

media time. There is also a Science technician who will work in the new Science laboratory and one of the extra educators in the Senior Learning Unit also acts as an ICT technician to support the diverse technologies employed across the school. Each of these technicians is a specialist in their area but not necessarily a teacher. They are able to support and up-skill the teachers and students in ways that are useful and meaningful.

Performing Arts is catered for through an extensive itinerant music program coupled with Artist-in-Residence programs that have seen students take part in circus skills, singing and percussion, dance and drama programs over the past 5 years. The school has regular performances both for and by students in the school, Learning Communities and outside the school.

The school is well resourced with laptop computers, desktop computers and interactive whiteboards in each of the communities. The technology is unobtrusive in its location and use and the ICT Lead Teacher, who is a member of the 3/4 teaching team has an army of trained ICT student leaders who assist with the care of these resources. Students also have access to professional media tools which have been procured from a television studio 'throw out', iRivers which are used for podcasting activities for the radio station, digital cameras and videos and the newest addition, iPads. Students are well trained in the use of these technologies and have ready access to them.

The Assistant Principal, is also the environmental science specialist and shares this knowledge and expertise across the communities, however, she is largely located with the Senior Learning Suite team. In an entrepreneurial move, Jennifer has employed technicians and experts to support staff and programs across the school. Therefore there is a media technician situated in the TV studio so that students can access this area at any stage without a teacher having to plan for specific



Figure 10. TV Studio



Figure 12. Organisational Furniture

This physical resource is well labelled, visually attractive and usually serves multiple purposes in the spaces.

LOTE in the school is Italian and the two teachers are working in a research initiative with the DEECD on a computer-based LOTE program called the Rosetta Stone which sees the Year 5/6 students learning Mandarin online. Further to this language learning, each community has an Asian partner country (Prep – Indonesia, 1/2 - Japan, 3/4 - India and 5/6 – China) which is embedded into inquiry learning to offer a further lens for learning. Therefore when students may be investigating a topic study of Natural Disasters, they will also look at this topic within their partner country to extend their understanding and knowledge.

Furniture and organisational units in each Learning Community are both functional and aesthetically inviting. Teams have been encouraged to look carefully at what they need and to purchase accordingly and a large portion of the budget is allocated for this purpose. Furniture is colourful and flexible in the way it can be used. The emphasis on organization of resources allows students ready access, tidying up is easy and manageable and student records and work can be easily monitored and located.



Figure 13 Learning House Furniture and Use of Moveable Walls

## Nature and Quality of Learning

### Next Steps of Learning

The nature of learning across the school is focused less on negotiated curriculum and more on personalised learning within a structured use of VELs. Initial attempts at a fully negotiated curriculum were restructured to support students to become independent learners. While this may have been more beneficial for student monitoring and outcomes the students who were at first granted this freedom and then had it removed mourned the loss of this process.

*When we were first in the Learning House we used to have these timetables and we would fill out what we wanted to do and when we wanted to do it. Now we get the timetable given to us and we have only a few independent work sessions in a week and most of those have to be done with our class so we don't get to work with our friends. And the teachers will say it is independent maths or independent literacy whereas I liked it better when you could just do things that you had to get done. I find that now when it's independent maths and I've finished everything that I am just doing work that I don't feel like I'm learning anything. When I've got things that I really need to get done but it's not the right sort of work and I'm not allowed to do it because it's not maths or literacy or whatever we are doing at that time.*

