

# 'Think like a kid': Engaging teachers to engage students

**School type** : Co-educational P-6

**Location** : Outer metropolitan

**Size** : 250-500 students

## ABSTRACT

This action research project aimed to expand staff understanding of student engagement in preparation for a long-term change to child-centred, personalised, learning that has proven effective in enhancing student engagement (SE). The motivation for change at this small Catholic primary school came from student engagement data indicating the students were bored. With research showing that students who lack cognitive challenge feel frustrated with their school experience and are at risk of disengaging, it was clearly time for change. For change to occur, teachers needed to understand the interconnection between the behavioural, emotional and cognitive components of student engagement – 'substantive' engagement. Through staff and student surveys, perceptions of SE were collected, with staff data revealing a strong recognition of the behavioural component of engagement, but less recognition of the emotional and cognitive components. A more in-depth study of best practice strategies followed. Taylor and Parson's (2011) six common strategies for improving SE were used to audit, implement and evaluate practices. A coordinated approach to professional learning incorporated a student engagement focus at all levels of the school, including a small group of Year 5/6 students. A staff blog proved invaluable in promoting professional dialogue and collecting data on growing understandings. In reviewing the action and data collected, the integrated approach seemed effective. Teacher knowledge of best practice strategies had increased and many of these strategies were evident in their inquiry units. ICT as a tool for SE was less well incorporated. This will need to be addressed in the next cycle. With a high learning confidence the students have a lot to share about how they want to be engaged. Letting them into the conversation is the next challenge. One of the students advised teachers to 'Think like a kid'. Is engagement as simple and as complicated as this?

## INTRODUCTION

*'The very first thing I'd say to a teacher is 'Think like a kid!' If a teacher is saying information in this complicated way then the kid's going to get bored. So you've got to make it into a fun way'* (Student from student focus group).

## Background

The connection between student engagement, student learning and student wellbeing is strongly supported in research. The Catholic Education Office Melbourne (CEOM) *Student Wellbeing Strategy's* (2009) main aim is 'to promote an optimal learning environment to support student engagement and learning outcomes' (p. 2). Bond et al. (2001) believe student wellbeing is enhanced by a focus on student engagement and connectedness to school – it is a 'way to promote both emotional wellbeing and learning outcomes' (p. 381). Student wellbeing, student engagement and student learning are 'inextricably linked' (DEECD, 2009, p. 5). Research has highlighted the negative effect boredom can have on emotional

## IMPORTANT INFORMATION

This project was undertaken in partial fulfillment the Master of Education (Student Wellbeing), Melbourne Graduate School of Education (MGSE) at the University of Melbourne. The project has been edited for online use and individuals and organisations have been de-identified for ethical reasons. CEOM and MGSE gratefully acknowledge the author for making the projects available.

wellbeing. It directly affects SE and connectedness to school (Bond et al., 2001, p. 379), and the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) (2011) warns that students in this situation are 'unlikely to direct maximum motivational energy into their unstimulating school work', and this disengagement is therefore a major challenge for schools (p. 4).

### School Context

This action research project was undertaken in a Catholic primary school situated in the north-eastern suburbs of Melbourne where there are many open spaces and parklands providing a wealth of recreational and environmental opportunities for our students. In 2011 the school had an enrolment of 297 children in 12 class groups, with a staff of 31 teachers and support personnel. The students are mainly Anglo-Saxon and many are from second generation European backgrounds, predominantly Italian. The parent community is supportive and eager to be involved in the life of the school. There is an historic church on site that provides easy links between the parish and the school community. The school has a higher than average socio-economic profile, with only a small percentage of families eligible for the Education Maintenance Allowance (approximately 5%).

Student academic achievement is high. NAPLAN data consistently demonstrates high levels of achievement in Literacy and Numeracy. Insight SRC data from 2009 & 2010 indicated a high level of satisfaction with student behaviour, and wellbeing data from the *Student Attitudes to School* survey showed low student distress and satisfactory student morale. The school, however, was challenged by data that revealed significant inconsistencies in the student engagement area. There was high *student motivation* and *learning confidence*, but a lower level of engagement through *purposeful teaching*, *stimulating learning* and *connectedness to school*. These last two areas had fallen from 2009. In delivering an analysis of our 2010 student engagement data, a school advisor told us, 'Your children are telling you they're bored'. This confronting interpretation of student data became a stimulus for change.

### Goals and Initial Aim

Based on the CEOM *Contemporary Learning Schema* (2009), our learning and teaching statement (2010) represented our vision. It states in part that 'we value the interests and experiences of each individual. We strive to provide a rich and relevant curriculum that is personalised and supported by explicit and scaffolded teaching'. Our vision helped to establish goals and to set a direction (Marcus, 2000).

#### Long-term goal:

- to improve SE through a whole-school approach to personalised learning.

#### Short-term goals:

- to expand our understanding of SE
- to develop common understanding of personalised learning and how it links to SE.

