

Negotiated School Review Report

Prepared for

Elsternwick Primary School

and the Department of Education & Training

2005

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1.0 Executive Summary

The purpose of this review is to outline some of the challenges we will grapple with during the coming four years. Our work on Inquiry Based Curriculum is still in its early stages. Now eighteen months into our journey supported through the work of Kath Murdoch, we see this learning as the cornerstone of our work in teaching and learning during the next four years.

In addition, we pose questions as to how future leadership structures might look to support sustained change, particularly where new pedagogical understandings are required. For the past two years we have worked with a model of team based instructional leadership. This model requires further development as well as staff members who are skilled with a different view of leadership from the often used model of a management focused one

As a school community we are fortunate to have a supportive parent body who are very involved in the day to day life of the school as well as being interested in current educational issues. Our challenge is to ensure that the parent community has many opportunities to continue to have input into our journey of pedagogical and curriculum change.

Lastly, we have the exciting opportunity of having received Master Plan Funding during the course of this review. This presents for us the extraordinary challenge of considering what learning could look like for us as a community not just in the next four years but for many years beyond. We need to consider ways in which our physical space and resources can support a constructivist view of how learning could look for both the current and future generations of students and staff at Elsternwick.

This document sets out our exciting agenda for continuous but well grounded and researched change for the coming four years. It is centred in learning from constructivist pedagogy and well supported through in-house professional learning programs for staff. In addition we plan to construct facilities which will support the innovative teaching practices that arise from this constructivist base.

2.0 Definitions

Constructivist or Constructivism: is in essence the belief that learners construct new ideas or concepts based upon their current/past knowledge. The learner selects and transforms information, constructs hypotheses, and makes decisions, relying on a cognitive structure to do so.: <http://www.educationau.edu.au/archives/cp/04c.htm>

ICT: Information and Communication Technologies which includes computers, scanners, printers, digital cameras etc... <http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/ict/>

Inquiry learning: This approach is built upon the idea that students are actively involved in learning and continually reconstruct understandings in the light of experience. It encourages students to participate in active investigation, and to integrate, rather than separate knowledge, as they move from acquisition of facts to the development of deep understanding.

<http://www.ltag.education.tas.gov.au/planning/models/inquirymodel.htm>

Instructional leadership “a style of leadership that promotes, celebrates and enhances the importance of teaching and learning and staff development.” “The purpose of instructional leadership is to help teachers create powerful cognitive and social tasks ... and teach their students to make productive use of them” <http://www.ncsl.org.uk/mediastore/image2/kpool-evidence-hopkins.pdf>

MYRAD: The Middle Years Research and Development (MYRAD) Project was commissioned by DE&T and was undertaken by the Centre for Applied Educational Research at The University of Melbourne. The project involved in-depth research and evidence driven whole-schools approach to improve student learning outcomes in the middle years (Years 5-9).

<http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/mys/research/>

Throughlines: describe the most important understandings that students should develop through the inquiry units of work from Years P-6. <http://learnweb.harvard.edu/alps/tfu/info3b.cfm>

Pedagogy: “Function, work or art of a teacher; teaching; instruction”

<http://education.qld.gov.au/curriculum/learning/literate-futures/glossary.html>

Victorian Essential Learning Standards or VELs is the new state curriculum. 2005 is a validation year in which school communities are expected to audit their existing curriculum against VEL's and make recommendations on changes.: <http://vels.vcaa.vic.edu.au/>

3.0 Aim / Purpose

Constructivist Theory of Learning – Where to from here?

Broadly speaking, this review intends to capture three critical areas of need.

- *Teaching and Learning with a constructivist pedagogy*
- *Performance & Development which is inclusive of Leadership for constructivist learning and*
- *Resourcing constructivist learning*

The Self Evaluation highlighted a growing understanding amongst the staff at Elsternwick Primary School of the need to embrace a constructivist and differentiated approach to teaching and learning. This change in pedagogical beliefs continues to be at the heart of our journey which has seen us embrace an Inquiry approach to learning.

In addition, our evaluation reviewed some recent changes to leadership structures designed to support the change in learning and teaching practices. Currently we operate with five teaching teams, each ably led by a teacher who in turn is a member of the Leadership group. Our challenge here is to develop a culture which values all teachers as leaders some of whom have additional responsibilities in charting learning and aligning school goals and targets to curriculum development.

Resourcing a constructivist view of learning provides its own challenges. We work in a school where many of its traditional learning spaces are now a century old and present few, if any opportunities for temporary modification. The facilities lack the flexibility required for learning now and in the future. Master planning funding recently granted will enable the school community to address some of the critical issues related to teaching and learning spaces for constructivist pedagogy.

