

# Grovedale West Primary School

## Aims of the ILE and the Nature and History of the Innovation

### School context

Grovedale West Primary School is a P-6 State school located in an area of the City of Geelong which has undergone substantial residential growth over the past ten years. The school is 15 minutes from the city centre and the area is well serviced with day care facilities, secondary schools and is a short distance from the Deakin University Waurn Ponds campus.

The school promotes a positive education philosophy. It is well-resourced with large classroom spaces and grounds. There is a Deaf Education Centre at the school and the current cohort of approximately 220 students learns Auslan sign language as their LOTE. There are 12 Koori students and approximately the same number of deaf students. A substantial number of ESL students and students with special needs are also enrolled in the school. The school is working towards individual learning plans and personal goal development for every student in a culture of team teaching. Relationships with parents are valued and the school has put in place programs which encourage parents to become involved with the school while their children are still pre-school age.

The suburb of Grovedale is located on the border of suburban and rural Geelong. The community is made up predominantly of Australian-born families with a small but significant cohort of indigenous residents and a slightly larger number of immigrant families from mainly English-speaking backgrounds. There is reasonably high employment with a spread across a number of industry and occupational sectors. The spread of incomes is fairly even across low to high quartiles but the majority of adults in the area do not hold educational qualifications beyond high school and of those that do the largest number are vocational qualifications. Most students in the area attend government schools.

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

Grovedale West Primary School has previously catered for up to 800 students and this is reflected in the space that is available to the school. However, the school went through a substantial period of caretaker leadership which, despite their best efforts, had a detrimental effect on the reputation of the school. This changed with the appointment of the current leadership team four years ago and there has been a strong focus on improving the teaching and learning culture that is seeing a slow but steady shift in actual and perceived outcomes for the school community.

When the current Principal was appointed in 2006 it was apparent that there needed to be a change in school culture. Teachers worked extremely hard but they worked in isolation and there was a lack consistency for learners moving from year to year. At this early stage the Assistant Principal was a successful Prep teacher in the school. She was moved out of the classroom to become the Teaching and Learning Coach and spent considerable time working in all of the classrooms across the school, observing and collecting data to develop a whole school improvement plan.

*Several things became clear. There was no consistency in teaching between any of our teachers and any of our classrooms. Every teacher operated differently to every other in every way. There was virtually no team planning. There was limited use of student data. There was inconsistent use of progression points as starting points for student learning. There was next to no culture of*

*teacher learning even though most teachers would write in their PRP's that they were lifelong learners. What we did have were a group of teachers who worked extremely hard and cared a great deal for their students. I wanted them to be rewarded for all of their hard work and for our students to have the best possible outcomes (Assistant Principal).*

One of the first things she did at this point was to track the learning of a student in the school and to write her story. Kathleen became the impetus for shared ownership of change through the story of her 5 years (to date) of learning in the school.

*Every year Kathleen and all the other children had to relearn the way the new... year's teacher did things. So it was about a complete lack of consistency. Every teacher did their own thing. They did it to the best of their ability. No one came to work to do a bad job. Everyone was working as hard as they could but there was no consistency between grades so Kathleen would change grades and all her friends and everyone in the school changes grades and okay, how do we do things now. How's my teacher going to talk about comprehension? What's the language they are going to use around maths? How are they going to teach me spelling? Is that going to be the same as last year or do I have to learn something new. Some kids...you know we all know that some kids learn despite that. And some kids are really disadvantaged by it so we figure that all children would be advantaged by having a more consistent approach. I used the story of Kathleen because everyone here knows her and loves her and I just used the facts about what happened to her. Used that to show the staff that what we really need to do was to get some consistency because from Kathleen's point of view it wasn't helping her to learn (Assistant Principal).*

This was a change in focus to using data in a proactive way to create shared protocols around how to individualise learners and their learning and to close the gaps between outcomes and practice. Overall the aim was to ensure that the cohort of children who had not been progressing could advance and to use data to plan for this to happen. The change also required a shift in teacher perceptions of student deficit. This was achieved by showing them data from other schools which showed students with similar SFO data achieving better outcomes than similar students at Grovedale West Primary School.

Initially a school improvement leadership team was put together, not from the lead teachers but from volunteers across the school. These team members had to be prepared to make difficult decisions and to look for ways of doing things differently.

