Leading for Educational Quality: High Performing Teachers Exhibiting Leadership and Making a Difference in a Learning Community

St. Thomas’ Primary School Principal: Jason Slattery

It is very rewarding being a School Principal. The opportunity I have is one of continually striving to improve our working environment. Through critical reflection and open communication school improvement is a constant thought in my mind.

Our presentation today is trying to portray our school sharing leadership and giving all staff the opportunity to grow professionally and to be able to share their skills with one another. This has assisted our school staff to learn more about curriculum initiatives and their teaching practice and pedagogy.

Working with over 40 colleagues it is important to listen to others opinions and thoughts. We have worked extremely hard to help shape a culture which has each staff member respected and heard. We can be thought of as one piece that makes up a jigsaw where we need to work together, piece by piece in order for our school environment to work cohesively.

The Role of Principal has definitely seen myself grow as a person and leader. I have learnt to try and understand more about others and their feelings. An effective leader has a calm personality and respects what others have to say. They need to create an environment where colleagues feel valued and want to be part of the school community. I have a firm belief that if a school has a positive culture and the teaching staff are happy then that will flow through to the children who can witness the staff working together in harmony.

This creates much debate because I haven’t even spoken about the core role of educators, that is providing teaching and learning outcomes for all children. We cannot expect that teachers just have to come to school and begin teaching. Teaching is a profession where planning, support, encouragement and questioning are all paramount in the development and growth of a teacher. Reflection of teaching practice will also allow each teacher to evaluate the lesson content and gauge student interest and participation.
The teaching profession has changed dramatically over the last twenty years. We are made to be accountable and are highly scrutinised in the media. Being made accountable and responsible for the delivery of a quality education is making teacher’s think before they plan and implement a curriculum which is probably a positive step in education. Parent’s expectations on teachers are also very high. Regardless if it is a fee paying school or not, they demand time and a guarantee that they are receiving a high quality education and have regular access to staff at any given time. Teachers need to acknowledge this, knowing that we have the most important job of having a positive educational experience with all children under our care.

The Principal can help all teaching staff in so many ways. I always try to listen and be there for all staff. I try and encourage staff as much as possible, at the same time understanding that teaching is a difficult profession and requires many hours of planning and preparation. While I encourage and support my staff it is still vital to have high expectations as we place importance on school improvement.

At the start of each year our staff list personal expectations and one another’s role descriptions for the coming year. It is important that we all understand our role and the impact each of us has on the school. Feedback to all stakeholders is vital for school improvement. Communication needs to be clear and specific as to how we can improve teaching practice. Communication Meetings are held each term with The Leadership Team (Principal, Deputy Principal and Curriculum Coordinator) and the year level teachers. This enables everyone to discuss the school data and make any recommendations for the future. Importantly, The Leadership Team can be seen as a support to each level. We assist each level for future student testing, specialist appointments, purchasing resources and attending any relevant professional development. The staff appreciate the support and understand that these meetings are for the benefit of school improvement and helping all of the children under our care.

My two presenters today, Rosie Phillips and Angela Pope are teachers young in experience but both considered high performing. They embody everything it is in our culture and expectations at St Thomas’. They are both highly motivated and leaders in their own right. From their motivation and dedication to teaching, Angela and Rosie are having an impact on
our teaching staff who want to follow and be part of programs and conferences that they have been part of during the last 18 months.

**Overview of the Project**

*(Angela Pope)*

In 2012, Jason approached Rosie and myself regarding a Pilot Program through the Victorian Institute of Teaching known as Phase Two: High Performing Teachers. It illustrated how our pedagogy reflects the elements of high performance within our teaching, work with students, colleagues and the wider school community using the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers. This involved developing a Case Study based on our own learning goals within what we wanted to develop through our own practice. Rosie is an advocate for Open-Plan Learning so she developed her project on ‘Positive Learning in an Open Plan Classroom.’ I am passionate about teaching Mathematics and developed my project on ‘Developing students’ Numeracy through effective teaching practice.’ From this we worked together to create a case study and write a paper in conjunction with the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers.

**Victorian Institute of Teachings Quality Teaching Program Participant: Angela Pope**

**Developing Students’ Numeracy through Effective Teaching Practice**

Throughout my teaching career, I have been fortunate to teach across a variety of levels and work within different Professional Learning Teams. There have been advantages and disadvantages within each of these teams, but a common element was the way Mathematics is taught. For some teachers, it is a subject area they may lack confidence in and thus teach the same content one particular way to the same students each year. This results in students having a negative mindset and attitude towards Mathematics. Upon reflection, I thought there has to be a way to change this perception and create a positive learning environment where mathematical investigation, collaborative learning, and risk taking are all encouraged and nurtured. After reading and attending different Professional
Learning sessions, observing “good” Mathematics teachers, and developing and reflecting upon my own teaching practice, I took the opportunity, as Special Projects Coordinator, to improve our students’ Numeracy through effective teaching practice. In order for this to happen, I needed to consider the three stakeholders of my students, colleagues and the parent community.

