

SOMERVILLE HOUSE ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT REPORT

What impact does a learner-centred pedagogy have on enhancing learning outcomes for Year 5 students and the teaching strategies of their teachers?

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INTRODUCTION

As Benjamin Franklin once said, ‘tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember; involve me and I learn’. It is from this premise that the Somerville House Junior School chose to engage in an action research program. Following on from a productive action research project in 2016, involving a different team of teachers, the School was eager to continue the positive work that was occurring. As a school, continuous improvement is always at the forefront of our strategic and day-to-day actions. We strive for both ‘best practice’ and ‘next practice’ to ensure that we are proving educational programs that allow our students to flourish both academically and pastorally.

A productive school culture, and the pastoral, educational, sporting and cultural programs that form a part of that, do not simply occur without the investment of time, energy and commitment. Thomson (2015) urges action. He states that ‘it is not sufficient to get children to school; it is also crucial that their educational experience is worthwhile and of benefit’. We must create learning environments that are of the highest quality and, in order to do that, we must be in a process of learning, a process that is supported by action research.

BACKGROUND

The project team consisted of three members of the Junior School staff: Amy Woodgate, Assistant Head of Junior School (Teaching & Learning), Esther Harrison and Liz Munro, both Year 5 classroom teachers. The project spanned from February through to November.

2017 saw the opening of a purpose-built learning centre for Year 5 and 6 students, the Robinson Learning Centre. Images of these learning spaces are found on the right.



Robinson Centre Learning Spaces 1



Robinson Centre Learning Spaces 2

These learning spaces were designed to be adaptive to the learning needs of the students. Physically, the learning environment can be configured in different ways, through the use of movable glass walls and break-out spaces, to facilitate different modes of learning. In terms of pedagogy, these new learning environments also saw Junior School staff engage in a process of change. They reflected upon their practice and developed programs and learning experiences that best represent effective teaching for learning practices, particularly when working in flexible learning spaces.

Somerville House is also involved in the Self-Improving Schools program run by Independent Schools Queensland. One of the key goals identified as a school focus is the further development of teacher expertise, ensuring consistent teaching practices at an expert level. The desired outcome is to see expert teaching practices embedded across all learning areas, with a focus on continual learning gains for students, and greater student empowerment and engagement.

The core areas of the School's Strategic Intent, and the goals of the Self-Improving Schools program, correlate directly to the action research project, and our aim to explore and enhance the use of learner-centered pedagogies that have a direct impact upon the learning outcomes of our students. Through this project, it is our vision to provide students with a curriculum and with learning opportunities that inspire them and allow them to know themselves as learners, which is key to their success in the future.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The research of Ron Ritchhart, from of the Project Zero project at Harvard University, and the well-known work of Australian educator, Kath Murdoch, in the inquiry model of teaching, have both formed a key component of the academic reading for this action research project. These two authors provide extensive descriptions and examples of teaching and learning practices that have the learner at their core. Some of the practices explained by these authors are strategies, tools and protocols that are familiar to many teachers; however, other practices are perhaps challenging to the practice of some educators. The research team sought to compile a list of as many teaching and learning practices as possible and then develop actions based on this list.

Kath Murdoch's *The Power of Inquiry* (2015) has been the focus of Junior School professional development sessions over the last eighteen months. Murdoch offers knowledge, research, tools, strategies and techniques to support teachers to engage in inquiry practices in their classrooms. The research team explored Murdoch's work further when developing the background knowledge for this project, and when developing specific tools and strategies to be implemented during the action cycles.

Ron Ritchhart's work, *Creating Cultures of Thinking: The 8 Forces We Must Master to Truly Transform our Schools* (2015), as well as his work at Harvard University as a part of the Project Zero team and its online resources, have been crucial to this action research. The aim of both Ritchhart's text and the online resources of the Visible Thinking project

(Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2016) is to enhance the understanding and use of thinking routines. By their definition, thinking routines are able to guide a learner's thought processes and promote active processing. This definition aligned with what the research team set as goals for the project. The team was strong in the assertion that thinking was the key. By developing the learner's ability to think, share her thinking and communicate her thinking, the learning experiences would, by nature, be learner-centred and therefore, have an impact on each individual learner.

Ritchhart argues that once we, as educators, establish that we value thinking in our classrooms, then we need to ensure that it is made visible at all times. By making thinking visible, Ritchhart then states that teachers have the information necessary to provide opportunities for students to take their thinking to the next level and build on their understandings.

For the research team, this was crucial to the success of the project. The actions of the project focussed on introducing and consistently using a range of thinking tools, strategies, protocols and routines in the learning environment. These experiences were to be embedded in the classroom practice, not just an 'add-on' that sat in isolation or in just one subject area.

As the research team moved past the initial phase of the project, academic reading began to focus on the concept of learner-centred pedagogies. 'Learner-centred', as a concept, then shaped the actions that were undertaken and the learning experiences that were implemented.