#### Initial Aim

The purpose of this student wellbeing project was to begin the process of what would be a far reaching set of cycles. The initial aim of the first cycle of the project was to gain a shared understanding of SE and personalised learning, including the close links between them.

#### Change Agent Role

In my dual role as Student Wellbeing Leader and Learning and Teaching Coordinator, continual reinforcement of the intrinsic link between student wellbeing, engagement and learning occurs daily. As part of the leadership team, my role is to help shape and adapt the curriculum in order to engage and challenge our highly able students. The reality of our student engagement (SE) data necessitated a re-evaluation of curriculum delivery, and prompted us to understand why our students were telling us they were bored.

## THE ACTION RESEARCH

### Developing a Strategy for Change

After some early research and consultation with a CEOM school advisor, it was decided that the school would introduce a *personalised* approach to learning. Personalised learning is equated with *student-centred learning* as an effective approach. It means ‘developing organisational and teaching strategies to ensure every child’s education is tailored to their needs so as to support higher levels of SE and attainment’ (DEECD, 2007, p. 3).

In 2011, SE was identified as a key area for improvement at the school. The Student Wellbeing sphere of the Annual Action Plan (AAP) provided the intended outcome: ‘That students feel connected and engaged through a personalised approach to learning’. The long-term research question became: Will a whole-school approach to personalised learning improve student engagement at our school?

Action Research is a ‘powerful tool for change’ (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 297). It is a self-reflective process that develops through small spirals of planning, acting, observing, reflecting and then re-planning. A key feature is its collaborative nature involving ‘self critical communities of people participating and collaborating in all phases of the research process’ (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 300).

### The Collaborative Group

Although this was a whole-school initiative, the Level 4 Professional Learning Team (PLT) was the main collaborative group for the project. The group consisted of the three Year 5/6 classroom teachers and the Deputy Principal/Literacy Coordinator, providing a balanced representation of leadership, wellbeing, curriculum and general classroom perspectives. A small group of Year 5/6s provided the student perspective. It was anticipated that our established PLT meeting structure would provide the forum to facilitate our exploration of SE.

### Cycles of Change

The research questions for the three-month timeframe of this project were:

- Cycle 1: What is SE? What does the research literature say about the best ways for improving SE? How does this compare with what is currently being done in our classrooms?
- Cycle 2: Will a coordinated approach to professional learning (PL) expand staff understanding of SE?

### What is Student Engagement?

Student engagement has a number of connotations. Taylor and Parsons’ (2011) review of the literature revealed many types of engagement: ‘academic, cognitive, intellectual, institutional, emotional, behavioral, social, and psychological to name a few’ (p. 4). They concluded that the literature ‘did not agree upon a definition of what *student engagement* might be’ (p. 4). This is because engagement is multifaceted, according to Fullarton (2002), who defines it as twofold: engagement with learning and engagement with the school community (p. 2). DEST (2011) states ‘Engagement describes energy in action, the connection between person and activity’. DEST distinguishes three forms of engagement: behavioural, emotional and cognitive (p. 2). This multifaceted nature of engagement is well supported in the literature (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 60). The three interconnected components can be described as:

- Behavioural engagement – ‘students’ participation in education, including the academic, social and extracurricular activities of the school’.
- Emotional engagement – ‘students’ emotional reactions in the classroom and in the school. It can be defined as students’ sense of belonging or connectedness to the school’.
- Cognitive engagement – ‘students’ investment in learning and their intrinsic motivation and self regulation’ (DEECD, 2009, p. 7).

Csikszentmihályi’s (1990, cited in DECS, 2010, p. 1) view of engagement as ‘being in the flow’, became a focal point as the project progressed. He sees optimal engagement as ‘a state of total

involvement where one is completely immersed in what one is doing'. In this state people are totally engaged and fulfilled. 'Sometime students note they are *in a zone*'. During such times, concerns like time, food and behaviour are typically forgotten (Taylor and Parsons, 2011, p. 20).

### Ways of Enhancing Student Engagement

Recently, the focus in SE has moved from a deficit approach to the disengaged learner, to one examining the elements that keep students engaged. While previously SE was about 'reshaping' disengaged students, current work is about 'revisioning schools to fit the learning needs of students' (Taylor & Parsons, 2011, p. 2). This perspective 'reflects the current drive to tailor schooling to individual need, interest and aptitude, so making it increasingly personalised' (Hopkins & Craig, 2011, p. 12).

The effectiveness of personalised learning in improving 'student engagement with and responsibility for learning' (Black, 2007, cited in DEECD, 2007, p. 36) is supported by research. Although explanations of personalised learning differ, there appear to be some common themes: learners are central; information and communications technology (ICT) is a key enabler; there is a commitment to lifelong learning; and communities of collaboration are promoted (DEECD, 2007, p. 2). Significantly, these themes reverberate in Taylor and Parsons' (2011) synthesis of the literature on SE. They found six common strategies that advance SE:

- embedded collaboration
- inquiry-based learning (IBL)
- relevancy
- integrated technology (IT)
- engaging and challenging instruction
- assessment for learning (p. 7 & 25).

