

Five Years On: An Australian First

Evidence
of Impact



St Bernard's Catholic Primary School
VIC • Australia

Since 2018, over 350 educators have visited the classrooms of St Bernard's Catholic Primary School in East Coburg, Victoria. They have travelled from inside and outside the country to see Australia's first Visible Learning+ Certified School in action, to tap into the knowledge and experience of the school's 5-year journey and to be inspired for their own context and practice. It's hard to imagine they would leave disappointed – and certainly not if they had the privilege to speak with students, teachers and leaders.

However, what these visitors can only see is one moment in time – a time when learning now sits at the core, when practices are deeply embedded and where evidence of success is tangible. They could not be expected to perceive the significant cultural shift that has taken place or imagine the investment of energy, commitment and resources. Yet these shifts are exactly what others can best learn from St Bernard's story. What is instructional is not just what the school is doing now but why and how they got there – and where next.

In and Out of the Learning Pit

As with the learning approach evident in the school, the journey has been one of going deeper into the change process, to become increasingly sophisticated in their ways of working and to be ever more demanding of themselves. The phases of the 'learning pit'¹ that the students readily identify in their learning are equally applicable to the school transformation.

By way of illustration, both Joanne Doherty, the Principal, and Shane Crawford, Impact Coach, vividly recall the time several years in when all seemed lost and they felt mired in confusion and doubt – at the bottom of that pit. The progress of the previous few years seemed illusory in the face of less-than-positive national assessment data. As Joanne starts:

"I remember getting our NAPLAN data and I was devastated... at that point we realised we were in the pit. And the pit's uncomfortable and it's challenging."

Shane continues that when he asked the students: "They said to me bluntly, 'NAPLAN, you don't tell us about it. You make us sit it. You send it home in an envelope. Every other assessment, you explain why

we're doing it, where it's going, what we're doing with it and then afterwards, where we're going to next. So, it's not important to you, so we didn't make it important'... That's all we changed."

Although difficult at the time, that cognitive conflict² was a necessary precursor to an honest reassessment and to implementing responsive practices. The reality of the data caused the leadership team to challenge their thinking and to adjust practices – but significantly, it did not change their purpose and their belief in two key pillars: success in learning and positive relationships.

Teachers are similarly honest in recognising the potential for their professional growth and also revert naturally to the analogy of the learning pit. A less clear and well supported approach at his previous school meant that Hamish, a Year 3/4 teacher, welcomed receiving support with some of the practices of Visible Learning. He self-reflects:

"We need to get into that learning pit ourselves and say, 'I don't know. I don't have all the answers and I am able to make mistakes.' And showing that to the kids as well, being honest and realistic. So that's where I've come from so far, and it's been great."

'Do you hear what these children are saying?'³

It is not only the school leaders and teachers who communicate their understanding of the school's transformational trajectory. Ruby is a wonderfully insightful Year 6 student who, when asked to capture the school in one word, gives what might seem a surprising answer. Ruby's word is 'change'. She elaborates:

We have come a long way since Prep and we keep changing; we keep looking for better. There's no final point and no limits. We will keep challenging ourselves.

At age 12, Ruby already understands change as an ongoing process and interprets it as the opportunity for improvement and progress, with 'no limits'. You may note her inclusive use of 'we' – an indication perhaps of the symbiotic aspirations of student and school.

Taking up Ruby's theme, Year 5 and 6 peers, Danielle, Emily, Kate, Lucy, Riley and Tayla, are unanimous in their view that St Bernard's has changed significantly over their years there and are able to detail some of the changes they have seen; for example:

- They say they used not to work together so much but now collaboration is a natural way of working, enabled by learning hubs and the assignment of learning buddies who can offer different perspectives.
- It is now OK to make mistakes, so allaying student anxieties and instilling a belief that errors are an opportunity for learning.
- They have Learning Intentions and Success Criteria and, while these existed before, the difference now is to understand and reflect on their work through the success criteria and what is needed – they suggest these are 'like steps to success'.
- They have the qualities of good learning where they can see what they need to bring to learning.
- There are visual scaffolds for these learning qualities and motivational posters, as well as suggested curriculum strategies.
- Communication books are used so that students can make their voices heard when they might otherwise have been hesitant to do so.
- They regard their school as inclusive and democratic where everyone has a say and can debate ideas – an approach they say is evident in classrooms too.

