

It takes a village to educate a child: LLV's evolving story of building innovation in a context of constraint

Ci vuole un villaggio per educare un bambino: la storia in evoluzione di LLV per costruire innovazione in un contesto di costruzione

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ABSTRACT

Lindfield Learning Village in Sydney, Australia, is an innovative K-12 public school challenging traditional educational approaches and demonstrating excellence in practice and outcomes. Its unique educational model, based on stage-not-age, student-centered and authentic real-world transdisciplinary learning has attracted widespread interest with waitlists of up to 2,500 students. Characterized by its innovative learning environments and diverse suite of shared spaces, the school is configured as a cross-stage hub model to optimize opportunities for all students and staff to develop meaningful relationships in smaller cohorts as-well-as enable stage-based learning. Since opening in 2019, the school has continually piloted and evolved its pedagogical practices and learning spaces. This paper discusses the process of creating the school's vision and educational model, and key steps in implementing a process of pedagogical transformation to enable the school as it is today.

SINTESI

Il *Lindfield Learning Village* a Sydney, in Australia, è un'innovativa scuola pubblica K-12 che sfida gli approcci educativi tradizionali e dimostra l'eccellenza nella pratica e nei risultati. Il suo modello educativo unico, basato sull'apprendimento transdisciplinare del mondo reale senza distinzione di età, incentrato sullo studente e autentico, ha suscitato un interesse diffuso con liste d'attesa fino a 2.500 studenti. Caratterizzata dai suoi ambienti di apprendimento innovativi e dalla *suite* diversificata di spazi condivisi, la scuola è configurata come un modello di *hub* a più stadi per ottimizzare le opportunità per tutti gli studenti e consentire al personale di sviluppare relazioni significative in gruppi più piccoli e con apprendimento basato sullo *stage*. Dall'apertura nel 2019, la scuola ha continuamente sperimentato e sviluppato le sue pratiche pedagogiche e gli spazi di apprendimento. Questo articolo discute il processo di creazione della visione e del modello educativo della scuola e i passaggi chiave nell'attuazione di un processo di trasformazione pedagogica per rendere la scuola come è oggi.

KEYWORDS: innovative learning spaces, student-centered learning, transdisciplinary learning, learning hubs, stage not age

PAROLE CHIAVE: spazi di apprendimento innovativi, apprendimento incentrato sullo studente, apprendimento transdisciplinare, centri di apprendimento, *stage not age*

Introduction¹

Lindfield Learning Village (LLV) in Sydney, Australia, is a progressive K-12 public school challenging traditional educational approaches and demonstrating excellence in practice and outcomes. The school has attracted widespread interest for its innovative approach to learning and is profiled in the 2020 Australian documentary “New School”².

Designed to accommodate 2000 students, the school is configured as a cross-stage hub model to optimize opportunities for all students and staff to develop meaningful relationships in smaller cohorts as-well-as enable stage-based learning. Since opening in 2019, the school has continually piloted and evolved its pedagogical practices and learning spaces. Whilst there have been waitlists of up to 2,500 students, there are currently 730 students at the school with incremental growth of 200 additional enrollments per year until capacity is reached.

In telling the story of LLV, its pedagogy and its spaces, we need to step back eight years to understand how the vision for the school was created. Even earlier, a critical part of the LLV story is of the iconic neo-brutalist building which houses the school and dates to the 1960s. This paper will discuss the rich history of the LLV building and site, the process of creating the school’s vision and educational model, and key steps in implementing a process of pedagogical transformation to enable the school as it is today.

1. A village for learning innovation

Located 20 minutes from the Sydney CBD, the LLV site is located on the fringe of the Ku-ring-gai national park. The site is recognized for its long history bridging architecture and education, with the original building, the William Balmain Teachers College, which opened in 1971. The building was recognized for its excellence in design, winning the prestigious New South Wales (NSW) Australian Institute of Architects (AIA) Sulman Prize for Public Architecture in 1978. It became Ku-ring-gai College of Advanced Education in 1974 and later, part of University of Technology Sydney in 1990. In 2014 the NSW Department of Education (DoE) acquired the site and began the process of developing a new school.