**My Work with Students**

Effective teaching practice is essential to ensure we have a holistic approach to student learning. All students can experience success, given sufficient time, and appropriate and positive learning experiences. Each student has a unique learning style and approach to learning. Teaching in an open-plan classroom gives me the opportunity to explore my teaching practice. Rosie and I plan and work collaboratively to plan and create activities that cater for a diverse range of learning styles. We are fortunate to have a close working relationship that allows us to be flexible and spontaneous with our teaching.

Reflection time is often at the end of a session, however there are great benefits in reflecting throughout the lesson as students get the opportunity to share their approach to their peers and enhance their own understanding. Their peers then have the opportunity to use the strategy or approach to solving the task. This type of reflection may be whole class, or a small group. The formal reflection time at the end of the session involves the whole class and may be in the form of a discussion or reflective writing in their Learning Log.

I have developed a collaborative learning environment with my colleague in the open-plan classroom. All students are encouraged to extend their own learning which is promoted through open-ended tasks. Each individual student has their own strengths in Mathematics and a collaborative learning environment, open-ended tasks, inquiry-based approach, mixed ability and ability levelled tasks, all cater for their individual learning needs.

**Learning Goals and Reflection**

Effective teaching practice must include goal setting and reflection for teachers and students. Every Mathematics unit has a goal to achieve, and every session an achievable learning focus. Although students learn differently and have varying abilities, the focus
remains the same, but the expectations and learning goals are different. Students are goal oriented and can see the purpose of their learning. They adjust their personal learning goals based on constructive feedback from their peers and teachers. Students have a Learning Log that they can use for reflection and follow the three key elements:

- Today I ...
- I discovered ...
- I enjoyed ...

Students have developed their reflective skills and self-monitoring through greater opportunities. At times, they will verbally share their three key elements with a partner or in a group. I find this to be most effective and they learn new strategies from each other and they are discussing and sharing their learning. "It is important to give time to reflect on any plans drawn up, processes followed and strategies used so that the students can see the significance of coming to terms with the structure of the problem as well as the value and applicability of particular strategies that might then be used."¹

**My Work with Colleagues**

Part of my role as Special Projects Coordinator is to support and work with my colleagues to develop effective teaching practice of Mathematics. In order for students to achieve their full potential and develop into lifelong learners, we as educators need to create a learning culture. "I therefore suggest that we should focus on the greatest source of variance that can make the difference—the teacher. We need to ensure that this greatest influence is optimised to have powerful and sensational positive effects on the learner. Teachers can and usually do have positive effects, but they must have exceptional effects. We need to direct attention at higher quality teaching, and higher expectations that students can meet appropriate challenges."² A key part of my role is to model good teaching practice to my

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¹ George Booker et al. *Teaching Primary Mathematics* Pearson Education Australia Pty Limited, 1992. p. 44

colleagues and develop their confidence to teach Mathematics as it is often a subject area where some teachers are reluctant to be innovative and trial new programs.

**Developing a Learning Culture**

Through the Accelerated Mathematics Program, I have witnessed a learning culture that promotes a love of learning. Based on valuable assessment data and discussions with classroom teachers, students were selected to participate in the program. As a result of completing a range of problem solving tasks, I had the opportunity to witness students across varying levels share and develop their mathematical knowledge.

Within my own classroom, a Zone of Proximal Development is established in order for all students to know and understand the learning focus of the task. I have developed a range of self-assessment that clearly reflects our learning focus. Students in an extension group are encouraged to strive and achieve within their ability, as well as those students in a transitional or remedial group. Learners are able to monitor their own learning by following rubrics that state learning goals. They use Learning Logs which encourage metacognition and the use of various strategies.

**Planning Collaboratively**

As a Year 3/4 Professional Learning Team, we plan, evaluate and reflect upon our teaching and where our strengths and weaknesses lie within our own teaching of Mathematics. We devise Units we clear learning goals for ourselves, and that target and cater for the diverse abilities of our learners. Within my own group of learners, students create a learning goal for the lesson by reflecting on the previous lesson, their prior knowledge of the concepts taught, and their determination to develop into Mathematical Investigators. I review the effectiveness of the learning and teaching in this environment through observation and student feedback. I modify our focus to ensure I am catering for all students’ needs; in particular those I believe are underachieving or who need extending. Encouraging students to develop their own learning goals provides students with the opportunity to direct their peers’ learning by using their strengths to guide them through the task, and encourages
each student to self-reflect and take ownership of their learning. My goal is to see a positive experience for all involved.