These six strategies framed the audit, implementation and evaluation of our practices for effective SE.

### Action Cycle 1

The process of change began earlier in 2011 with the employment of an education consultant to provide staff professional learning in IBL. The brief was to deliver the concept of personalised learning through a refocus on the school's inquiry-based units of work. In alignment with evidence suggesting wellbeing and engagement are significantly influenced by the amount of agency and voice students have within their own learning (Freeman & Black, 2011, February 19th, slide 68), the consultant was committed to negotiating the curriculum with students.

Previous data collected using the IBL Audit Tool (CEOM, 2009 & 2010), indicated that staff were not confident with the terminology and practice of inquiry-based learning. The consultant, therefore, held a whole-school professional learning day to deepen our understanding of the inquiry process. Throughout the year the consultant worked with staff to develop units of work that increasingly allow for student voice, and later worked with the teams to plan our Term 3 units with a whole-school focus on 'sustainability'. These units would be a vehicle for our exploration of student engagement.

During this cycle, I intended to work with a group of Year 5/6s on establishing a student blog. It would demonstrate one way of engaging students through IT. To prepare for action I used the website *Integrating Technology in the Primary Classroom* (Morris, 2011) to research blogging and its use in the classroom. With the support offered on the website I trialed blogging by setting up a staff blog during the mid-year holidays and, towards the end of the holidays, I sent an email to staff, informing them of the blog. The first post *Welcome to our Staff Sustainability Blog* reminded staff about the forthcoming project and asked for comments. Surprisingly, 11 staff responded before we had even returned to school. I was beginning to understand the potential of blogging for *staff* engagement.

During the first staff meeting of Term 3, 2011, time was allocated to explain the project and link it to the Student Wellbeing outcome of our AAP. Strategically, this reassured staff that the project was not an added extra, but an extension of our existing PL and was embedded in our school improvement plan.

**Method**

The method of data collection to inform this cycle was formulated during a collaborative group meeting in July 2011. The principal wanted a review of the specialist subjects for the next year and was planning to survey the students on their enjoyment of these subjects. There was a clear link between the action research project and this data. We discussed the most effective way to gather student data on SE and what components of engagement would be measured? Did *enjoyment* equate with *engagement*? Fredricks et al. (2004) believe it is the multifaceted aspect of engagement that ‘leads to the challenge of defining and studying each and their combination in conceptually nuanced ways’ (p. 83). We agreed that enjoyment might indicate a certain degree of engagement and decided to use the former in the student survey. This seems supported by Eccles et al. (1983, cited in Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 63) who describe four components of emotional engagement, one of which is ‘enjoyment of the activity’. Other components of engagement would be explored through a student focus group.

Additionally, quantitative and qualitative data would be gathered from other stakeholders, and staff would be surveyed on how they currently viewed SE. The principal was already planning a parent forum to elicit views on the specialist subjects, and suggested this would be the perfect opportunity to gain the parent perspective on SE.

**Staff Survey**

To provide quantitative data about staff understandings of SE and personalised learning, a simple staff survey was devised using the following open-ended statements and questions:

- Student Engagement is:
- Personalised learning is:
- How do you personalise learning for your students?

The survey was distributed and collected at a whole staff meeting devoted to the action research project (9 August 2011). As part of informing staff on SE,

I presented a PowerPoint entitled *Personalising Learning to Enhance SE – Setting the Scene*. The presentation:

- reinforced why we were undertaking this school improvement – stressing the link to our SE data and the AAP
- placed the project within the context of student wellbeing
- explored the varied definitions of SE
- used the reading *Improving SE* (Taylor& Parsons, 2011) to discover ‘best practice’ for SE (through a jigsaw activity).

The jigsaw activity had produced a thorough summary of the six common strategies (6CS) for improving SE. These were collated into a table for future reference at staff meetings and laminated to display in the staff planning area for optimum impact.

**Student Survey**

To provide quantitative data on the subjects that were engaging our students, different subject areas were listed with a ‘Likert-type’ scale (Mertler, 2006, p. 105):

Please circle the number to show how much you enjoy each school subject

Italian

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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Not at all

50/50

I love it!

This survey was administered to students in Years 3 to 6.

**Initial Staff Data**

Data from the initial staff survey was collated and presented to members of the collaborative group (Table 1). Discussion about the responses to the question, *What is SE?* proved significant in determining the next step in our action research.