Knowing the natural beauty and indigenous heritage of the site, David Turner, the original Architect and Bruce MacKenzie, the Landscape Architect, sited the building around natural landmarks of Aboriginal significance. Turner was inspired by the idea of an Italian village on top of a hill, resulting in a meandering wide

¹ The authors would like to acknowledge the significant work of Sue Low, former Director Educational Leadership NSW Department of Education, who led the LLV project from 2014 through to the school’s second year of operation. Her passion, strength and wisdom ensured that the vision was never compromised.

² “New School” is an education-architecture documentary which presents the challenges of 21st century education and explores the importance of design in generating productive responses. (<https://vimeo.com/ondemand/newschool>).

circulatory route through the center of the school effectively serving as a “main street” (Figure 1). The building’s original suite of diverse spaces and the notion of a learning village inspired much of the development of this school.



FIGURE 1 – LEVEL 5 “BROADWAY”, A KEY CIRCULATORY ROUTE OF LLV³

The original purpose of developing a school on this site was to provide more accommodation for students on the North Shore of Sydney. A needs analysis prepared by the Department of Education based on current and projected demographic data in relation to the demand for school places showed that Primary and Secondary schools in the area were at or near capacity. As the site had previously been used for educational purposes and was of a very high standard in terms of space, structural condition, and architectural design, it was well suited to be repurposed as a school.

The structure of the existing building, with its wide array of spaces and connections to the outdoors, opened opportunities for broader thinking around more flexible learning environments than singular classrooms designed for one teacher and 24-30 students. The existing mix of co-located spaces for small groups, class groups, large groups and individual workspaces provided an opportunity to think about what learning could look like within those spaces. The existing building effectively acted as a prompt and enabler to push boundaries and rethink a whole approach to education, putting students at the center of the learning.

³ Photographer: Tyrone Branigan. Architect: DesignInc with Lacoste+Stevenson.

Although still needing to consider the constraints of the current education system, it was an opportunity for bold thinking to shift the mindsets of the future school community towards future and global thinking. While providing extra spaces for students in the North Shore may have been a driver for the project, it was also an exciting and challenging opportunity to think about space and learning in new ways.

2. Creating a collective vision

Although there was aspiration for an innovative school, what type of school it could be was unknown. Therefore, it was necessary to explore the educational model that would fit the existing building and the community who it would serve. The development of LLV's educational model and original business case took place in 2014.

From the outset, collaboration was central to the design process. This process was led by a steering committee composed of the school network Education Director, local school Principals, a representative of DoE facilities, and a parent representative. They were supported by an educational architect, a local education specialist and Professor Stephen Heppell, a global educational specialist, researcher, and thinker. This brought a valuable evidence base to the project, drawing together the latest research and thinking from around the world to help inform possibilities for the learning model and structure for the new school.

2.1. Guiding principles

Early in the process, the team met with the original Architect and Landscape Architect to learn about the vision and design approach for the building and site. This was a significant moment for the team, embedding deep understandings of the history and culture upon which they would later build. A series of foundational learning, building and site principles were then agreed upon which informed the consultation strategy and the development of the educational model (Figure 2).