Thus the aim of this review is to challenge us as a school community with the following questions:

- *Are there critical skills or knowledge (Throughlines) that need to be developed to ensure deeper understanding?*
- *Are there other areas of the new Victorian Essential Learning Standards that require further examination to support our constructivist learning base?*
- *What systems and/or activities do we need to develop a performance and development culture that sustains instructional leadership, values in house professional learning and builds reflective teacher practices that would sustain learning for deeper understanding?*
- *Are there alternate organisational structures that would enable such an approach to flourish?*
- *What kinds of resources and facilities are required if constructivist learning is to proceed?*

4.0 Methodology

A working party for this review has been established and has membership drawn from the Leadership team which includes Mark Walker (Principal), Sarah Salter (Assistant Principal), Demos Diplaris and Rosanna Grosso (Leading Teachers) and Sue Goddard, Anne Coburn and Michele Martin (Team Leaders). In addition, Kath Murdoch has acted as our critical friend and has facilitated a review symposium. The working party has been joined at times by the School Council President, John Stafford and other members of the School Council and parent body.

A summary of review processes appears below:

- *Briefing of staff*
- *Leadership Team Discussions 04.08.05, 09.08.05 & 18.08.05*
- *Parent Consultation 21st Century Learning Symposium 09.08.05 facilitated by Kath Murdoch*
- *Writing of the Review Document undertaken by the Assistant Principal*
- *Presentation of the Review to School Council*
- *Draft presented to the Regional Office for comment*

Note: The Symposium held early in August was designed to inform some core members of the school community about the learning needs of children in the 21st century. It was considered critical that we continue the process of working together as a whole school community. A precedent has been set whereby a number of forums have been held during the past two years where members of staff, school council and the parent body come together to plan and seek direction for the future. In many ways this forum followed in the footsteps of those planning meetings before it and demonstrated the strength of the school community in action.

5.0 Findings

The last school charter 2003-2005 had as its Teaching and Learning priority *'To support teachers to develop and implement teaching and learning approaches that promote student thinking skills and strategies'*. While this priority has been achieved in terms of the way in which it was envisaged, our pedagogy and teaching practice has moved on from three years ago and now we set a different, more rigorous and exciting agenda.

5.1 Staff as Learners

To bring about sustained improvement, and the development of thinking skills which were embedded in all aspects of teaching and learning, it was determined that an alternative model of professional learning needed to be put in place. Joyce and Showers (1980) in their seminal study on effective professional development models, determined that professional development that took place within the workplace had a much greater affect in terms of sustained change than did models which relied heavily on individuals going out to professional learning activities. With this in mind the school contracted the services of Kath Murdoch, a highly respected educator to lead the school through a journey of change and the development of a constructivist teaching and learning framework through developing and Inquiry approach to learning.

In addition, Anne Hammond was contracted to facilitate improvement in the writing strand of the English KLA. Both these educators have worked with some staff during the past two years at EPS. Their work is not yet done and we envisage a continuing relationship in order to support sustained change within the school.

The staff at Elsternwick is a highly experienced, well regarded and motivated group of professionals. Challenging their perspectives on teaching and learning has caused some to feel unsettled. These feelings are evident in recent staff surveys which point towards some polarisation of staff views with some staff feeling a lack of participative decision making, empathy and morale while others feel quite differently. The Leadership and Consultative committees provide on-going forums for open and explicit feedback on changes occurring in the school and related staff welfare. Inevitably change creates areas of concern which may need to be addressed on more than one level. Also, research shows that change often brings with it resistance which is a reaction to a perception of injustice and must be rallied against (Theron & Westhuizen, 1996).

In any institution undergoing change, there will always be those who resist and perhaps even attempt to block change, even if not patently aware of these behaviours. At the other end of the spectrum, for some, the change will not come quickly enough. Theron and Westhuizen (1996) contended that the challenge for the leadership organisation in the school is one of a balancing act where explicit and implicit choices need to be made in respect of the tempo, planning and the organisational structures that underpin the change force. As a school Elsternwick needs to continue its progressive reform, mindful of inclusion of all staff through the leadership and meeting structures in place.

It is acknowledged that any form of change takes time if it is to be implemented and effective. The staff at Elsternwick Primary School has already made significant changes to teaching practice, particularly with the adoption of an Inquiry approach to teaching and learning. These changes are receiving recognition in the local community and staff are being given the opportunity to showcase their work in numerous public forums. These presentations have in turn led to other educators wanting to visit and see the wonderful success that an Inquiry approach can generate.