It is essential to continuously evaluate and moderate learning and teaching programs and student progress to plan effectively. Within our Year 3/4 Professional Learning Team we use different forms of data and assessment, both formative and summative, to analyse the progress of students and plan for future teaching. For example, Assessment for learning is achieved through monitoring the students’ reflections which they make through their learning logs, using KWL charts to guide teacher direction and diagnostic testing. Assessment as learning is achieved through the use of one-on-one questioning, think/pair/share, class discussion, students reflecting upon lessons in their learning logs, self-assessment rubrics and through the use of graphic organisers to demonstrate metacognition. Assessment of learning is achieved through formal testing, recorded questioning of students’ understandings, observation of students during task work and evaluating work samples. For example, The Mathematical Assessment Interview (MAI) is conducted with every student at the beginning of the year to determine what the learning needs are for each individual student. This data is then used to plan effectively and ensure we are giving each learner every opportunity possible.

Within our meetings, we discuss our planning, the need for new resources to help a particular learning style, or a general discussion about how individually ‘flagged’ children are progressing with their learning or place in the class. Our Curriculum Coordinator regularly checks programming and participates in Professional Learning Team Meetings. As a result of our effective planning meetings, it is evident that students have ownership of their learning as they are self-monitoring. This encourages them to recognise strengths and develop their areas for improvement. As a result, my students are developing a new passion for Mathematics and will seek opportunities to promote Mathematics throughout the school. For example, two Year 3 students taught a new maths game in a Year 5/6 class. The confidence they gained from this experience, motivated them to continue to develop their own Mathematics.
Modelling Effective Teaching Practice

I support teachers by modelling various ways of teaching that cater for different needs. For example at the beginning of the year, in a Year 1 classroom I introduced different Mental Maths games to students and the teacher. These include singing, clapping, counting aloud, dice, cards and partner activities. This opportunity gave me a greater insight into a different age group and the importance of using our Mathematics Data to plan and teach effectively. The classroom teacher’s feedback was positive and she continues to play these games during her ‘Warm Up’. I modelled how to teach factors in a Year 5/6 classroom where the teacher is not so confident teaching Mathematics. I explained the Scope and Sequence and Planning Documents that we use to ensure good teaching practice. As a result, the classroom teacher is more confident when planning and teaching Mathematics.

My Work with Parents

Involving the wider school community in the development of a student’s learning is essential. Students learn best when they are nurtured and provided with every opportunity to develop academically, socially, emotionally and spiritually. In order for this to be attainable, we promote and encourage a whole school community approach.

Parent Community

As a result of improving our Mathematics program through our teaching practice and knowledge of the subject, we involved the parents and promoted a ‘working in partnership’ network. Based on our feedback from parent surveys, there was a need for parents to be informed on how they can help their children at home in terms of Literacy and Numeracy. As a leadership team consisting of myself, Principal, Deputy Principal, Curriculum Coordinator, Senior and Junior School Coordinators, and Religions Education Coordinator we decided it would be valid to hold Parent/Child Information Workshops. These workshops give parents the opportunity to listen to the Literacy Coordinator discuss the benefits of reading with their children and strategies involved. As Numeracy Coordinator, I informed parents about a new computer based program we had started called Mathletics and how we can involve students in Mathematics around the home. These Parent Workshops were
extremely beneficial for parents and it gave them a greater insight into what is happening at school, what they can do at home and thus how we can all work in partnership. The children also came and were engaged in problem solving activities that they shared with their parents at the end. Parents and students can see a link between what they learn at home and what is promoted at school. They understand the benefits of lifelong learning.

Whole School Mathematics Sessions

Each term I organise a Whole School Mathematics Afternoon. The aim is to give students the opportunity to work in multi-level groups with different teachers whilst completing different activities. The activities are in conjunction with the Mathematical Assessment Interview (MAI) and include open-ended questions, computer based activities, or problem solving that incorporate all facets of Mathematics. Parents help in each classroom and see the importance of Mathematics and sharing of skills. The older children take a leadership role and nurture the younger children by teaching them new strategies or guiding them through the problem. Both parents and students look forward to the Whole School Mathematics Afternoon and it is evident that there is a culture in our school community that maximises learning and values the input of all stakeholders within the school environment.