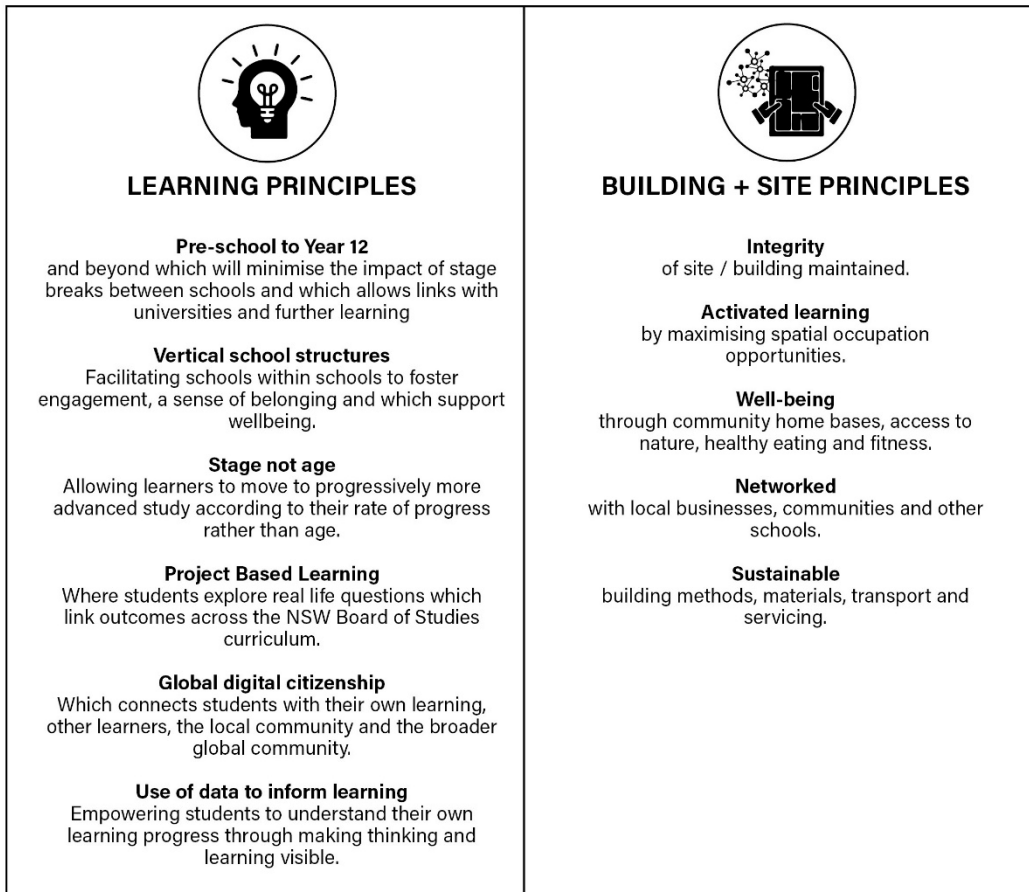


FIGURE 2 – LEARNING, BUILDING AND SITE PRINCIPLES FOR LLV

2.2. Involving community

A clear, transparent and inclusive engagement strategy was developed around three-tiers comprising immediate neighboring households, local schools and Council, and educators and the broader metropolitan Sydney community. Over a five-week period, a series of physical and virtual events took place targeting each of these spheres (Figure 3).

Physical strategies included letterbox drops in the local area to inform neighbors of a morning tea and tour of the site; an evening public lecture by Professor Stephen Heppell; and a series of workshops for teachers, students, parents, and community exploring the possibilities of what the new school could be. Through these events, the latest research in education and global exemplars were shared, discussed, and debated.

