

School Practices: Our Lady of the Assumption School (1)

*Michele Vuleta
Our Lady of the Assumption School
Queensland
Australia*

While it is possible to cognitively plan to structure the school culture to be one that fosters collaborative and supportive practices, I believe that schools are more likely to more successful in this endeavour more quickly if they also have an element of serendipity on their side. For Our Lady of the Assumption this came about through the number of Year 6 and 7 students enrolled.

The total of 90 Year 6 and 7 students dictated that we had to take some action where we had multi-age classes. There are strong opinions against composite classes in the Enoggera community. In terms of equity for all of our upper school students, we either had to have one straight Year 6 and one straight Year 7 class and one composite, which we knew would create problems or we had to structure our classes equitably and have three multi-aged Year 6 and 7 classes.

We had neighbouring primary schools and colleges that were implementing Middle Years of Schooling (MYS) pedagogy and we were also lucky to have 3 staff members who were engaging in a lot of dialogue and exchange of ideas between themselves and with local primary and secondary schools.

Colleagues at one of our neighbouring schools had had the experience of introducing Middle Years of Schooling practices and facing opposition from some elements within the parent community. They were generous enough to share their challenges with us so that we were in a better position to set ourselves up for success as we introduced Middle Years at our school. We began by informing and consulting with our parent body about our plans and the advantages for teaching and learning for pre- adolescent and adolescent students. Parents were able to embrace Middle Schooling theory and look forward to the benefits for their children.

Armed with the wisdom and prior knowledge of our colleagues, we set out three Year 6 /7 multi-aged classes and called these classes our Senior School. The staff undertook professional development in Middle Years of Schooling pedagogy and set about building their teaching team.

Collaborative and supportive teaching and learning practices require that the individuals involved are emotionally intelligent and willing to be challenged both personally and professionally. Daniel Goldman in his book, *The New Leaders* refers to emotional intelligence and the success of teams:

Collective emotional intelligence is what sets top-performing teams apart from average team...a group's emotional intelligence requires the same capabilities that an emotionally intelligent individual expresses: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management. (Goleman et al, 2002, p. 177)

Effective teamwork draws heavily upon the emotional intelligence of the members.

Some of us are fortunate enough to belong to a staff team that gets along together. It is not really just good fortune; it is hard work, an awareness of the importance of emotional intelligence and people being prepared to develop that. People need a willingness to be professionally and personally supportive. When you start working with one another perhaps rethink your ideas. Sometimes you have to move well and truly out of your comfort zone.

In the interests of enabling teachers to achieve optimum outcomes in teaching and learning our leadership team uses a consultative approach to decision making, wherever possible, within our school. In this way we overcome the challenge of one individual having to have all of the wisdom and access greater wisdom from the knowledge and life experience of the whole staff group. This also ensures greater 'buy in' to projects and initiatives that occur in our school e.g. hosting visiting students and modifying time table arrangements in order to be able to accommodate non-contact time for the whole MYS team of three teachers. To do this we need the co-operation of the Music Teacher, the Librarian and the LOTE teachers.

Staff members have concrete experience that through collaboration, consultation and support particular arrangements have been able to be made to accommodate the needs of the MYS team. As a result of this they are confident that they will be given similar opportunities in order to accommodate specific projects that they may wish to undertake.

Our experience tells us that this philosophy of 'letting go of control' within leadership, allows leaders to rise from within the whole staff team. Support from the Principal in this way engenders initiative and responsibility in each staff member and affords them recognition for their work.

Reference

Goleman, D., Boyatzis, R., & McKee, A. (2002) *The New Leaders. Transforming the art of leadership into the science of results*. Little Brown.

Biographical Details

Michelle Vuleta is Principal of Our Lady of the Assumption Primary School at Enoggera in Brisbane, Australia.