Victorian Institute of Teachings Quality Teaching Program Participant: Rosie Phillips

Creating a Positive Learning Environment in an Open Plan Classroom

My project was creating a positive learning environment in an open plan classroom. Between Angela and myself, we had 55 students in one learning space. Creating this positive learning space was the learning goal which we both shared. It directed and continues to direct my professional development.

I see my professional development as something which is ongoing. It is not only used to support my own teaching practice but that of the learning community as a whole. There are many stakeholders within this community; students’ colleagues and parents. By recognising
the stake holders within our community and utilising their knowledge, we are able to create a vibrant learning culture where all individuals thrive.

At the beginning of last year, Angela and I formed a shared learning goal of creating an environment that emphasized the importance of the teaching partnership and recognised the together approach of learning. Due to this vision, Angela and I both felt we needed to create an environment that ran efficiently, respected diversity of the learners and utilized the space. The physical environment suits a structure of learning which is both flexible and adaptive. There is a variety of learning resources and spaces that students have to share. Due to this shared environment students become more respectful of each other as learners and the resources that they have to share. The learning environment which we created also allows students to exhibit independence, feel safe and respected as learners and as people. Students work collaboratively in ability and mixed ability groups. In these groups they continually take on different leadership roles. Of course you can’t just wake up one morning and create this learning space. It is a process of reflecting upon and refining your own practise as well as drawing upon the stalk holders of your learning community.

**My Work with Students**

**Meta-strategic Knowledge**

As a facilitator of learning I need to understand my students and give them strategies to be able access information independently. For students to actively understand their own thinking they need to be able to break it down. This is why I thought it was important for me to teach them meta-strategic knowledge.

Meta-Strategic Knowledge (MSK) is cognitive procedures comprised of higher order thinking strategies such as “solving problems, classifying, establishing and analysing casual relationships, constructing good arguments, formulating research questions, testing hypotheses and drawing valid conclusions” (Zohar & David 2008:59). These higher order thinking strategies are important for students to develop as we live in an era of continuous change. We are continually bombarded with new information and technology in our everyday lives. New jobs and skill sets are being created every day. Students need higher
order thinking strategies to be lifelong learners who are able to continually acquire new knowledge and skill sets. Educators across the globe have seen that learning in the classroom too must change; “learning and instruction is moving from an emphasis on acquisition of basic skills and large amounts of information to an emphasis on deep understanding and the development of reasoning skills that will enable students to acquire and process new knowledge” (Zohar & David, 2008: 60).

In a positive learning environment students need to be able to see themselves as learners. This is why reflecting upon and breaking down their thinking process is important. It also helps me understand how they learn so I can structure my lessons more effectively.

**Assessment**

Assessment is important to ensure that the learning needs of each child is been met and that anything taught is been built upon previously gained knowledge. I use the following forms of assessment to analyse the progress of my student’s skills and to plan future teaching and learning strategies in my classroom.

**Assessment for learning** is achieved through monitoring the student’s reflections which they make in their learning logs, using KWL charts to help plan consecutive lessons and using diagnostic testing which is implemented at the beginning and end of each schooling year.

**Assessment as learning** is achieved through the use of one-on-one questioning, think/pair/share, class discussion, students reflecting upon learning activities in their learning logs, self-assessment rubrics and through the use of graphic organisers to demonstrate metacognition.

**Assessment of learning** is achieved through formal testing, recorded questioning of students’ understandings, observation of students during task work and evaluating work samples from the literacy activities.
**My Work with Colleagues**

“The most powerful single moderator that enhances achievement is feedback” (J.Hattie, 2003 p.2).

**Relationships**

When creating my positive learning environment, I ensured that it catered for the diverse abilities of my learners; of course I could not do this independently. This is why I value the team teaching approach. Through conversing with my year level team, collaboratively we are able to reflect on our practise and refine it. We review the effectiveness of our teaching, what is working and which students in our class may be underachieving. With this in mind we are able to create learning activities that cater for their diverse needs.

**Fish Bowling**

When our Principal approached my colleague and I with the idea of team teaching together, the first thing we did was observe each other’s practice. This was important as I developed an understanding of how she taught, her relationship with her students, and her expectations. I also took away ideas to develop my own teaching practice. My colleague also observed my teaching. Together we conversed about our expectations of students, our teaching style and the learning environment we wanted to create the following year.

During whole staff strategic planning meetings I have voiced the constructive benefits of ‘fish bowling’. At my school we have teachers ranging from graduate to those in leadership roles. The majority of teachers have taught at other schools and some have taught to different curriculums. With this much diversity how can we not learn new things from each other’s practice?