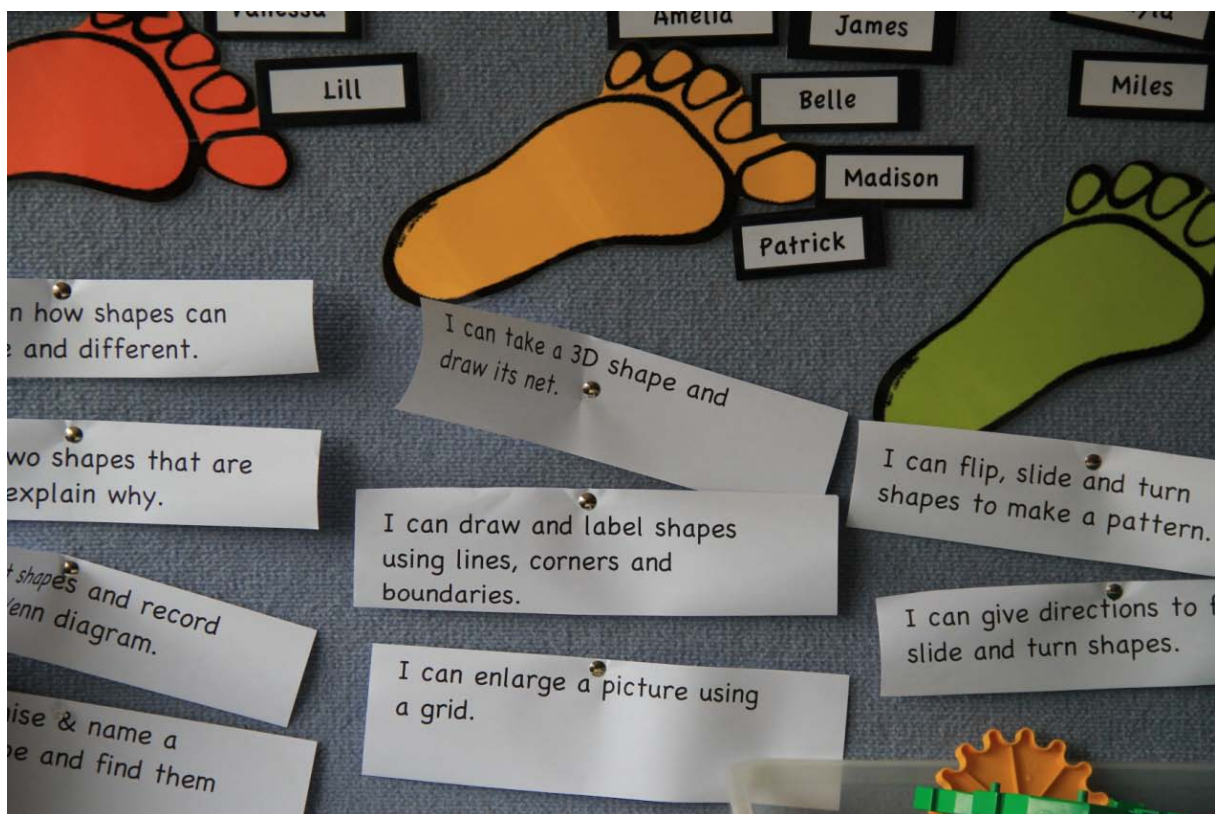


Figure 14. Footprints in Numeracy

Personalised learning takes the form of a broader construct which the school calls 'Next Steps' of learning. The aim is that every child should have their next step identified in all areas of the curriculum to ensure that they progress in their learning. Teachers have further developed this by breaking VELs down into 'footsteps' or 'steps', which are displayed for topics in the classroom. This construct was begun in the 3/4 Learning Community and has filtered through to other parts of the school which can be directly attributed to the culture of independent experimentation with pedagogy and process within each of the communities. On the other hand teachers did express

more of a need to share some of these trialled activities to ensure that there is some continuity across the school.

In taking students to their next steps of learning, the spaces and the team teaching approach provide more opportunity for this to happen:

*[The spaces] are flexible spaces, that's the way I like to think of them and that was the idea of their design. They weren't open spaces, they weren't closed spaces, they were flexible spaces because we acknowledge in our struggle to challenge kids to the next steps we were very much restricted by space. So we wanted to open it up so that we had much better flexibility around the space. There are children who, in our school, would prefer and work better in a much tighter closed off space with one teacher. We identify kids all the time that in order to make significant inroads to their next step of learning, they need to be one on one in a small space. And I think it's one thing to acknowledge that, but it's a whole other thing to provide that (Assistant Principal).*

### **Sustainable School: Sustainable Programs**

Bentleigh West Primary School is a leader in sustainability. Not only is it a fundamental element of the design of the school but it is a strong focus of the learning and reputation of the school. As such, BWPS has been successful not only in competitions around sustainability design throughout the school but in the types of community-based environmental campaigning and inquiry that the students undertake through the curriculum.