Table 1 Most Common Responses to 'What is SE?'		
Engagement	Staff responses	%
Behavioural	Participation/Involvement	60%
	Attentiveness/Focus	15%
Emotional	Interest	40%
	Having fun	15%
	Enthusiasm	10%
Cognitive	Questioning	20%
	Motivation	15%
Other	Teacher providing/doing	25%
	Catering for different learning styles	20%
	Flow state	10%

- Staff responses identified elements of all three forms of engagement. The majority of feedback centred on the behavioural aspect of SE: 12 out of the 20 teachers surveyed (60%) specifically mentioned students' *participation* and *involvement* in an activity. 40% recognised the *interest* needed for emotional engagement, and 20% viewed engagement as students responding to and asking questions, thus recognising cognitive engagement.
- Interestingly, the data revealed descriptions of SE as what the *teacher* needed to do or provide: 'Creating an environment where students participate and contribute wholeheartedly.'  
'Providing a learning environment that values the learner.'  
'Provides a safe learning environment.'
- The multifaceted aspect of engagement was evident in a single response: 'being engaged at many different levels'.

The collaborative group discussed the different perceptions of engagement. We speculated about the compliance of our student body and whether *participating* and being on task suggested to some teachers that our students were fully *engaged*. Some staff views of engagement could be categorised as procedural, defined as: 'when students are complying with teachers' wishes and instructions, regardless of the nature and quality of the classroom learning experiences. This level of engagement does not necessarily mean that the students are enjoying what they are doing or getting any educational benefit. They are just on task' (Munns & Woodward, 2006, p. 1). A deeper and more valuable level of engagement is *substantive* engagement. This is the multifaceted aspect of engagement described as the 'coming together of the cognitive, the affective and the operative at high levels' (p.1).

Data collected from staff responses to 'How do you engage your students?' (Table 2) was collated using the 6CS as a frame (Taylor and Parsons, 2011).

Six common strategies (6CS)	Staff responses	%
Interaction	Positive teacher–student relationships	40%
	Interaction among learners	40%
	Allow choice	15%
Exploration (IBL)	Hands-on activities	20%
	Discovery	10%
Relevancy	Connected to interests/real life	25%
	Open-ended tasks	15%
Integrated Technology	Use of ICT	15%
Engaging & Challenging Instruction	Challenging	30%
	Variety	20%
Assessment for Learning	Formative assessment	25%
	Success	15%

- It was encouraging to see the number of responses that identified some element of *Interaction* as a strategy for SE. 40% of responses indicated *positive teacher–student relationships* and *interaction* among peers as important for engaging learners.
- *Engaging and challenging instruction* was recognised with 30% of responses specifically listing *challenge* and 20% indicating *variety* in instruction techniques as important.
- *Relevancy* as *connecting to students' interests or real life* was identified by 25% of respondents.
- *Formative assessment* was recognised by 25% of teachers.
- Significantly, only 15% of responses identified the use of IT as a means of engaging students. IBL as a strategy was not mentioned.

As a result of these findings, the collaborative group elected to spend time exploring our understanding of substantive engagement in the classroom, the rationale being that to improve SE we needed to understand the difference between procedural and substantive engagement and to explore the strategies that would improve this deeper level of engagement. It was hoped that the impetus for adopting personalised learning would naturally flow from this depth of understanding. The Numeracy and Literacy Coordinators suggested that they could integrate the exploration of the engagement strategies into their PLT sessions. We decided to trial a more focused, coordinated approach in our delivery of PL.

At this stage the group drew a large spiral on paper and started to map the action research cycles, including the revised plan (see Figure 1). The team was taking ownership – it was starting to feel like our project rather than a solo undertaking.

### Revised Plan

Staff data from the question 'What is personalised learning?' revealed a lack of clarity and common understanding; however, it was decided to put this aside and to use it to inform our next cycle.