*We had many younger staff keen to be involved in the school improvement journey. They brought new and fresh ideas to the table; seeing the students and school from a fresh perspective and minimizing the blocking of forward thinking by staff who had long held opinions, views and practices at the school. It gave us a broader spread of leadership within the school...and we shifted the conversation away from teachers to kids (Principal).*

Also around this time the leadership group at the school attended a DEECD hosted Signpost Conference where disadvantaged schools talked about their successes with students and communities. This was also a catalyst for a change in conversation.

*After going to that Signpost Conference we put together our own document. We got all that team out of the school for a while, away from the school, and sat them down and said: What are the key things that we need to do for our school? We know what the department wants us to do what do we need to do? So we put together our own strategic approach to school improvement with 15 key areas (Principal).*

The 15 key areas are:

- Agreed definition of high quality instruction
- Using data

- Coaching, mentoring, high quality professional development
- Teams collective capacity
- Resources
- Assigning staff to key priorities
- An expectation that good enough is not good enough
- Priority focus on Literacy and Numeracy
- Establishing community partnerships
- Setting specific measurable goals
- Quality tasks
- Staff expectations clearly articulated
- Strategic allocation of resources
- Group dialogue and planning
- Recognising and valuing staff

The principal states:

*The school over the last four years has been going through change from managing school behaviour as the key focus to looking at student learning as the key focus. The data needed to improve significantly. The students' attitude about being learners within a school needed to change significantly. The community understanding of what this school was about needed to have a new slant and the teachers who had been working in the school needed the opportunity to have new learning because they've been doing the same old thing for a long time.*

One of the significant changes was to focus on student learning instead of behaviour management (Figure 1):

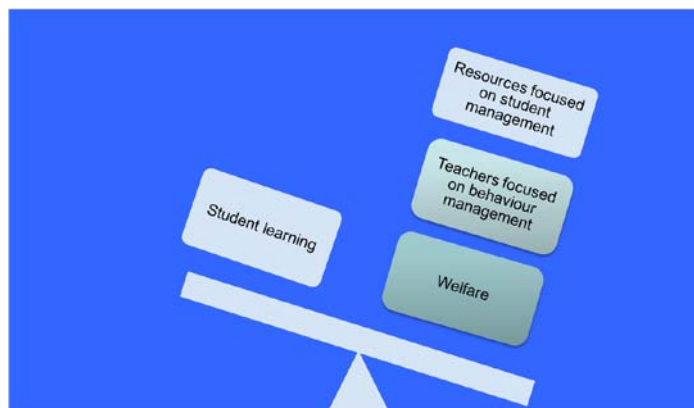


Figure 1. The Student Behaviour Management Imbalance

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

Grovedale West Primary School cannot be perceived as having a single Innovative Learning Environment structure that is working across all year levels. Nor is it entirely appropriate to look at the individual levels for patterns of use as these are still very much in an emergent phase. What Grovedale West Primary School is doing in an innovative manner is building a learning culture from the ground up which is data driven and puts individual student learning at the centre (see Figure 1, above). This is not a negotiated curriculum for each student although there are elements of this

happening at each year level. Nor is it a whole focus on inquiry through an integrated approach although the narrow focus approach is intended to integrate literacy across all curriculum areas.

However, on the back of the innovative approach to cultural change Grovedale West Primary School has been successful in securing a \$2 million BER building in 2010 (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. BER Library and Classroom Plan

This space has allowed the school to achieve two major goals. One was to create a flexible space for the Level 3 students (Years 3/4) so that the team teaching practices which this team aspired to could be realised. It also allowed the school to geographically orient their administration in a way that it hadn't previously been able to achieve thus improving the relationship to the community.

The 3/4 classes moved into the new BER building, the Middle Inquiry Pod (MIPod) (see Figures 3 and 4), upon its completion in July 2010. The space allows a great deal of flexibility in the use of resources and structure of activities. There are 3 classes of approximately 25 students within this space but the teachers and students work across all the groups and spaces according to the activities and learning they are doing.



Figure 3. Middle Inquiry Pod (MIPod)



Figure 4. Open gallery space in the MIPod

As yet, the Prep teachers team plan but do not team teach which is a function of the traditional spaces that they inhabit. The future development of this space in line with the rest of the school will allow for 'a smarter use of time', better distribution of physical and human resources and also an opportunity that will help to shape better learning outcomes through more personalised approaches and coordinated efforts. The teachers are also hoping to develop outdoor learning spaces that allow for a natural flow in and between learning spaces and activities.

