

'TRUE' Visible Learning

Evidence
of Impact



St Joseph's School
Stanthorpe, QLD • Australia

Cael politely opines that while people often grasp the general idea of Visible Learning, they may misinterpret its essence. In elaborating, he observes the 'visibility' of learning can be taken too literally, related only to what is hands-on, observable and demonstrable. Rather, Cael offers a more nuanced understanding, suggesting its true meaning is about 'students taking control of their learning and having a clear path with multiple ways to get to an outcome.' Cael is in Year 7 at St Joseph's School.

Cael is not alone in his thinking. His imperatives of:

- ownership of and responsibility for learning,
- clarity about the learning path, and
- having options and choice

echo throughout the conversations with teachers and students at St Joseph's.

Two Campuses, One School



St Joseph's School is a P-12 Catholic school in Stanthorpe in Queensland and belongs to the Diocese of Toowoomba. The school comprises two campuses, primary and secondary, separated by a road. In the past, the road was not only a physical barrier but a symbolic one, in that the campuses operated relatively independently - organisationally and in terms of teacher practice. Not so now.

The change to a P-12 perspective has gained significant momentum over recent years enabled by joint leadership, combined staff meetings and transition activities across campuses. But the most powerful enabler has been the introduction in 2018 of Visible Learning which provided a shared focus

on learning and a common language to sharpen that focus. St Joseph's is now accredited as a Level 3 Visible Learning+ Certified School and teachers note the consistency of practice both within and across campuses.

Importantly, students recognise and welcome that consistency. Grace is in Year 9 and understands that while different subjects have their demands, what remains constant is the expectation that 'you lead your own learning'. Grace gives the example of her English and Mathematics classes where students are encouraged to refer to past mistakes to learn from these. She believes her growth is attested by her increased understanding, independence and significantly improved grades.

Matt, the Secondary Deputy Principal, explains there has been a strong emphasis on collective teacher efficacy across the school which lends itself to a 'through school' context. Matt and his colleague Sarah, the Primary Assistant Principal, have made P-12 continuity a particular focus, such that Sarah is now a member of the secondary curriculum team. As Matt says, 'It's about pedagogy; it's not about what year level you're teaching'.

The key has been shifting mindsets and what is accorded priority in both contexts, so that the emphasis throughout the school is on those higher impact strategies, such as collaboration and feedback. While Sarah recognises and respects the differences between primary and secondary schools, she speaks of the excitement and 'energy in the room' when secondary and primary teachers have the opportunity to share practice.

Megan's role as Assistant Principal Formation and Identity involves her in working in classrooms across the school, so she sees first-hand the primary-secondary connection and the synergies between campuses. Andrew, the Principal of St Joseph's, believes that the introduction of 'the hub' concept of team teaching and flexible space, first set up for Year 6 in 2020, has also been instrumental in enhancing the P-12 continuum.

That continuum is not only about the transition from Primary to Secondary but also about Early Years transition. Colleagues like Linda and Glenda have been able to adapt core features of Visible Learning

to their Early Years context. For example, they use the language of Learning Intentions and Success Criteria (LISCs) but with added pictorial representations; they create characters to represent learning dispositions, and they role play the emotions of the learning pit. Early Years education is integral to the whole school.

The St Joseph's Change Process

Mind you, back in 2018, not all teachers were convinced of the value of adopting the principles of Visible Learning. Sarah acknowledges that implementing Visible Learning hasn't necessarily been easy. Year 4-5 hub teacher Johanna openly admits that, although now at ease, she was less than impressed with the original decision, and made it known at the time!

Johanna's turning point was attending a Corwin Visible Learning Conference in Melbourne. The breakthrough for her was to hear about practical applications - the classroom reality of Visible Learning and her subsequent experimentation. 'That's what got me hooked on the Visible Learning journey'.

A big turnaround in Johanna's practice has been handing over the responsibility for learning to the students, for example, through the use of formative and summative assessment where they can map and celebrate their own growth. Student responsibility is a theme echoed in Anna's comments about her secondary English classroom where she strives to relinquish control and put the onus on the students.