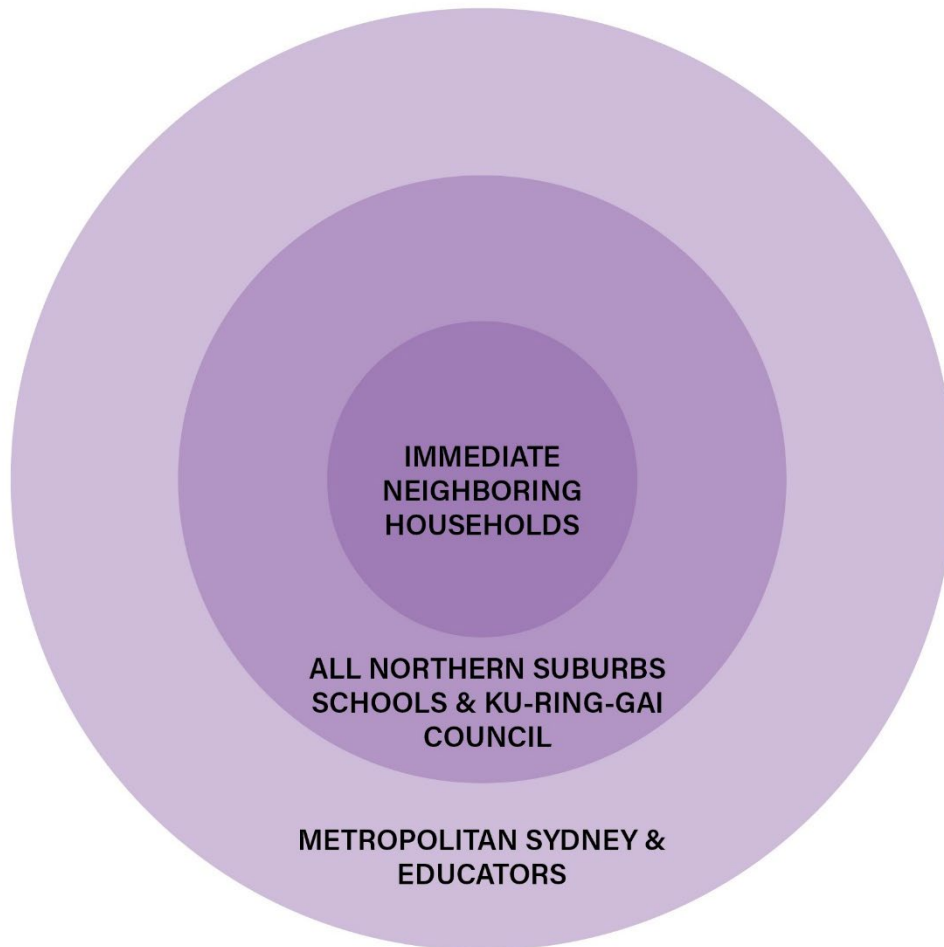


FIGURE 3 – THE LLV COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

Supplementing face-to-face events was the use of digital platforms, including MindMixer, a virtual community consultation platform. Facebook and Twitter were used to support communications and messaging. This allowed a wide range of people to further engage in dialogue around the future of education and provide feedback on the educational model being developed. Importantly, it allowed the project team to respond to queries and contribute to discussions, ensuring that participants were heard. Key topics framed on the consultation platform included:

- reflections on current schooling;
- rating the importance of educational concepts such as P-12 schooling, vertical school structures, stage-not-age learning, project-based learning, global digital citizenship, and use of data to inform learning;
- opportunities for lifelong learning in the future school.

The platform also enabled notifications for physical events and provided a location for interested families and teachers to sign up for future updates. In total, there were 4,206 unique visitors to the “Lindfield School of the Future” MindMixer⁴ site with over 550 people signed up to the platform to contribute their thoughts – significantly more than would typically engage in face-to-face consultation for a school development.

2.3. Educational model

Community dialogue and feedback informed the development of three educational models. Core elements were replicated across the models, however there were three distinct focuses: global focus, community focus and entrepreneurial focus (refer Figure 4). These were put to the community to vote. Although the propositions put forward were certainly progressive, the project team were pleasantly surprised that there was overwhelming encouragement to push the educational concepts further as a blend of all the models. This led to a further period of finessing the final proposition and endorsement by the community.

The merging of the physical and virtual in the engagement process enhanced the energy, excitement, and interest in the project. The virtual platform enabled a collective knowledge base around learning and education and gave participants a sense of inclusion and ownership. Ultimately, it began the building of a community around the future school.

⁴ “Lindfield’s School of the Future: A Learning Village”, MindMixer site: <https://lindfield.mindmixer.com/>.

