

## School Practices: Our Lady of the Assumption Primary School (2)

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*Middle Year Schooling (MYS) was introduced to the Year 6 and 7 levels at Our Lady of the Assumption (OLA) three years ago where three teachers worked together to educate 90 children in a range of settings that involved a number of teaching staff covering a wide and varied programme of learning. Although team membership has changed, the MYS philosophy is still followed and adhered to with the distance covered in those three years quite surprising. Each year the team members find themselves exploring new methods of teaching and learning thus offering our young adolescents many and varied opportunities to reach their full potential. From the learning of basic spelling and grammar rules, to negotiating the curriculum, to embarking on the creation of e-learning environments, the journey continues.*

Through our interpretation of the principles and philosophy of the MYS, we aim to instil in our young adolescents a sense of identity, we hope they grow as problem solvers and they develop a resiliency that will carry them through life with a sense of hope and a belief in a bright future.

Collaboration and support at OLA begins with the MYS team itself. The three teachers are in constant dialogue with each other regarding all matters – the social and academic learning of the students as well as the personal concerns that come to light. The teachers seek to understand each other and their points of view and share equal roles within the team. The leadership role of the team can change as individual teaching skills, expertise and knowledge are utilised. There is a connectedness and a respect between team members that gives them strength and helps to overcome professional isolation. Flexibility is a key word with team members as structures and programmes can change at short notice. The in-house saying ‘there is no *me* in ‘t-e-a-m’ is often quoted within the team. Integration of subjects features in all work plans where the teachers work in a partnership that facilitates knowledge and learning. The students observe the skills of collaboration, cooperation and open communication on a regular basis.

In following the MYS philosophy, much of the classroom work focuses on developing in the students a sense of self knowledge, self definition and self worth but it is with the support of our whole school community that the senior students are able to apply their knowledge and to practise their skills in an environment that is safe, secure, positive and pleasant. As leaders (and here leadership refers to all Year 7 students with some students holding more senior positions than others) they move through the school organising, assisting and controlling many aspects of school life. The staff and teachers come to know more about these young people and an interest in their well-being is sparked. This interaction encourages communication from both sides, the students now have to apply the learned social skills from classroom work and a sense of responsibility for the successful completion of the job is nurtured. Putting out and stacking away at preschool, setting up the microphones for assembly, working with the office staff in the

writing and publishing of a column in the weekly school newsletter, partnering up with younger grades when walking to and from church and so on brings a sense of community, collegiality and a connectedness that reinforces the teaching and learning undertaken in the work programmes in the senior school. Such nurturing of the personal growth and development of young adolescents is thus completely and competently covered when interaction at all levels of school life is undertaken. Effective teaching needs a caring and committed community.

With the development of this public image for the young adolescents comes an earned respect, added positions of trust follow on as does a self efficacy that fosters initiative and proactive behaviour in many of their undertakings.

A focus is also placed on problem solving skills. Whilst inquiry learning, group tasks and specific problem solving activities are included in work programmes, the young adolescents enjoy working on more practical, meaningful tasks that involve playground issues, how to make the best use of limited resources so that no students are disadvantaged or deprived and in working with parents on tasks that help beautify and improve the school environment. The sharing out of sporting equipment, the monitoring of troubled or lonely children in the playground and solutions for keeping the grounds tidy are often brought to the teachers' attention by the students themselves. Regular class meetings and year level meetings are occasions when many problems are aired and solutions discussed. Goals are set and then revisited throughout the term so the desired outcome is achieved.

The senior students have developed their Christian conscience further by interacting with our neighbours who are day visitors to the respite centre. The students have assisted these people in their efforts to attend some of the school assemblies namely at Easter, piano recital days and the school feast day. Problems encountered with moving these people even over a short distance have been overcome with the help of the students.

The resourcefulness of these young adolescents, the positive approach they demonstrate in accepting challenges and the initiative and level of critical thinking in their planning and execution of tasks is brought to our attention by the affirmations of people outside the classroom. This year *The Good Samaritan Award* acknowledged the forethought, commonsense and responsible action taken by a Year 7 boy in caring for a troubled Year 1 child on the way home from school. By empowering the students in this way they develop not only a sense of belonging but also a sense of ownership and an affiliation with OLA in its entirety.

I shall now refer to the collaboration and support we receive from our parents, they are our greatest advocates. We are in constant contact via letters, phone calls, emails, by making available to them regular interview times and with other activities such as coaching for sport. At the beginning of each year one or two parents offer to help organise that aspect of the young adolescents' life which is of paramount importance to them, namely the social activities of senior school. To help develop self-awareness and social competencies, to just spend time together and to simply have some fun, a carefully organised social calendar operates for the senior students. By working in partnership with the parents we are able to enjoy the company of our young adolescents in an environment of learning that can only happen outside the classroom.

The Easter raffle, Year 7 camp, senior school disco, the visits by international students are all undertaken because of the support we receive from our parents.

For the second year, we have a group of forty-five 12-13 year olds coming from America as part of their summer holiday programme. These young adolescents and their teachers spend one day with us during their ten-day stay in Australia. The students interact via music and dance, classroom learning and discussion, games and sport, and the sharing of food. We are the only school they visit and the only children they spend time with during their travels. Last year a group from New Zealand joined us with our students billeting them for part of their stay. Japanese exchange students are also regular visitors to our school. Our parents on such occasions organise the food, assist with supervision and see to all the minor details that make such functions pleasurable experiences. Not only is the social learning in this setting invaluable, but the wealth of factual knowledge in understanding another culture and another country is a very rich and rewarding experience.

Finally it is our hope that our young adolescents will develop a resiliency that strengthens them in knowing who they are and how they are carving out the path on their life's journey, that mistakes are great learning opportunities and that success can come from failure.

And so a collaborative and supportive culture has evolved at OLA. From the MYS team to the development of interdependent and self directed learners in the senior school, to the shift from observant fellow teachers to the creation of risk takers as the implementation of new teaching and learning practices appear throughout the school. The active discussion of the curriculum, the cross pollination of ideas and the continual reflection and review of practices and procedures has created a learning climate and environment that radiates self-development and self-exploration in all areas and at all levels. The teachers at OLA now operate out of a collective wisdom which allows them to reach their potential and hence make teaching and learning an educationally stimulating experience for all concerned. The characteristics associated with MYS learners are very much applied to the teachers as well.

To conclude, MYS at OLA is not the creation of a mini high school. We are very careful with the jargon we use and how we structure learning experiences and make every effort not to duplicate high school talk in our learning environment. Our focus is to educate young adolescents in a manner that is conducive to their stage of growth and development and if the benefit of this is an easy, trouble free transition into high school then that is the bonus, the icing on the cake.

### **Biographical Details**

Cathy Bennedick is a Year 6 teacher at Our Lady of the Assumption Primary School at Enoggera in Brisbane, Australia.