The 1/2 team is team teaching and planning. They have three classes and four teachers. The extra teacher is utilised in different ways for different needs – sometimes taking an explicit small teaching group and other times as a roving teacher during independent inquiry sessions. However, they are teaching in relatively traditional spaces that are part of future development plans.



Figure 5. SIPod Corridor



Figure 6. Learning in the SIPod

The 5/6 students are working in a redeveloped section of the older building (see Figures 5 and 6) where they have a range of options in a flexible space for structuring teaching and learning. This space is known as the Senior Inquiry Pod (SIPod) and it contains withdrawal and teacher office spaces along with formal and informal spaces and furniture. This was the first of the flexible spaces in the school to be developed and has been a site of trial and experiment which has informed practices across the school. An important factor in the transition to this space is that the teaching team practiced team teaching approaches in traditional spaces for the two years leading up to this \$500,000 redevelopment's completion, giving an indication of the thorough planning and thought process that has gone into creating the space. The space includes withdrawal rooms, teacher offices,

formal and informal flexible furniture arrangements (which are still being developed), increased light and significant design around sightlines throughout the entire space.

### **Improved Use of Data and Time**

Grovedale West Primary School is moving away from traditional models of teaching and learning to team centred approaches. All teachers are being trained in using data and the team approach allows for ideas and resources (physical and human) to be shared for the maximum benefit of each child. As the Principal says:

*It's the structure behind the teaching and learning; the spaces and the learning environment comes with this all around it.*

This up-skilling to enable teachers to read and interpret data has allowed conversations to take place that are meaningful and productive. This process has been a long and slow one for the leadership team as the teachers needed to shift their focus from themselves as teachers to their students as learners in order to move forward with the data analysis. However, as this shift has occurred the teams have built accountabilities around their work and ownership of the processes by which they are able to move and improve student learning.

The next move involved setting up teams based on levels not curriculum. This was about simplifying processes, targeted planning and enacting that planning. The biggest element that is provided to enhance this team centred approach is *time* for effective teaching and learning. The specialist program allows the classroom teachers to have three hours of professional conversation time together as a team. The first hour is with the teaching and learning coach and the next two are quality professional conversations around students, planning and data. The after school meetings have been reduced from three hours to 45 minutes of whole staff professional learning. This allows teachers more preparation time after school. Within this framework teams are encouraged to engage in team focused professional development which might involve visits to other schools.

### **Narrowing the Focus**

In order to achieve this time, the specialist program has been used with each specialist also working on the whole school focus which in 2010 has been writing and language development. Therefore the Drama specialist has been focusing on script writing and oral speaking. The Environmental Science specialist also has developed writing in this in program. The narrowed focus is seen as a strength across all year levels and areas of curriculum in terms of developing student skills and learning.

*Teachers kept saying again there's too much to do and not enough time for planning, how can we do everything and how do we cater for all the children. And so that's when we gave ourselves permission to stop and just have the one focus and not be trying to focus on maths, and reading, and writing. Just writing, that's it (Principal).*

The narrow focus on literacy and specifically writing skills allows the staff to monitor this across the curriculum with the aim of improving the performance of each level, increasing the depth of knowledge within the content, improving teacher knowledge and skills, and enhancing student engagement and learning. To achieve this the teams undergo coaching in the focus which involves professional reading conversations, shared planning, assessment and reporting, use of ICT, use of the E5 instructional model and differentiation of the curriculum. The current literacy focus has also been extended to include specialist programs.

The starting point for Grovedale West Primary School is always the data – looking at students performing above and below the standard, putting names to data and developing individual learning profiles for all students in the school. This has revealed not only current performance and outcomes of learners but has also highlighted where students may have reached a plateau in their learning. The ability to track cohorts of students from year to year has also permitted teachers to work from the students' actual level and not just the expected level which was often a mismatch for student learning in this community. This has not been an exercise in lowering standards but a genuine attempt to meet students where they are in their learning journey and help them move forward.

While this analysis of data may not be deemed to be new, the difference for Grovedale West Primary School, as with many other schools identified as having Innovative Learning Environments, is that the teachers and students are taking ownership of the data. It is no longer solely the responsibility of the leadership team but a collective accountability that is used to make positive decisions for learning.

### **Moving from Engagement to Engaged Learning**

The leadership team recognised the efforts of the staff and the amount of work that they put in to setting up learning activities in their classrooms. However, the teachers had not connected the amount of work they did with the amount of learning that the students were doing. The teaching and learning coaching regime revealed that a range of dynamic activities were being used but without a real connection between intent and task. This was seen as a direct result of a student behaviour management culture as opposed to a student learning culture.