Daniels and Perry (2003) believe that children wholeheartedly endorse learner-centred practices. Their research states that learner-centred environments foster both the cognitive and metacognitive development of students, enhancing both learning and social and emotional outcomes for children. Learning experiences are challenging, age-appropriate, and respectful of individual, group and gender differences. Engagement and confidence increases, and there are higher levels of motivation for students entering learner-centred classrooms.

Daniels and Perry (2003), Schuh (2004) and Weimer (2012) all describe the characteristics of learner-centred teachers and learner-centred environments. These authors agree that learner-centred teachers provide a range of instructional activities at a range of developmentally appropriate levels. In these environments, there is careful monitoring of progress and development, with regular opportunities for reflection, self-assessment and feedback. Both the academic and social needs of students are considered.

From the reading conducted during the initial phases of the research project, and then throughout the action cycles, the team was able to establish the knowledge and understandings necessary to make decisions throughout the project. The team was able to have confidence in the choices made. Thinking tools, strategies and protocols were selected on the basis of readings undertaken and data gathered. Key learning experiences were developed and implemented on a foundation of learner-centred practices and problem-based learning. The literature provided the framework for question development, for many of the actions implemented, and for the direction the project took.

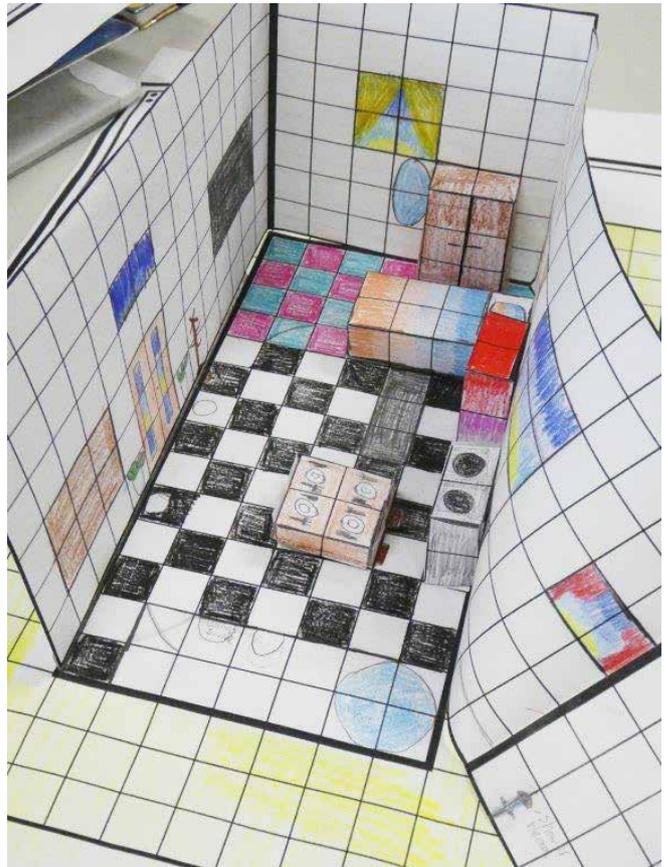
SIGNIFICANT ACTIONS

Developing from reading in the area of learner-centred practices, a Maths Workshops unit was implemented. The students engaged in Maths Workshops twice a week. All students in the year level met with their teachers at the start of the session. Each teacher offered and described a workshop based on a particular concept, and at a particular level of knowledge and skill for that concept. Each student then took ownership of her learning by selecting which workshop she should attend. Students were encouraged to select workshops based on what they wanted to consolidate, or on the area in which they wanted to challenge themselves. The onus was on students to know themselves as learners and to be empowered to make choices that were most beneficial to their continued progress on their learning journeys.

A second significant learning experience was the implementation of a Tiny Houses unit in Term 3 of Year 5. This new unit featured curriculum links to Mathematics and Design Technologies. The Tiny Houses unit had a simplified PBL framework, with the unit culminating in an Open House event at which all tiny houses were 'open for inspection' by parents, other staff and students. The Year 5 teaching team worked collaboratively to develop and implement the unit, meeting regularly to discuss student progress and what their priorities were for Mathematics lessons in the coming days or weeks. Student work samples from the unit can be seen pictured.