Student perceptions are consistent with those of their teachers. Iain is a Year 1/2 teacher and Mathematics Leader who believes that while five years ago a lot of good things were happening, consistency across the school was lacking. A purposeful and graduated start with building blocks, such as Learning Intentions first followed by Success Criteria, helped staff to have common understandings. Students becoming familiar with these concepts was the next phase, and now they are to the stage where the Criteria are co-constructed with the students.



Bianca, a Year 3/4 teacher, has been at the school for a year and finds students here more self-directed: *They want to know what they have to achieve by the end of the lesson. It puts things in perspective [for the teacher] and makes you more accountable. It helps you to plan.*

Afroditi is a long-term teacher whose tenure preceded the engagement with Visible Learning. Her reflection on the change is about de-mysticising learning for students.

"I knew what I was doing but it was hidden from the children, so even though there was a focus and we knew what we wanted them to learn, we never told them that... It was in the way you delivered it so it could be magical, and they were all going to get it. And you were, like, why didn't they get it!"

Refining Practice

An example of the ongoing refinement of practice and approach is the transition from learning dispositions to learning qualities. The eight learning dispositions were originally depicted as superheroes representative of 'persistence' or 'creativity' or 'self-direction' etc. and students were accordingly bedecked in coloured capes. But the students themselves identified that they had outgrown the notion. In a move Shane light-heartedly describes as transitioning from childhood to adolescence, there are no longer separate dispositions but an integrated and holistic concept of learning.



As Iain explains:

"Things can become stale and stagnant and they're not live anymore. They [the learning dispositions] became almost just like a display in your classroom and so it was a good time to revisit it. The students were [too] comfortable, and it needed an extra level of challenge."

A further example is an expanded concept of visible learning so that visibility applies not only to making the learning so, but also the learner. The school vision statement has been revised to 'where you are known', signalling to students their place and voice in the school, as well as teachers' knowledge and understanding of them as learners. The goal is for students to know themselves as learners, and equally for teachers to know themselves as learners.

Leading the Change

That the school has reached this point of development is no accident. A critical factor is the quality of the leadership. Staff see that Joanne and Shane and their leadership team have enabled the change, providing clear direction, consistent messaging, focussed support and the time and space to learn. From Joanne and Shane's first connection with the research of John Hattie, they found the work to be exactly what would support the development of the school. Joanne paints the previous picture:

"Because what was really evident was that we didn't have a common understanding of learning; we didn't have a common understanding of what good learners were. We didn't have that, let alone our children. I don't think we had a clear approach to learning; we didn't even have a language to discuss learning as a staff."

Times are very different now, so that according to Afroditi: “We all live it and we’re all part of it. It’s become second nature.”

Teachers appreciate the coherence between the leaders’ words and deeds. In the same way that there are non-negotiables for classroom practice in making the learning visible, these processes are evident in the running of the school and in approaches to adult learning. Meetings and professional development, for example, are learning opportunities organised with clear Learning Intentions and Success Criteria. Furthermore, it is well understood that all decisions are driven by what is best for students and their learning.

A Word of Advice

For those who draw on the St Bernard’s story there is much to learn, however in order to best inform your own context, rather than focusing only on **what** they are doing, deepen your inquiry to attend to **how** they have arrived at this moment in time. Most importantly, to truly appreciate St Bernard’s journey, understand **why**⁵.

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¹ Nottingham, J. (2010). Challenging Learning. JN Publishing.

² *ibid.*

³ Matthew 21:16

⁴ Hattie, J. 2012. Visible learning for teachers. Routledge.

⁵ Sinek, S. (2011). Start with why. London: Portfolio Penguin.

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