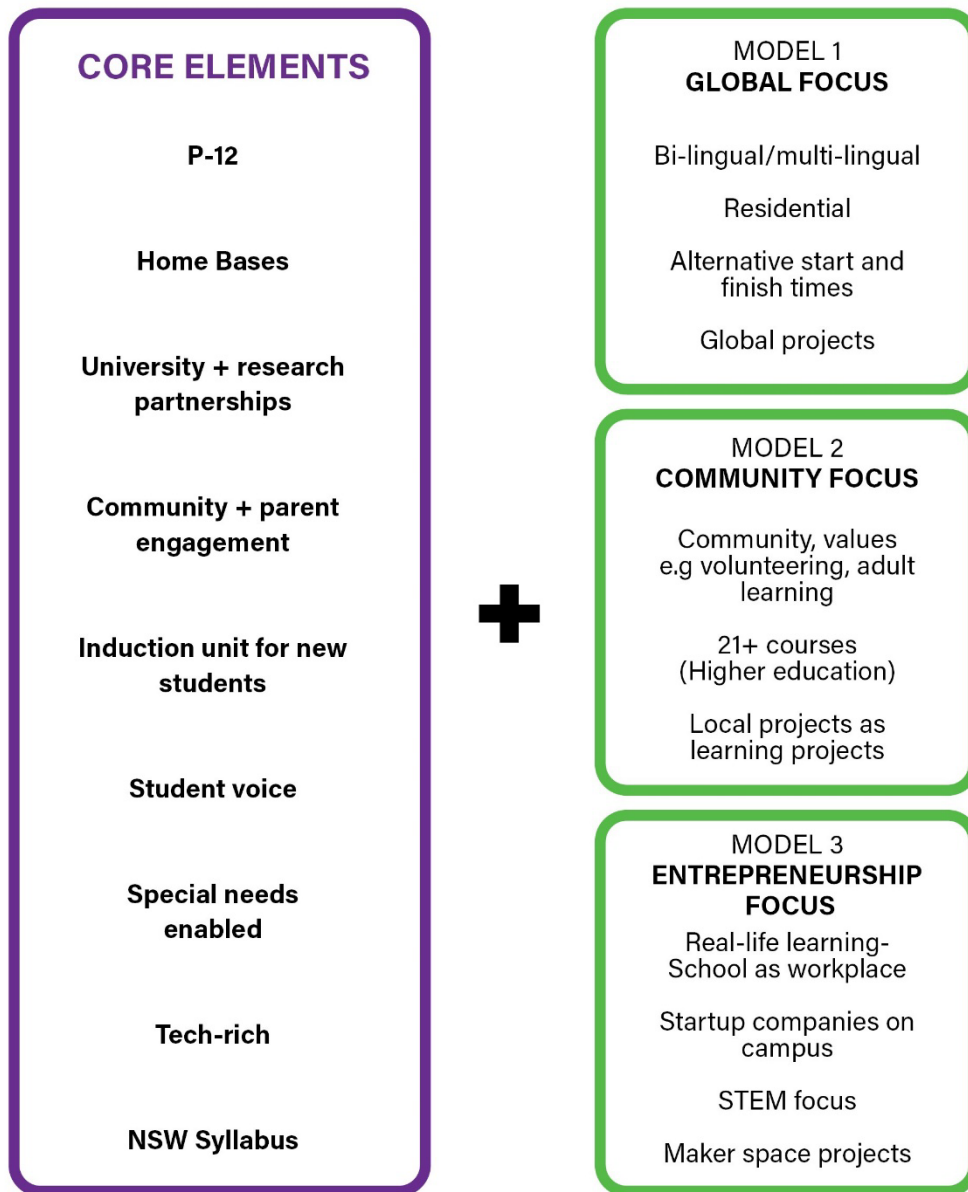


FIGURE 4 – EDUCATIONAL MODEL OPTIONS

3. Seven Pillars of Learning

Endorsement for the new school was finalized in 2018. Although the original Education Director had retired by this stage, two members of the steering committee had respectively taken on the roles of incoming Director and LLV Principal. This enabled the deep thinking and decisions made early on to be carried through into the design of the organizational and physical structure of the school.

Based on the core elements of the original Educational Model, seven Pillars of Learning were articulated (Figure 5) which formed the basis of all learning that was

to occur in the school. These pillars were found to have a natural conceptual alignment with the “8 Aboriginal Ways of Learning” framework⁵ and were, therefore, symbolically connected in the graphic representation of the pillars. The seven Pillars of Learning included:

- all through school;
- stage not age;
- home bases;
- project based multidisciplinary learning;
- student directed individualized learning;
- flexible timetable;
- community, university and business links.

It was then the job of the school and its community to develop an implementation plan.

⁵ The 8 Ways framework is a NSW Department of Education initiative:
<https://www.8ways.online/>.