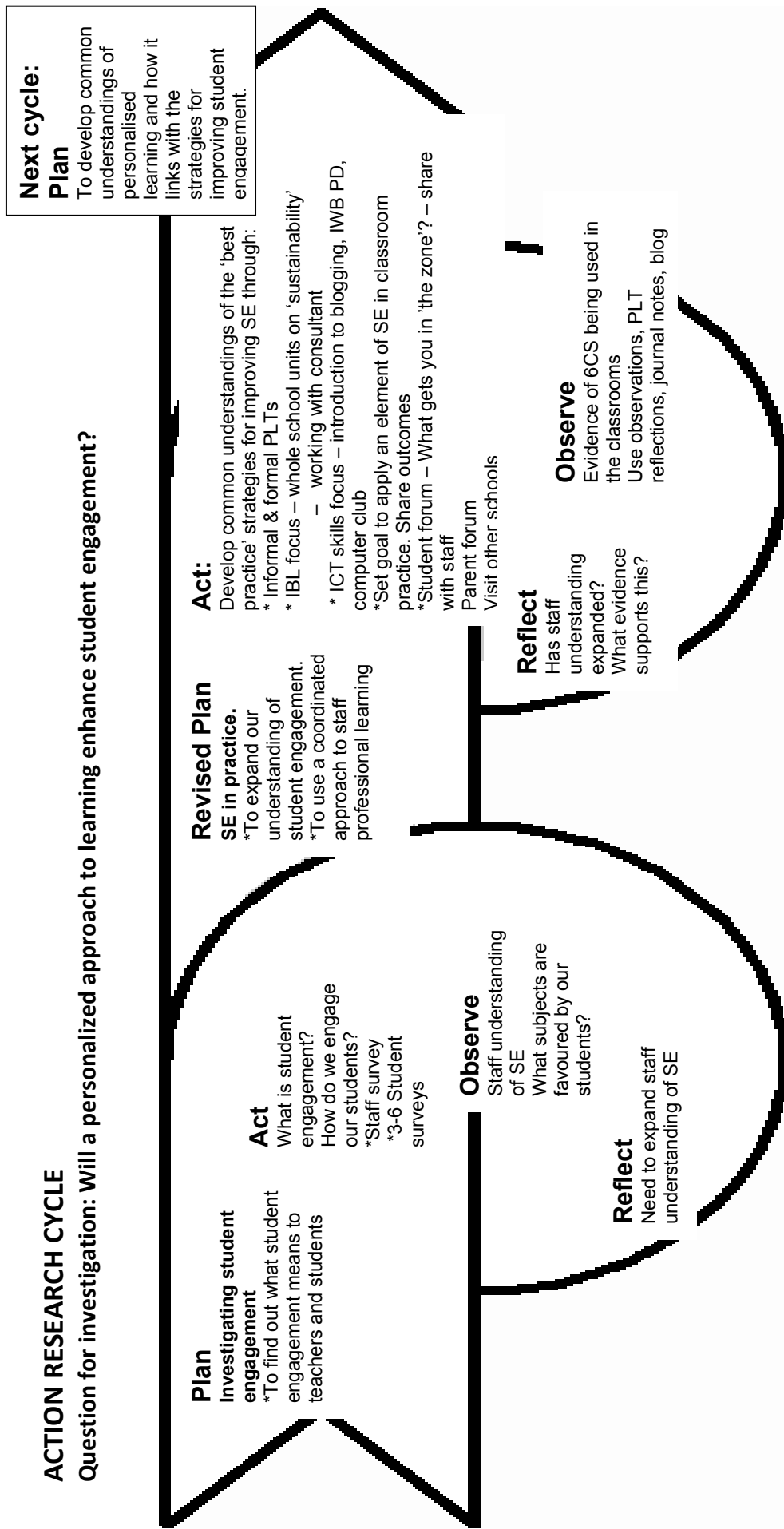


Figure 1 : Action Research Cycle



## Initial student data

Initial student data revealed the subjects that were enjoyed by our students. The results were collated and graphed as depicted in Figure 2.

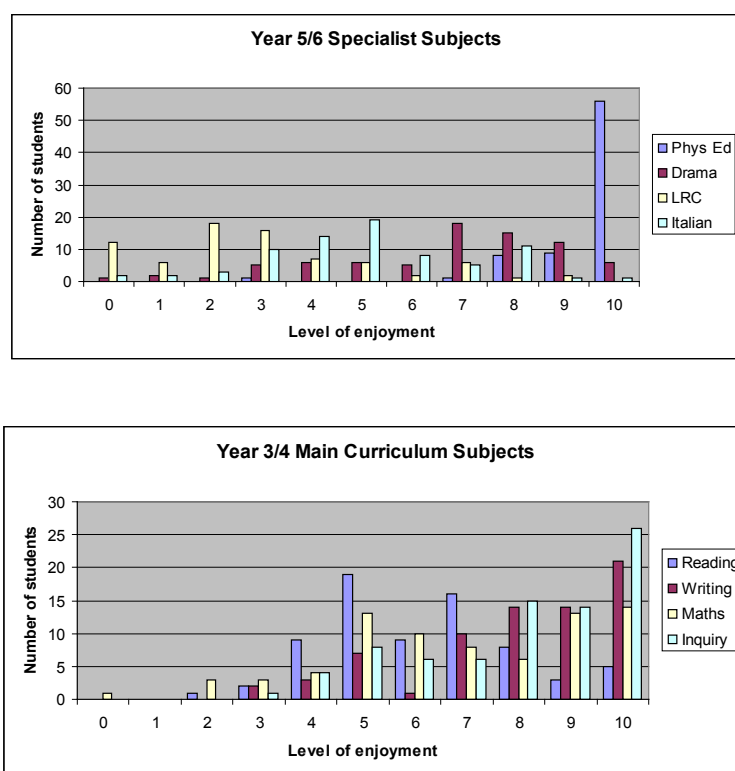


Figure 2. Examples of data compiled from the initial student survey.

This data allows numerous comparisons between subjects, levels and grades. This gave the principal information sought regarding the specialist subjects. For the purpose of this project there were some significant findings.