For Amanda her epiphany was also the Melbourne conference because 'before that it felt that we had just done LISCs for 18 months', without truly understanding why. At the conference she was exposed to other strategies and ways of working that made sense to her. A trip to New Zealand visiting Stonefields School gave Amanda the opportunity to see the endpoint, that is, what a Visible Learning school looks and feels like in action. For both Amanda and Johanna, it then became a collaborative process of trial and error – an attitude encouraged by school leadership. There has been no looking back but also a recognition that, in reality, there is no endpoint.

As a secondary Mathematics and Science teacher, Lisa believes that her practice has changed for the better.

She no longer has use for packaged online programs and now designs her classroom almost entirely around student collaboration. She thinks that Visible Learning works particularly well for Mathematics because students need constant and immediate feedback. Maths lends itself to collaboration, so students hear, for example, how others solve problems too.

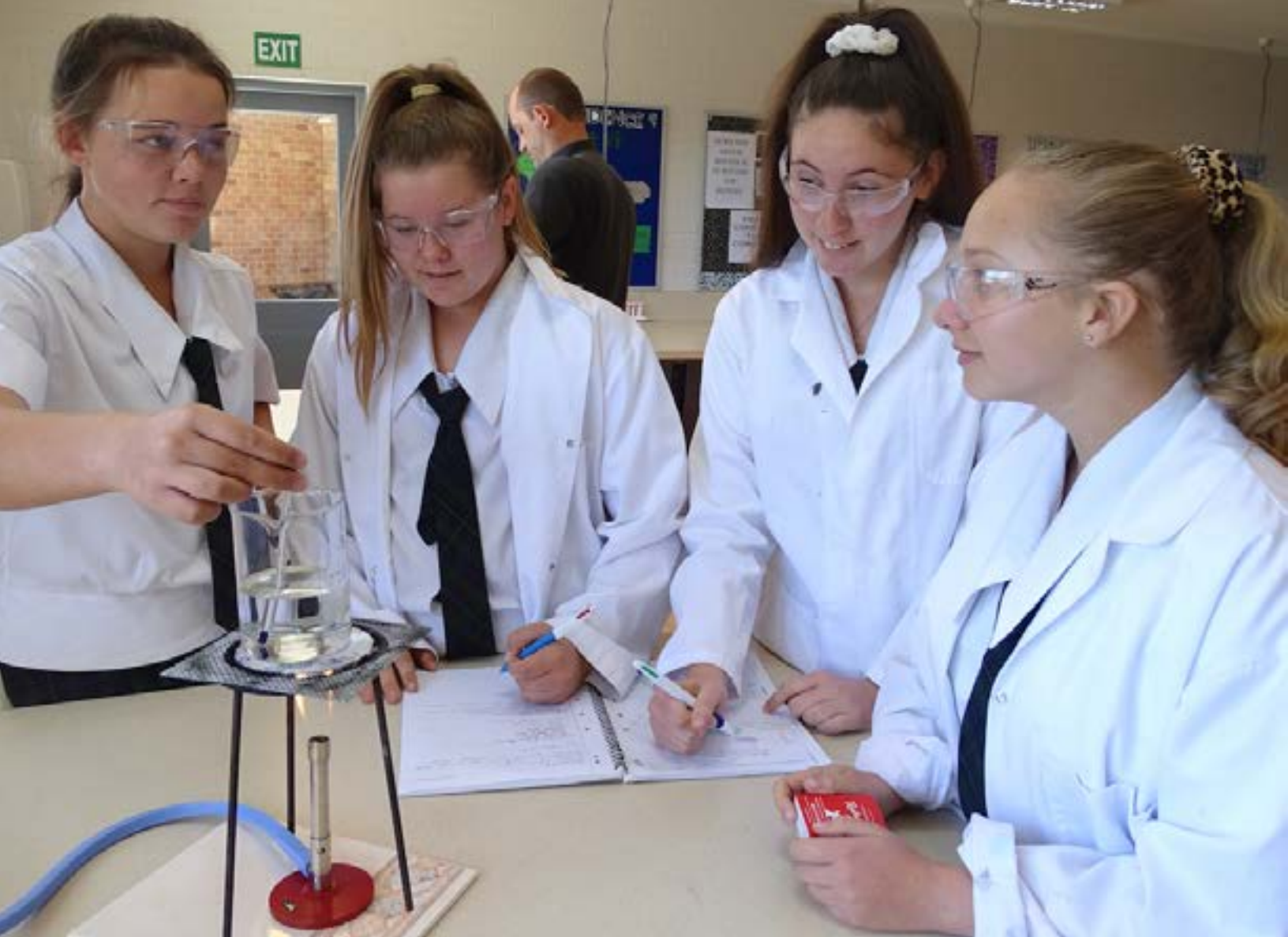
At the beginning, the Leadership Team saw it as their responsibility to lead Visible Learning; however, they soon realised that the process needed to be driven by teachers for teachers. Their biggest lesson was about building the capacity of teachers to be teachers of others.