ALL THROUGH SCHOOL	An “all through” school encourages daily connections between older and younger learners. Older students can be mentors to younger students and younger students see the learning they can look forward to.	
STAGE NOT AGE	Allows students to move to progressively more advanced study according to their rate of progress rather than age. It allows for acceleration as well as remediation and specific support.	
HOME BASES	Students will be enrolled in a K - 12 group of up to 350 students known as a Home Base. The Home Base operates as a “Schools-Within-School” model to break down the larger student cohort into smaller “neighbourhoods” to support a sense of connection and belonging as well as foster positive wellbeing. Research into effective learning and social groups indicates that home bases allow students to take on a strong identity within the larger campus. This will allow teachers to form better relationships with students and track their progress accurately in order to better support their individual needs.	
PROJECT-BASED MULTIDISCIPLINARY LEARNING	Student-focused learning experiences will be a normal feature of the teaching and learning framework for the school. Students will engage in meaningful and authentic multidisciplinary tasks which challenge them to explore issues and themes of importance to the community and the world. These projects of global significance will enable students to explore areas where they can make a difference. Technology will allow students to connect with other students, agencies and experts from around the world.	
STUDENT DIRECTED INDIVIDUALISED LEARNING	Each student will have an individual learning pathway based on data collection of student needs and achievement. This will be monitored by a teacher/learning mentor and the students.	
FLEXIBLE TIMETABLE	In order to maintain an agile and responsive learning environment, the timetable will allow for flexibility across key learning areas. Students will move through the various learning spaces and specialist classrooms according to their learning pathway requirements. Subjects will not necessarily be taught discreetly but in a cross disciplinary approach where students are meeting outcomes across multiple learning areas.	
COMMUNITY, UNIVERSITY AND BUSINESS LINKS	The proximity of the Lindfield school to a wide range of high-profile businesses such as Microsoft, CSIRO and Macquarie Hospital creates the possibility for students to engage in real life learning. There are opportunities for students and community to learn from each other through mentoring programs. The school will work in collaboration with neighbouring schools and their communities of practice. The Schools-Within-Schools model has no boundaries and extends to the expertise demonstrated in the high performing neighbouring schools.	

FIGURE 5 – THE SEVEN PILLARS OF LEARNING

4. Creating a new school community

4.1. Identity and belonging

In 2019, the school opened with 350 students and 35 staff. To enhance a sense of belonging, a series of six workshops called “Fortnight” took place in the first two weeks of the year. This co-design process was aimed to foster staff, student and community ownership of the school and its pedagogy. Three key areas were explored: “Self”, “People” and “Place”.

To build belonging, the guiding question of “Self” was “Who will I be?”. The aim of this workshop was to help learners better understand their own motivations and to discover their talents and interests. It also examined the concept of success and how this might be defined or redefined. A key outcome from this session was the decision to embrace the concept of failure throughout the learning process and to reshape mindsets to see failure as a critical component of learning.

In relation to “People”, workshops focused on the question “What will our school be?”. Cross-stage teams explored different aspects of the school including school uniform, the canteen, physical wellbeing, learning, values, culture, narrative, and sustainability. An agreement was made that student voice would be prioritized in the design of learning experiences. Students made the decision that the school would operate on a “first name” basis, where teachers would be addressed by their first names. In relation to school uniform, students felt that one was needed to engage in external activities such as interschool events, however its use in school would be optional. This began a process for students to design a unisex “multi-form” in collaboration with a parent who was a fashion designer.

The guiding statement for “Place” was “What we will be to each other in our community”. Themes addressed were wellbeing, play, housekeeping, and reflection. Based on the premise that vision creates culture, the purpose of this session was to explore the culture of the school as expressed through the collaborative development of the school’s original vision and values statements. The key outcome from these sessions was an agreed language and sense of ownership of the vision for education and how the whole school community would embody this in practice.

Rich discussions took place across “Fortnight” giving direction and further action for the building of the school. Importantly, from the outset it gave students, staff and community the opportunity to develop an identity together and a sense of what it meant to be a member of the Lindfield Learning Community.

4.2. Learning Characteristics

In the first year, school staff undertook extensive professional development, looking at the latest research about teaching and learning to develop a series of

Learning Characteristics⁶. Five characteristics were identified and developed into a Learning Characteristics wheel, with each component having three sub-characteristics (refer Figure 6). Each of the learning characteristics were then matched alongside the curriculum outcomes as designated by New South Wales syllabuses and turned into a progression of “I can” statements, enabling students to track their progress in both academic and learning characteristics on a *continuum* from Kindergarten to year 12.

These learning characteristics are embedded in every aspect of a student’s learning experience. They are explicitly taught and can be assessed by use of a rubric which has five levels – novice, apprentice, practitioner, expert, and master. To help students become independent learners, they can also self-assess using this rubric, mapping themselves to determine their own learning progress and learning needs.