- Across the levels, students have an extremely high preference for Physical Education: 59% of Year 3/4s and 75% of Year 5/6s ranked this subject as a 10 (the highest score).
- Art also ranked highly: 64% of 3/4s and 37% of 5/6s rated it 10.
- Out of the main curriculum areas Writing stood out as a favoured subject: 80% of 3/4s and 64% of 5/6s ranked it 7 or above.
- IBL was ranked highly by the 3/4s: 83% rated it 7 or above, while the 5/6s were less enthusiastic, with 61% ranking it 7 or above.
- ICT was another preferred subject: 83% of 3/4s and 68% of 5/6s ranked it 7 or above. It is interesting to note two of the Year 5/6s' written responses. Their ICT scales were unmarked and they'd written 'we don't do it' on the line.
- The differences in *levels of enjoyment* between the 3/4s and the 5/6s were apparent. Apart from Physical Education the 3/4s' levels were much higher than the 5/6s in all subject areas. The factors underlying this needed further investigation.

## Action Cycle 2

Teachers, as leaders of change, are the key to improvement (Duignan & Bezzina, 2006, p. 13). Professional learning, therefore, is 'at the heart of educational change' (Stoll, 1999, p. 522). In this next cycle we were aiming to deepen staff understanding of SE using a coordinated approach in PL. It was anticipated that by exploring best practice SE strategies, motivation to change would be established. Increasing staff understanding and involving them in the planning and implementation of this change was imperative (Marcus, 2000, p. 374).

### Whole Staff Professional Learning

Actions included a number of whole staff meetings with SE as a focus:

1. Assessment – student portfolios (16 August, 2011). During this meeting I was able to use the staff's 6CS summary to highlight authentic assessment as a strategy for SE.
2. Literacy (17 August 2011). The Literacy Coordinator spent time connecting literacy and SE. An excerpt describing the new *literacies* required to engage 21st century learners was used as a reflection and to guide a short discussion (Taylor & Parsons, 2011, pp. 20–21).
3. ICT (30 August 2011). The 6CS summary was used to refocus attention on IT and SE. The benefits of blogging were shared with staff.
4. Numeracy (31 August 2011). The 6CS were used to stimulate discussion on the importance of Exploration in Maths (Taylor and Parsons, 2011, p. 11). A brainstorming activity – *What does SE look like in Maths?* revealed many recently emphasised SE strategies. One brainstorm identified engagement as being '*in the zone – the flow*' – even attempting the spelling of Csíkszentmihályi! Teachers were 'talking the talk'!

### 'Off-site' Professional Learning

In September, to add to our professional learning about student engagement, two members of the collaborative group and I visited a local primary school where staff had transformed their whole approach to establish more personalised learning and teaching. We were impressed with the innovative design of their learning spaces, their collaborative planning and teaching, and their efficient timetabling system. We took many exciting ideas about personalised learning back to school.

One of the most significant actions in relation to reaching our long-term goals was our invitation to participate in the CEOM Leading for Contemporary Learning Project. This is a three-year project to develop leadership capacity for curriculum development for the 21st century (CEOM, 2009). Our small team participated in the first two PL days for the project in August 2011. The project required the implementation of a key improvement initiative using an action research model. It was strategic to continue with this student wellbeing project.

### Level PLTs

As Learning and Teaching Coordinator I have access to all level PLTs during their weekly planning time. This was a facilitating factor in keeping SE at the fore. The Level 4 PLT inquiry unit was centred on building a sustainable garden at the back of our school. It was authentic SE in action that allowed for much student choice and voice for the Year 5/6s. While the teachers were excited about this unit, they did admit to being daunted by the prospect of letting go. We agreed that during weekly planning time we would support each other to develop the unit. Maximising engagement through student voice was our goal. The unit's progress would be shared at staff level.

### Student voice in Professional Learning

According to interest, students were grouped to work on various aspects of establishing the garden. The Bloggers (my target group) were tracking the progress of the garden and the learning taking place throughout the school. A parent letter had been sent home explaining the project and seeking permission for participation; however, there were some major hurdles in establishing their blog – our contracts for acceptable Internet use and photo permission forms were inadequate for our leap into the blogosphere and required review. Despite this, the students continued researching other student blogs and writing blogging guidelines for whole-school use. I was impressed by their collaboration and independence. They achieved so much without my constant supervision, although juggling their busy timetable with my commitments was a constant battle. The use of this smaller target group allowed for ease in collecting data through observations, informal interviews and anecdotal records. Quantitative data was also gathered during a focus group with The Bloggers. Towards the end of term responses were videoed and common themes were identified.

Guiding questions for the student focus group.

*What does being 'in the zone' mean?*

*Tell us about a time when you were 'in the zone'?*

*How did you feel?*

*Tell us about a time when you have been 'in the zone' at school.*

*What were you doing?*

*What was the teacher doing?*

*If you were going to tell a new teacher how to get kids 'in the zone' what would you tell them to do?*

Nine students took part in the focus group.