The leadership team is now considering giving teachers specific release time to go into another teacher’s classroom to observe their colleagues.
**Moderation**

In our Year 3/4 Professional Learning Team, we develop a range of self-assessment tasks that clearly reflect the learning focus of our activities. We gather work samples from across ability levels and assess where we would position them according to VELS. We then discuss how we can help individual students and cater to their learning needs. It is important for us to maintain this reflective process as it ensures that student learning is constantly progressing and assessment is consistent.

**Communication Meetings**

Each term I have a Communication Meeting with my Principal, Jason, to discuss the dynamics of the open plan classroom and if there is any additional support that is needed. This conferencing is important in maintaining a positive learning environment. It ensures that both Jason and I are aware of the progress of students, classroom issues and changes in family circumstances.

**Utilising Professional Knowledge**

As teachers we are not islands. We need to build bridges and not let a competitive work place environment get in the way of growth. Any knowledge that we do gain as professionals needs to be shared. Staff run professional development sessions are a fantastic way for teachers to show case newly acquired practices. This has been beneficial for me as a young teacher. I have been able to learn from my own colleagues’ strengths as well as show case my own. Recently I was able to share with staff how I structure and teach a literacy block. It was great to receive feedback about my practice and how staff were going to try and integrate some of the activities and structures into their own block.
**Working with the School Community**

“Nurturing a learning culture” (www.aitsl.edu.au/professionallearning)

**Wellbeing**

To ensure a positive learning environment is maintained, open communication is encouraged between myself and parents. This discourse is important, especially when introducing expectations of students and implementing a Behaviour Management Policy. To ensure these two things are effective it needs to be followed up at home. For this to happen, parents need to be aware and support this initiative and see that I am consistent in practicing this Behaviour Management Policy and making clear my expectations.

**Building Bridges**

When creating a positive learning environment I look to incorporate community input. I actively seek out parent helpers for station leaders in rotational activities. For those parents who work during the day, I have partaken in Literacy and Numeracy Information Workshops for parents. I set up a station which showcased work samples and lessons from our literacy and numeracy block; activities and strategies are also provided to parents to complete at home. This promotes and nurtures a learning community and students can see a connection between learning that occurs in the classroom and home.

I have invited local community members to share their knowledge. This encourages students to see learning in a different light and they are able to make connections with their new found knowledge and the outside world. One example was in Term 2 when we studied Immigration. We invited a local historian in to talk about the development of our community and the contributions of different cultural groups.
Students Learning

“A vibrant learning culture where individuals thrive”
(www.aitsl.edu.au/professionallearning)

Our Learners

For those students who have been identified as having ‘Special Needs’, or who have been acknowledged as ‘At Risk’, Individual Learning Plans have been created to ensure their learning needs are met. When constructing their learning plan, I consulted the Special Education coordinator, the individual child, their parents, as well as assessment data to ensure all areas of their development had been catered for.

Positive Learning Environment

Due to the physical environment of my classroom, the structure of student learning is more flexible and adaptive. There are a variety of learning areas where students can persue collaborative inquiry based tasks. All students are encouraged to extend their own learning which is promoted through open-ended tasks. This ensures students are taken from what they know and are able to make meaningful connections, “50% of the variance of achievement ...is what students bring to the table” (J.Hattie, 2003 p.1)

To ensure meaningful learning, each activity has a learning goal which students are made aware of. Conferencing groups are set up to discuss learning goals. This provides regular constructive feedback from peers and teacher.

Open communication is kept throughout the year with parents, and formalised in personalised reports. Issues are dealt with when they first arise to ensure they do not get out of hand.

Building Independent Resilient and Respectful Learners

As learning spaces and resources are shared, students develop respect for each other as learners. As there are 55 students in the classroom the first thing we tackled as a learning group was noise level and what volume was appropriate for different learning activities. This allowed students to view each other as individual learners who had differing needs that
required attention. To develop independence, specific roles are given to group members. For example, Speaker, Equipment Monitor, Time Keeper and Captain. This ensures activities run smoothly and students are aware of expectation and learning outcomes. A count down timer is placed on the interactive whiteboard, so students can self-monitor and it ensures they are using their class time wisely. Students are continually working with different students of varying levels and interests. This develops resilience as their learning environment is continually changing.

**Conclusion**

This opportunity has provided Angela and Rosie with a greater insight into the importance of being a holistic practitioner. In order to continue developing one’s pedagogy, one needs to acknowledge and utilise all stakeholders. They also need to feel valued, nurtured and supported in order to foster their strengths and weaknesses and to challenge themselves in their own learning.
Bibliography