Andrew recalls a challenge in the early stages of Visible Learning was understanding how to start and structure the process so that teachers would have the requisite knowledge and skills. He says it came together when they focussed on the big picture and collaboratively developed their own model of exemplary teaching and learning.

In fact, the St Joseph's story is an instructive change piece. Influential educational writers such as Fullan¹ remind us that change is not an event but a process requiring the right drivers.

- Change happens over time with the building of capacity through appropriate support, reinforcement, and with the development of trust.
- School vision is shared and clearly articulated.
- Leaders are wise to build a coherent change dynamic that encourages early adopters.
- They provide time and space for increasing engagement and experimentation.
- Collaborative professionalism² characterises the way teachers work.
- Mistakes are an opportunity to learn, and success is celebrated.

As recounted by teachers and students, the St Joseph's change narrative exemplifies this approach.



The Power of Conversation

Conversation, both formal and informal, is a powerful driver of change at St Joseph's. Sarah observes that you can walk into the staffroom at lunchtime or after school and you see teachers sitting together, having a coffee, talking about learning, sharing successes, but also inviting colleagues' feedback on how they might have done things differently.

Joe is a senior English teacher who similarly remarks on the value of reflective discussion in the staffroom. He sees it as indicative of the culture a school not content with the status quo. Anna, the Head of English, agrees, feeling confident to share 'even the train wrecks'.

Megan is prepared to confide in her students when she feels something has not gone so well. 'It's

important we share with kids that we try things, we take risks... they don't work' – so that students understand teachers too reflect on how they might do things better.

Thinking Figuratively

An intriguing feature of conversations with students at St Joseph's is their ready use of figurative language when explaining key concepts of Visible Learning. Metaphors act as powerful tools to assist our understanding – they help us make cognitive leaps from what is already known to what may be unknown or lesser known.

- Ella, Maggie, Phoebe, Alex and Ted are a group of enthusiastic Year 6 students who, in talking about their growth in learning, use the parable of the

mustard seed³ to explain how the tiniest seed grows into the biggest plant.

- Jess is a Year 9 student who intuitively connects learning with wellbeing: People aren't perfect. They make mistakes and that's okay. Then they're not like a boulder hitting you; they're like a little pebble.
- When Ethan (Year 7) explains Visible Learning, he says: It's like having a long, big highway and having different streets going out to different areas. So, you're on that path but you stream off into another and that builds on what your original idea was.

Clearly, the students' analogising not only mediates their own understanding of their learning but enables them to communicate that understanding.

The Future

Although the formal cycle with Corwin is at an end for St Joseph's, the relationship continues through access to resources and professional learning opportunities, and through Sarah's role in supporting other schools. At the end of 2022, the school plans to undertake a Visible Learning Capability Assessment as a further measure of their growth. There is no sense of the journey ending anytime soon; in fact, as Amanda noted, there is no endpoint to learning.



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¹Fullan, M. & Quinn J. (2016). Coherence: the right drivers in action for schools, districts, and systems. SAGE: Thousand Oaks.

²Hargreaves, A & O'Connor, M. (2018) Collaborative Professionalism: When Teaching Together Means Learning for All. SAGE: Thousand Oaks.

³Mark 4. 30-32

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:

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