- When describing what being 'in the zone' means three main themes emerged: 'concentration' (6 respondents), 'having fun' (4 respondents) and 'being interested' (3 respondents)
- Significantly, when asked what gets them 'in the zone', 7 out of the 9 students responded with some form of sporting activity. Having a 'competition' (3 respondents), 'going outside' (2 respondents) and 'writing' (6 respondents) were also mentioned.
- The advice the students would give a new teacher on how to get 'in the zone' was revealing. The teacher's use of a variety of strategies seemed important: 'Say in maths, do it in different ways each time to get the answer to get them happy and want to do it more – because if you do things the same way every day you get bored of it.'
- Two students spoke about the teacher's attitude in relation to engagement:
  - 'Maybe teachers could be a little more enthusiastic in certain subjects. If a teacher has had a really hard morning just put it to the side and be more enthusiastic and maybe the class will be more into it – and in the zone.'
  - 'I would tell the new teacher don't do it in a droning voice, just do it in a happy way, they will want to learn more – if you do it in a boring way they won't really listen.'

### **Blogging and Professional Learning**

As the project has progressed, I became increasingly aware of the potential of blogging for engaging staff in professional discourse. Ray and Hocutt (2006, as cited in Albion, 2009, p. 17) found that 'blogs promoted reflective practice and collaboration and social interaction among users'.

My original intention was to have the The Bloggers demonstrate Web 2.0 tools and to show how they might be used in the classroom. The staff blog was merely intended for practice in establishing a blog and the exploration of features. Yet the staff blog has become the focus. It has been a very positive unplanned element of the project. Blog comments have provided an invaluable source of data, revealing staff's growth in understanding of SE.

Early in the project, as teachers began to interact with the blog I decided to change the purpose. I wanted to explore the blog's potential in extending our PL. My revised aims for the blog were:

- to keep SE on the agenda
- to model Web 2.0 tools
- to provide a virtual space in which teachers could share what was happening in their classrooms and provide feedback to their peers.

In keeping with the changed focus, the subsequent post was entitled Celebrating PLTs. The slideshow maker PhotoPeach was used to reinforce the collaboration emerging in our PLTs. To

reinforce the power of peer coaching, I included photos of a demonstration lesson the Numeracy Coordinator had conducted with the Prep team.

- 2 comments on the post and 8 more at the end of the slideshow indicated positive staff interaction with this post: 'Love the slideshow! It really captures all the aspects of that demo so well. Thanks again for a great job.' 'Wow! How impressive .... Just an ordinary week ... but how extraordinary! Well done everybody!!'
- The terminology associated with SE was evident in this comment: 'A reminder of all the great things happening every day. :-) Well done! Looked like an engaging, interactive and fun maths session.'

The following week I was able to showcase a PhotoPeach presentation by one of the Year 3/4 teachers. She had used my previous week's demonstration to create her own display of student learning.

- 3 comments on the post and 8 teacher comments on the slideshow further indicated staff positive interaction and peer feedback.
  - 'That's fantastic, I'm VERY impressed.'
  - 'Great work! Very clever idea.'
  - 'Wow how impressive! I can't wait to learn how to do this too.'
- Other staff comments indicated willingness to trial the tools:
  - 'This is fantastic! I am loving the new format. :-) I'll have a good look around it more later today. I definitely want to try out lots of the tools you have added here.'
  - 'Can't wait to try WORDLE next week during literacy. What a great way to reinforce our key vocab from our Inquiry. Thanks for the idea '
  - 'Thanks for introducing me to a new toy – WORDLE! Love it you should all have a go.'

The blog posts for the next few weeks reflected the PL we were undertaking on SE. I used extracts from the SE literature to introduce some of these posts. At the end of each post a prompt was used to invite staff to comment. Teachers began to share some of their inquiry strategies with engagement appearing in their discourse:

'We have been doing some great tuning in activities/tools to begin planning our learning and formulating questions for our Inquiry. We started with a Y CHART (think, see, wonder) using sustainability images in a carousel activity. We then highlighted words we thought would relate to an Inquiry we could study, based on sustainability. These words were listed on the Inquiry Word Wall and we came up with our Inquiry question, "Why do we need to use energy in a sustainable way?" Next we worked as a class to come up with 5 Whys?? So far the children are engaged and seem to be enjoying the learning!'

'Everyone is doing such a fabulous job with their inquiry. I am really blown away with the level of engagement from the students at our school. Nadine will be so impressed. Congrats everyone!'

The counter placed on the blog indicated that staff were visiting regularly. By the end of term the number of visitors to the site had been 178, with 64 comments – on posts or directly on Web 2.0 tools. 16 of our school's 23 teaching staff had left at least one comment.