Teams are now working on creating activities which not only engage but which will genuinely help students to move forward in their learning through skills acquisition and negotiated inquiry. This is a part of the teaching and learning design which is still developing across the school but there are examples of this type of learning happening with particular teachers and teams that is now filtering across the school as the learning and development culture improves. Again this work is developed around consistency in collecting, analysing and using data across the school.

### **Innovation for Space**

The nature of innovation projects across the teaching and learning in the school along with a school facility that was built for a much larger enrolment has allowed teachers to rethink the use of space. This takes the form of dedicated spaces for specialist programs that extend outside the classroom spaces. This includes the allocation of special teaching spaces for the Deaf Unit to be used as required for individual student needs, and the development of the After Hours Care Space which also serves as centre for local playgroups during school time.

Further to this, interior classroom spaces have been redeveloped for the Senior Inquiry Pod including removal of walls, development of isolation rooms within the space and teacher offices outside the learning space. The school has also received a BER template building which they have used not only as classroom space but as administration so that the school now orients to a much better road frontage for community access.

Importantly as teaching culture has shifted so have the school's ideas about how to best use space for the benefit of all the students. The development of the spaces has allowed for a strategic approach to teaching and learning that permits flexibility and flow for student groups. Again, this is seen by the school community as an emergent program rather than a true innovation but one that is based on rigorous use of data and undertaken with careful planning and negotiation of teams.

The team culture has required that teachers work together with a collective responsibility for improving outcomes for the students. The important message from the leadership is that no one should have to do it alone. This is also reflected in the changed culture of the regional network where schools are collaborating and sharing knowledge, data and information for the greater benefit of the region.

*We now teach in teams providing opportunities for skilled development, rigor and enhanced expectations. Expectation was a big [factor]. We needed the teachers to decide what these expectations we needed of children at this school were and that changed things significantly. We have the one priority focus. Teachers are responsible for all children in their unit. We're not just in grades now. Expectations are the same for all children and the teaching support is differentiated (Principal).*

### **Nature and Quality of Learning**

A big issue is the preparedness of students for learning entering the school in Prep. Initial data indicated that students were six months behind the expected level by the end of the first year. While this might indicate on the surface a problem with the efficacy of the program, the expertise that a young teacher from the UK has brought to the process of using data in early childhood indicates that the students are starting well below the expected level at entry.

*We know that the children have actually made quite a phenomenal growth but published data doesn't show that. They all have different starting points...It is assumed that all children come into prep at zero, which they don't (Assistant Principal).*

This particular Prep teacher had been trained in Australia but then worked for several years in the UK using play-based curriculum which he describes as a more holistic focus for younger learners.

*The thing is with the UK everything is quite tight and data driven. You know you are assessing the children in those areas on scales. So it's holistic in its approach to the child but on the backend of it all it's actually quite [rigid] in terms of its detailed [reporting] and the data they collect...I've actually learned to teach in a model that was quite rigorous and didn't leave anything to chance (Prep Teacher).*

The Prep model he employs is influenced by a developmental curriculum (see Figure 7) in combination with the lessons learned in the UK system. He initially resourced the classroom from garage sales to be based on a kindergarten environment.

*I'm trying to develop a program which is a mixture of quite direct focused teaching but also a high percentage of the day where the children are experimenting and being creative and using their skills in an open ended way (Prep Teacher).*





Figure 7. Prep Developmental Classroom

The program is not purely developmental in its structure but includes explicit skills teaching as well. There is the inclusion of a synthetic phonics program (THRASS) which is systematic and structured to help cater for the broad range of entry points he sees in the students.

*I was sort of shocked when I did my initial on-entry data. There was upwards of half the class who knew one letter of the alphabet; that was their name...and that was it...but I've been amazed at the progress that they've made (Teacher).*

While the developmental curriculum is seen to be useful for these particular learners there are broader benefits across the school for all learners. The Year 1 and 2 classes have made use of the developmental program in the past but stepped back from it to address the issues raised by the data. However, there is a hope that through the coaching and mentoring program this particular teacher will be able to demonstrate to other teams how to achieve rigor in a developmental program.