5.2 Leadership for Learning

In our Self Evaluation, we have already acknowledged the primary role of leadership as the core reason for successful outcomes to our last charter. Let us explore that role further in this review, Linda Lambert (2005) in a study of leadership in schools undergoing reform, suggested that there are typically three phases of leadership development: instructive, transitional and high capacity. If we at Elsternwick are representative of her findings then we would be likely to be included in the instructive phase. This phase involves the establishment of school organisational structures such as norms, teams and shared expectations. Further, Lambert suggests that it is the Principal's role during this phase, to start conversations, challenge assumptions, and teach about beliefs and new practices that ultimately become "woven into the fabric of the school". This description reflects many elements of our own journey as we seek to challenge assumptions that have been held for some time in our school community.

In the transitional phase, Lambert (2005) argues, that the Principal may gradually let go control of the innovation, releasing that control to the teacher leaders. Coaching and continued conversations conducted within an atmosphere of trust and safety is the key here. As a school we expect towards this transitional phase over the next 18 months. Finally in the 'high capacity' phase, teachers at all levels play an even greater role in leadership – there is co-participation rather than dominance of the Principal as leader and teachers share responsibility for the effectiveness of the school.

Thus, if our challenge in teaching and learning is the adoption of a common pedagogical belief based on constructivism that can become part of the fabric of our school, then a recommendation must be ***that the school seek to develop a performance and development culture that sustains instructional leadership, values in-house professional learning and builds reflective teacher practices that uphold learning for deeper understanding.***

A critical question may be: How do we change the emphasis in teaching and learning from one where the question is one of 'what will I teach', to one where the question is 'what will the learner learn'?

5.3 The building blocks of Literacy and Numeracy

Having adopted a Constructivist view of learning, a further recommendation will be to investigate ways in which constructivist pedagogy can underpin learning in Literacy and Numeracy.

Literacy

It is acknowledged that consistent results above both State and Like School groups have been achieved during the past Charter. It is also recognised that considerable work has been undertaken on the Writing dimension within the English domain. Due to the unavailability of Anne Hammond, our facilitator in writing, for the early part of this year, staff requested that we direct our energies toward some of the surface structures of the writing dimension. As a consequence, we began studying where improvements might be taken in spelling and grammar, from an instructional perspective. It is recommended that we ***continue to engage in strategies to improve our teaching in writing ensuring that both the surface and the deeper aspects of writing are covered.***

Student achievements in reading continue to be above both State and Like School group mean scores, particularly our Early Years data. This data source however points to readability of texts and our staff has highlighted a need to address reading comprehension as an area requiring additional professional development. A recommendation for the coming four years would be ***to address the area of teaching comprehension and assisting staff to develop a constructivist approach to this area of the reading dimension.***

Numeracy

In addition, while Numeracy results continue to be above State benchmark, they have been only at or marginally below like schools, particularly in the Early Years. Investigations have pointed to two areas that could be focus issues for the next four years.

- ***Consistency of assessment, particularly in the Early Years and incorporating the new learning statements in VELs.***
- ***Greater emphasis on constructivist approaches in the teaching of mathematics with particular emphasis on the use of concrete materials.***

5.4 Student Wellbeing

Our past charter had a priority in Student Wellbeing: *To enhance students' sense of belonging and worth and encourage them to become socially responsible by providing them with a safe, friendly and cooperative school environment.*

Our past two student surveys indicate that our school environment is considered quite safe when compared to state wide means. The school has worked hard to review both policy and procedures in behaviour management and welfare. As noted in our self evaluation, we have instituted the use of a new piece of software which has ensured greater consistency in terms of behaviour management and wider welfare issues. One issue that has caused undue stress on our resources has been the lack of social work support for the past eighteen months. We have recently sought to buy in equivalent services, while the Departmental service is unavailable to us.

While there is a perception that the school yard is safe, the same student surveys indicate a lack of connection with teachers in the middle years. Over the past three years students in years five and six, indicate a perception that teachers are not helpful and responsive to their needs. Current work with grade five students where they are being encouraged to say what kind of learning and teaching they find most effective is hoped to provide us with additional first hand data. This is valuable information for the school as it works towards providing the learning environment conducive to the needs of young adolescent learners.

Wolk (2003) argues that

...democratic classrooms are constructivist and generative. They nurture the creation of knowledge as opposed to the mere memorisation of knowledge. Democratic classrooms honour the knowledge and experiences that students bring to school and advocate learning as a social act; they de-emphasise the memorisation of endless facts that will soon be forgotten.