### **Sustainable Design**

The Learning Communities have included clever and environmentally sustainable design features to assist not only in maintaining quality air but also in minimising noise and aesthetic insecurities that often arise with high ceilings in open spaces. Hot air is released at night through the breeze atriums in the centre of each building. The garage door window walls allow for indoor-outdoor connections to be made in the learning programs. There are solar panels which feed back into the electricity grid minimising the cost of powering the school and the latest addition is a wind turbine on the top of the main building.

Landscape is a fundamental element of the whole school design. The commons that has been created between the Learning Houses has been grassed with astro-turf which is popular with the students for its texture and lack of bugs and weeds. This high traffic area allows the community of the school to gather and move easily without the school having to worry about ongoing grass maintenance and irrigation. On the other hand there are several water tanks throughout the school which cater for toilet flushing and irrigation of the many gardens and natural turf areas of the oval. Prior to the installation of these tanks the oval was brown wasteland.

Shade trees have been maintained throughout the school but also there has been substantial planting of native trees and plants throughout the school grounds for the future. Wherever possible these are activities of planning and planting have been done by or with students and are ongoing projects and places for learning throughout the school. The latest addition of a succulent garden was completed by students recently. The vegetable garden and the wetlands is an ongoing site of inquiry not only in environmental science but in literacy, numeracy, humanities and visual arts.

The wetland has been reclaimed in the last five years to restore the health of the Elster Creek. Students carry out regular water testing and planting in this area, they populate the wetlands with wildlife where possible and they maintain the traditional storytelling of the Aboriginal caretakers of the land.





Figure 15. Wetlands Classroom

Throughout the school there are many places for outdoor learning to take place in comfort and safety with fixed bench/table units located in the shade areas. A large amphitheatre deck has been built next to the soft and hard court areas where students can sit under the cover of a shade sail to work or watch demonstrations of PE skills. This site is also powered so that it can act as an outdoor assembly or concert area.

Newer trees have been planted down a walkway towards the back of the school. This has been titled the authors walk with a plaque under each of the trees for famous children's literature authors. Again the fixed bench/tables have been placed between the trees to ensure that students can make use of this area as both a learning and leisure area which will eventually offer shade for future generations in the school.

A large tree near the commons is the site of a sensory garden which is a current inquiry project for the Preps. Eventually they will plant and create this garden for all of the students to engage with.





Figure 16. Sensory Garden

The environmental science room has a long deck area outside which allows students to carry out experiments and planting projects. Students are often working on projects which are to benefit the ongoing maintenance of gardens through planting, creation of fertiliser, designing feeders for the chickens and composting activities. Recycling is a strong focus throughout the organisation of the school and nude food practices are encouraged. Students often create projects which raise money for other communities that need aid and they will also engage in letter writing campaigns to local, state and federal government to improve the environment based on the inquiry work that they undertake.

This embedded and authentic approach to curriculum and learning seems to have resulted in a community of students who are focused learners and committed to environmental issues. Again the language and vision for this work is filtered throughout the entire community of learners with great success. This level of inquiry work indicates that students are learning in integrated and authentic activities.

What is not so evident in this approach is the individual lines of inquiry that would signify a fully personalised learning process. Students indicate they feel that the work they do is often teacher-directed and they would like to break out into more individualised work and timetables. The teachers also acknowledge that this is an element of the teaching and learning that they need to improve and it is part of the constant experimentation, reflection and revision of their practices.

### **Cycles of Success**

A strength of the shared vision and language of the school is reflected in the way that teams are encouraged to experiment and trial ideas. The staff recognise that success will occur in cycles and that what was successful in the past may need to be revisited and revised in the future. The language that they put to this cycle is the 'Learning Pit' and this construct permits teams to work their way out of difficulties with time and support from the leadership team.