*We're making regular assessments against VELs and I know that other schools have Preps that can do great writing and great thinking but this cohort, we know where they were at when they started and we've seen children come from zero and they're already beyond level one and that's in half a year. It's incredible (Prep Teacher).*

The Prep students are regularly engaged in inquiry learning, negotiating topics and creating big questions for investigation which allow them to explore their interests while making use of their newly acquired literacy skills (see Figures 8 and 9). The investigations are highly individualised and students are demonstrating new knowledge in interesting and innovative ways that they are only too keen to discuss with visitors to the classroom. The next creative skill for these students will be to engage with mind mapping tools.

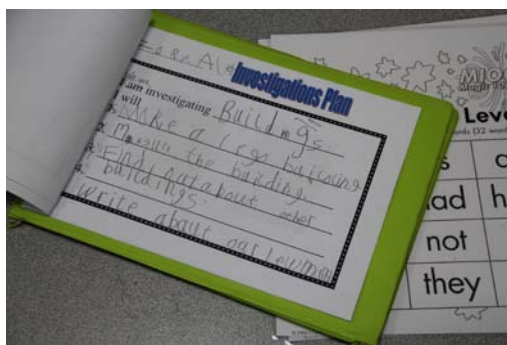


Figure 8. Prep Investigation Plan



Figure 9. Independent Learning in Prep

The spaces that the Prep classes inhabit are still traditional ones albeit two classroom spaces merged into one. Intended future development plans will develop this space in line with the SIPod but also with more connection between outdoor and indoor learning spaces to enhance both the developmental program and inquiry.

### **Fostering Independent Learners**

As time has progressed through this culture change there has been a gradual but perceptible shift in independent learning. Students in the Senior Inquiry Pod are beginning to negotiate curriculum in their inquiry learning and are able to earn Trust Licenses which permit them to move through the space and work independently as long as they are on task and not disrupting the learning of others. This allows the students to work in less traditional spaces and it is common to see them moving furniture to create nooks where they can work on the floor rather than just at tables.

Prep students are managing their own learning through the Inquiry Message Board which allows them to request resources from their teacher through written messages. Students at all levels have been introduced to the concept of goal setting and working towards specific criteria while identifying their needs through interaction with their own data.

There is a stated intention from all teams that they would like to move students into more independent and negotiated inquiry. Preparation for this is being done through whole school goal setting practices for all students. As teachers and students are becoming more comfortable in the flexible spaces they are rethinking and renegotiating the spaces and the ways spaces are being used in both the physical and temporal sense but again this is being done in a slow and strategic manner to ensure that the change makes sense for and has a positive effect on learning outcomes.

### **Impact and Effectiveness**

The school has undergone internal instructional rounds which have had a major impact on the school. This was an opportunity for staff members to observe and participate in each others' classrooms. The brief included looking for examples of good 'print' in each space and then to give each other feedback that was both critically challenging and constructive. This process was done not only as an internal exercise but also with a group of visiting principals which, although daunting, is perceived as being a process that has been of substantial success in terms of adjusting and refining practice. It was from this process that the teachers saw that too much time was spent in introducing activities. This practice has been changed as a natural outcome of collaborative team teaching.

There has also been a substantial shift in data around literacy for many of the students and across year levels. This is seen as a direct benefit of programs, coaching and the ongoing reflection and discussion afforded by restructuring teaching and learning time. These shifts cannot be attributed to physical space alone but as a combination of factors that have altered the teaching and learning culture of the school.

Students are now transferring their literacy skills into other areas of the curriculum through inquiry with many showing evidence of higher order thinking as a result of the changed learning practices and conversations within the school. This type of work can be seen at all levels of the school but has a particular presence in the Prep area that is very encouraging for future student outcomes.

Teachers are now planning for two hours using data and then they are required to present their planning to the coach in the third hour. At this stage she questions their thought processes, requires

the team to articulate their reasoning and questions how the planning meets the needs of specific students within the group. This is supporting fine grained planning.

### **Concluding Comments**

The key to long term success for the Innovative Learning Environment at Grovedale West Primary School may lay in their underlying edict of consistency. As they progress slowly, strategically and steadily through the various iterations of change in the teaching and learning culture they are endeavouring to build in consistency in language, practice and process to ensure that students' needs are met. They often return to the narrative of Kathleen's learning journey as it applies to all of the students in the school to ensure that there is consistency both horizontally and vertically in the students' various learning stories. The motto 'hasten slowly' is employed in faculty conversations as they work through the complexities of change, making sure there is a careful consideration for managing innovation that consistently puts students at the centre of their own learning.