Our own students tell us that learning must be relevant and for now, not for someone's idea of what might be needed sometime in the future. By allowing students to create their own knowledge, we honour them for what they already know and we help them make connections that allow them to make sense of the world in which they live. In the same article Wolk (2003) concluded that what is essential in building critical classroom relationships between teachers and students is that teachers "...allow students to see them as people with emotions, opinions and lives outside of school". This same conclusion was drawn by students themselves in a recent video produced by students from Thornbury-Darebin Secondary College.

A recommendation is that the school plan towards the creation of a Middle Years Learning Unit. The Middle Years Unit would:

- focus on excellence
- provide a learning environment designed for adolescents
- integrate thinking skills and brain research into the teaching and learning practices
- follow teaching and learning practices based on a constructivist pedagogy.

5.5 Learning Environments for Learning Now and in the Future

As mentioned earlier in this section, the permanent school buildings are more than a century old and some re-locatable structures geographically isolated from each other, on separate sites of the school. Such structures do not necessarily lend themselves to learning based on constructivist pedagogy.

Research in the United States is emerging to support the scaling down of school size. While one of the prime motivators appears to be safety (Klonsky, 2002; Raywid, 2002), there is additional evidence, such as an increased “sense of belonging and confidence” (McGoogan, 2002) for students in smaller learning environments. Some larger schools are moving to establish smaller learning communities within schools. McGoogan (2002) highlighted one example of a vertical learning team within a school where teachers from grades 1-4 met and worked together to create a mini school within a larger environment.

While the current model of teams based around multi grade structures is still in its infancy, the next four years may provide an opportunity to not only explore this model further, but also to investigate innovative ‘school within a school’ models.

With the master planning process already underway, the challenge is to design an environment that not only reflects our pedagogical beliefs where knowledge is constructed and not taught, but can accommodate the many different learning styles that predominate within a community of students. In addition, we know that flexibility of design will allow optimum use of space. We also know that the four walls that bounded our own generation’s learning have long since been breached through instantaneous digital connections that can be achieved with any place in the world at any time.

Learning is not defined by knowledge that exists now. Learning does not only take place inside classrooms. Learning can occur in small or large groups, alone or in pairs and a building design needs to take this into account. Learning is rarely done in isolation nor does it finish when primary or secondary school ends. This means that a community needs access to part or all of the learning spaces that are created so that lifelong learning can be demonstrated. Our current needs, particularly in terms of flexible spaces to allow performances of learning stemming from Inquiry Units of work far exceeds the current spaces available. Our Master Planning must accommodate these needs if this style of learning is to be encouraged and supported.

5.0 Conclusions and recommendations

Student learning Goals

- To develop learners who will use their skills and knowledge particularly of themselves as learners and apply their deep understandings to the world around them.
- To challenge our students to demonstrate and reflect on their learning with the increased use of ICT.

Student Engagement and Wellbeing Goals

- To improve student connectedness to teachers particularly in Years 5-6.

Key Improvement strategies

<i>Effective Schools</i>	<i>Key Improvement Strategies</i>
<i>Focus on teaching and learning</i>	<p><i>That the school seek to continue with the work on development of common constructivist pedagogical understandings that will underpin the work done in Inquiry Learning.</i></p> <p><i>Continue to enhance learning through the use of ICT</i></p>
<i>Purposeful teaching</i>	<p><i>Continue to engage a key facilitator to improve our teaching of writing ensuring that both the surface and the deeper aspects of writing are covered.</i></p> <p><i>Continue to develop in house professional learning programs that support improved teaching of student reading comprehension skills.</i></p> <p><i>Continue to develop constructivist teaching and learning strategies in mathematics through the increased use of concrete teaching materials and digital technologies.</i></p> <p><i>Teaching teams gain greater consistency of assessment, particularly in the Early Years and incorporating the new learning statements in VELs.</i></p>
<i>Professional leadership</i>	<p><i>Continue to develop a performance and development culture that sustains instructional and distributed leadership, values in house professional learning and builds reflective teacher practices that uphold learning for deeper understanding.</i></p>
<i>Stimulating and secure learning environment</i>	<p><i>The school master plan aims to build facilities that support communities of learners particularly in the middle years. The facilities will feature flexible learning spaces and an environmentally sustainable infrastructure that support a constructivist based learning environment. The middle years learning community will embed the findings of the MYRAD research, inclusive of learning styles and be a technological rich environment.</i></p>

Targets [note the specific cohorts will be listed in the strategic plan]

- To improve student achievement in Mathematics, especially in Years P-1.
- To improve the results of the 2005 student attitudes to school survey connectedness to teachers measure by 2008

6.0 References

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7.0 Review Signatures

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Date: __ / __ / ____

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Date: __ / __ / ____

School Council President