### **Evaluation of IBL**

The evaluation of our IBL units of work occurred during a whole staff meeting where we gathered data on the staff's current understanding of SE and IBL. Three questions guided staff in their reflections on the engagement strategies incorporated into their inquiries.

Use the '6 common strategies for improving SE' summary to evaluate your Term 3 unit.

- What elements of SE were well incorporated into your unit?
- What elements were less well incorporated/missing?
- What discoveries will you take into planning your next inquiry unit?

The evaluations revealed staff awareness of all six common strategies. Even though the summary sheet would have assisted in this awareness, many responses suggest a deepening understanding.

- As in the initial staff data, there was a high recognition of 'Interaction' for SE. This time student choice and voice were more evident:
  - 'Relationships between teacher and student more fluid – they were the experts, we were more facilitators – not leading but assisting students on their discoveries.'
  - 'Teacher and students were actively constructing learning in partnership.'
  - One teacher recognised the need to do more in this area:
    - 'Felt it was a little too directed by us.'
- Another common theme acknowledged how connected the inquires were to real life:
  - 'Very relevant – Real life!! Real people!! Real outcomes!!'
  - 'They could all see the impact they were making.'
- The discoveries teachers would take into the next units were significant:
  - 'The importance of allowing the students to connect to the outside world (letting go for the teachers).'
  - 'Really showed how valuable real life outcomes are. Our garden provided this opportunity perfectly as in retrospect in other inquiries these experiences feel a little manufactured.'
- The data indicated a lack of integration of ICT: 7 out of the 10 respondents listed this as an element that was less well incorporated into their units.

### Walking and Talking SE

To solidify understanding of the inquiry process, the consultant had recommended mapping the inquiry stages on the classroom walls to make the process explicit to students. A Walk and Talk activity, to share these inquiry walls, was conducted during the IBL evaluation meeting. A blog post entitled Walking and Talking SE was posted the following day. The interaction with this post was affirming: 2 teachers commented directly on the slideshow and 9 commented on the post.

- The terminology of SE was evident in many responses:
  - 'The learning taking place is clearly evident from the walk and talk we did the other day. This term's whole school approach to Inquiry was so successful I think the students will be talking about it for many years to come ... especially as their actions are so significant to the school as well as on a global perspective. I know the 1/2s are sooo excited about next week!'

'Yes the 3Rs were alive and well in Term 3. The children were engaged in relevant content. They were engaged in rigorous activity and they have been actively engaged in developing relationships beyond the classroom. From a literacy perspective this approach to teaching provides the opportunity to develop rich language experiences.'

- Recognition of the improvement in our understanding was also evident in a number of responses:
  - 'Great presentation. I do feel a lot more confident about the Inquiry process (still learning a lot though) and I'm proud of the 3/4 wall, especially as compared with last term. O! I love the idea of selecting samples of the student's work to display along the process. It makes the Inquiry that much more student focused. What clever, enthusiastic students AND teachers we have!'

'What a terrific job we are all doing in our classrooms with what Inquiry should look like and be like. I think we have all come a long way with our own learning and understanding about the Inquiry Process. The walls are just a small part of what we are doing in our classrooms. The children are so much more ENGAGED with the broad range of interactive activities and rich

tasks we set for them. Well done everyone!’

### **Summary of Findings**

The first two small cycles in this action research project have only begun the change process at our school. They have provided baseline data and prepared the teachers for the long-term change. Analysis of the data suggests that the project’s short-term goal of expanding staff understanding of SE has been achieved. Initial staff data revealed a lack of understanding of substantive engagement and suggested that there were some best practice strategies for SE that staff did not acknowledge, with IT and IBL the most obvious. Staff data collected over time indicated a deepening understanding of the strategies for improving SE, and, of note, inquiry unit outcomes show IBL is endorsed as an effective strategy. However, while IT is acknowledged as an effective strategy, there seems to be a lack of confidence in staff’s ability to deliver. There is a general consensus that PL is necessary in this area.

A coordinated approach to PL seems effective for engaging teachers, as was staff blogging. Having the common goal of expanding staff understanding of SE allowed the connections between subjects, content and skills to flow naturally. Our goal was achieved and anecdotally the integrated approach seemed well received by staff. Our next cycle will involve exploring the meaning of personalised learning and how it links with SE.

Evident in the student data are a number of considerations for future planning. Firstly, there are higher levels of enjoyment in Year 3/4 compared with Year 5/6; secondly, Physical Education and Writing were strongly favoured across both levels; thirdly, the Writing confidence of our students is certainly something to celebrate, but exploring how we stimulate and extend this is an important consideration; and finally, students indicate sport, being outdoors and competition as important for their engagement.

If we are to develop active, capable students who are fully engaged in learning, we must invite them into the teaching and learning conversation (Murdoch & Le Mescam, 2006), and make a shift from didactic to constructivist pedagogy requiring a move from teacher as expert towards peer-based collaborative learning. The student’s advice to ‘think like a kid’ is powerful in its simplicity.

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