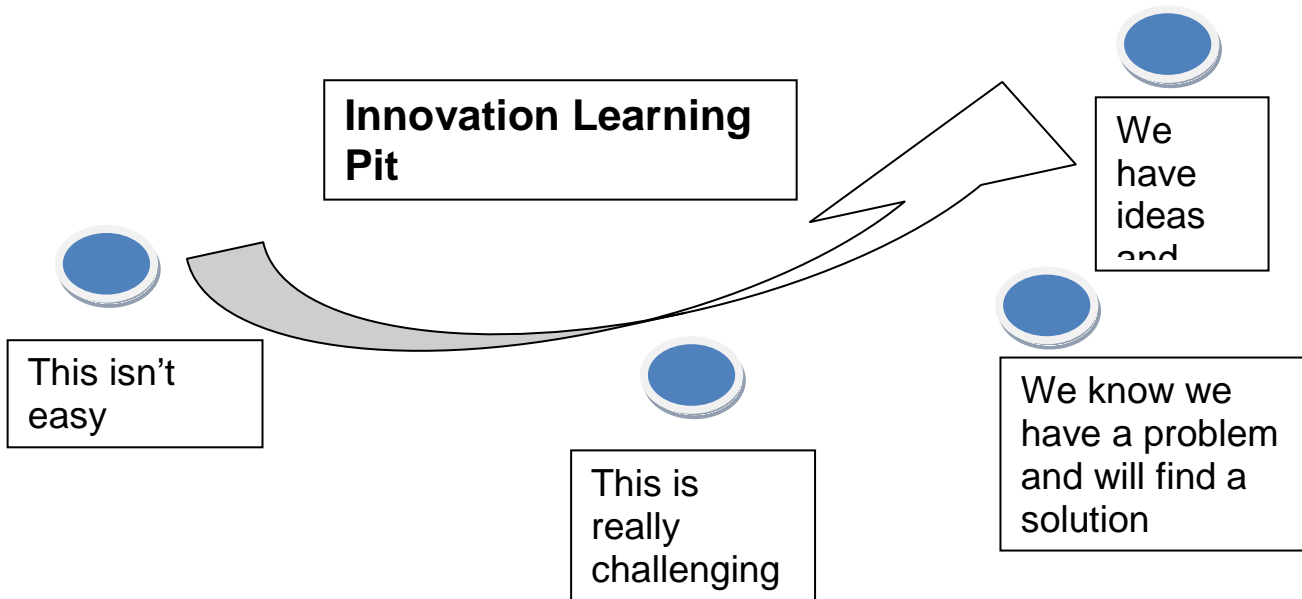


Figure 17 The Learning Pit

### Impact and Effectiveness

The strongest evidence of the impact and effectiveness of both the pedagogical and physical design of Bentleigh West Primary School does not, as is often the case, rest in the empirical data, although this is a reasonably strong evidence base, but in the intangible elements of the school.

The students are calm and engaged in both classrooms and the playground. They talk about feeling safe and happy and provide evidence in their interview data that they are able to access the types of spaces they are drawn to for both learning and leisure throughout the school. They see this as a strong feature of their personal success and happiness. The fact that the general school community reflects this sense of calm and still sustained reasonable to high outcomes data is a strong indicator of success for a school which has undergone major and consistent building development over the past three years.

The educators also have this same level of calm even in the face of challenging circumstances and feel that the best element of the new designs is the opportunity afforded for collegial support. The teaming element is useful for not only sharing the load but for more effective outcomes for students and dynamic opportunities for professional development to take place every day.

Teacher assessments against Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) indicate that students are more successful in their learning. Student behaviour data indicates that incident statistics are not only lower but less dramatic in nature. The multiple students throughout the school who are identified as special needs are coping far better than predicted in these environments. This is probably a function not only of the physical design, with multiple withdrawal spaces both on the periphery of the buildings and the use of the furniture throughout the spaces, but also of the organisation of the educator teams within each community.

## **Concluding Comments**

The danger moving forward for Bentleigh West Primary School is in the success of the programs and the projected growth of school enrolments. The Learning Houses work best for four teams and this will be felt in 2011 as the school prepares for an influx in the prep numbers to six teams. While the portable classrooms allow for some overflow for growth they are not ideal in terms of providing flexible spaces and personalised learning however, the school is always looking for new ways to utilise these spaces for the benefit of their students. The year 1/2 team has eight groups and already is struggling to balance a personalised approach with the imposition of silo timetables which limit them to particular spaces at particular times with no flexibility to extend programs according to student need and interest.

On the other hand the school is working in realistic ways with a range of indoor and outdoor spaces and programs which are encouraging student success in learning outcomes. The innovation of the school is manifested in a range of smaller entrepreneurial and pedagogical innovations which are contributing to a wider program of innovation across the entire school community and beyond.

## References

*The Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA)*. Retrieved 4<sup>th</sup> September 2010, from <http://www.myschool.edu.au/Glossary.aspx#G2>