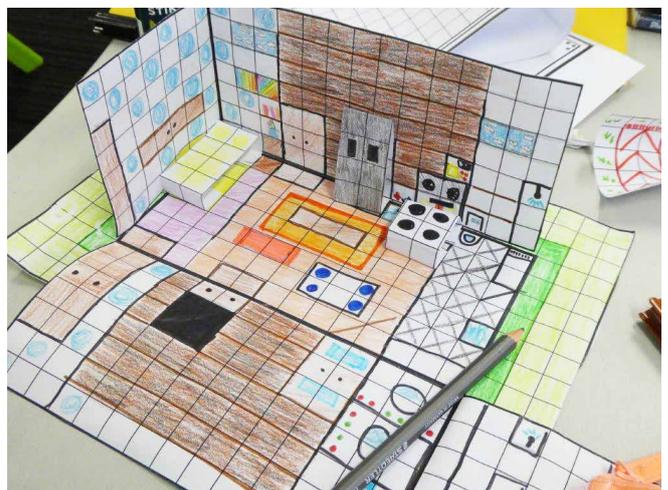
Tiny Houses Unit



Tiny Houses Unit



Tiny Houses Unit



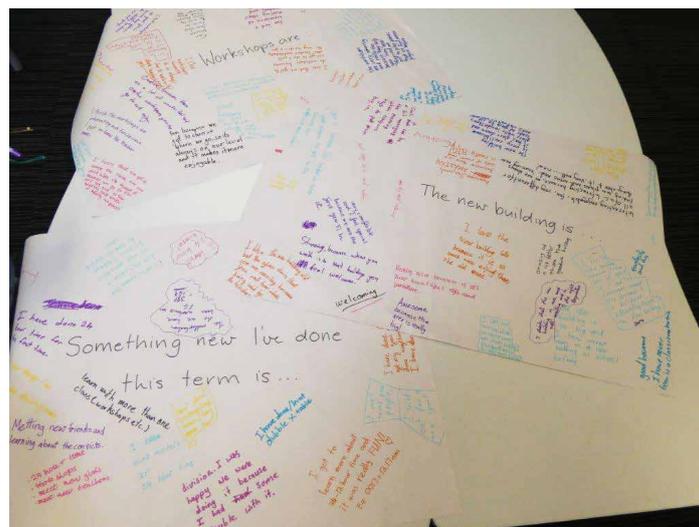
Tiny Houses Unit

Using a posed problem as a way of initiating discussion, the students worked through a series of steps to design, construct and display their tiny house models. They covered key mathematical concepts in the area of Measurement and Geometry, as well as mathematical thinking and reasoning. The students discussed their design problems with each other, supported one another to overcome challenges, and worked independently to make choices for their own design. They demonstrated mathematical knowledge and understanding in a unit that was meaningful and relevant to the 'real world'. The students engaged in reflection throughout the process, documenting their design challenges, as well as the learning behaviours they were exhibiting or needed to develop, and how they felt about the learning experience.

Learning journals are a medium for the students to make their thinking visible. The research team strongly believed that to facilitate student learning, and therefore enhance learning outcomes, it was necessary to provide the students with opportunities to develop their understanding and record their thinking. Kath Murdoch describes these journals as a way of recording, self-assessing and reflecting upon a learning journey (Murdoch, 2015 p186-187). As stated by Ritchhart, 'learning is a consequence of thinking' (Ritchhart, 2015 p31). Journals have been used to document and reflect learning and thinking in a range of different areas.

The primary aim of the action research project was to introduce students to a wide variety of tools, strategies, techniques and resources to assist them to make their thinking visible. The aim was to develop a learning environment that fostered thinking, encouraged creativity, and allowed opportunities for students to communicate their knowledge and ideas in a variety of ways. Teachers explicitly taught the thinking tools and provided opportunities for students to engage in these processes by embedding them in the regular classroom routines.

The teachers in the learning environments regularly used tools such as flat chats, wonderwalls, curiosity tables and jigsawing. Students have become familiar with each routine, and are beginning to develop the ability to know when and why a particular strategy is useful. They became proficient throughout the course of the year at communicating their ideas, acknowledging the ideas of others and collaborating to develop their understanding. Examples of flat chat routines used in Year 5 are seen in the images below.



Flat Chat Routine



Flat Chat Routine

The Robinson Learning Centre is a place where there are high levels of student agency, with both students and staff collaborating in the learning. There is a spontaneity to the learning experiences as they are responsive to student needs and interests. It is a learning community that extends beyond the four walls of the classroom, making connections to real world issues and ideas. The students are eager to share what they are learning, what they have enjoyed and what they find challenging. They are regularly asking why and wanting to investigate the answer.

DISCUSSION

The research team has found the action research project affirming. The actions that have been implemented have had a positive impact on students. The team has found that students are more responsive to new pedagogies. They are not hesitant to engage in a new style of task, but demonstrate greater confidence in their own abilities as learners.

The focus of the research question was to explore how these learner-centred pedagogies could enhance learning outcomes for students. The research team believes that the results from the students, the anecdotal observations made by the teachers, the analysis of work samples clearly show that there has been positive change for students. Students demonstrated an awareness of the habits, behaviours and dispositions they possess or need to focus on during particular learning experiences. Both students and teachers believe that these strategies have led to students having a greater understanding of themselves as learners, and this has been reflected in improved academic results. The learning experiences have allowed students to access content in different ways, catering for diverse learning needs and providing opportunities for consolidation of understanding.

CONCLUSION AND REFLECTION

It is hoped that the work this project began in 2017 will continue in 2018. The tools, strategies, protocols and techniques researched and implemented can be applied in more classrooms and learning areas in order to enhance the thinking, and learning, for students.

Entering the classrooms next year will be a new cohort of students, bringing with them varying levels of understanding of themselves as learners. They will have diverse experiences and learning needs as they enter the Robinson Centre learning spaces. Keeping in mind the words of Benjamin Franklin, the teachers will strive to 'involve' these students so that they learn. The positive results achieved through this research project will be the foundation upon which the learning community is built in future years.

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