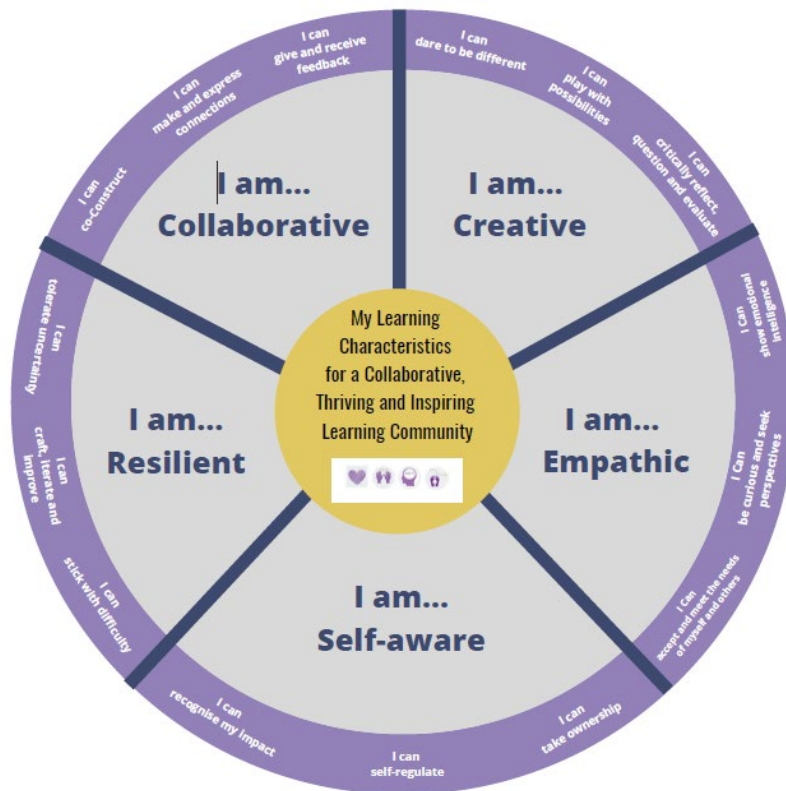


FIGURE 6 – THE LEARNING CHARACTERISTICS WHEEL

4.3. A culture of innovation

To support a culture of innovation, it was recognized that ongoing staff professional learning was critical. The school adopted the approach that teachers

⁶ Development and thinking behind the Learning Characteristics were influenced by the work of Claxton (2017), and Jefferson & Anderson (2017).

are researchers of their own practice. They are supported to work collaboratively in co-teaching teams and have autonomy over their teaching practice, allowing them to constantly iterate and improve whole school practice.

In 2020, in their co-teaching teams, teachers continued to interrogate and evolve the school model. This was particularly around two of the Pillars of Learning: multidisciplinary and home bases. After extensive reflection on the first prototype of the multidisciplinary model, where teachers of different disciplines were timetabled on classes together and sought to find connections in their syllabus, it was felt that learning needed to transform toward a transdisciplinary model.

Transdisciplinary learning is the exploration of a relevant concept, issue or problem that integrates the perspectives of multiple disciplines to connect new knowledge and deeper understanding to real life experiences. A transdisciplinary approach has less dependence on the timetable dictating connection, allowing teachers to explore more natural and fluid connections between disciplines based on a common concept and a driving question. Four pedagogical modes were developed, which established pedagogies that could be used as part of transdisciplinary learning approaches:

- masterclasses, for the explicit teaching of content to last no longer than 10 minutes in groups of varying size;
- pop-ups, where teachers can respond to specific student needs;
- flow⁷, focused individual or collaborative learning. This is the predominant mode in which students are most encouraged to work;
- maker spaces, where students can explore and make practical applications for what they are learning. Play is an important part of this mode, where students can fail with low risk.

These became a valuable tool for teachers as they collaboratively developed units of work across disciplines, mapping lessons to curriculum outcomes and the Learning Characteristics wheel, ensuring all aspects of the model were covered.

The idea of home bases evolved into the creation of hubs and stages of learning. The central purpose was to ensure a wellbeing structure that would provide individual support for every student. Breaking a very large school of 2,000 students down into a series of smaller learning communities ensured that every student could be known and felt a sense of belonging. This also enabled better ability for teachers to support and oversee student wellbeing.

At Primary School, learning hubs include Kindergarten to year 2 and years 3–6. At Secondary School, the stages are years 7–8, years 9–10 and years 11–12. Each hub comprises a series of “Learning Pods” of 18 to 28 students (across year groups) led by a teacher known as a “Learning Guide”. Learning Guides team teach, bringing together students across Pods in different configurations across the year.

⁷ “Flow”, as defined by Csikszentmihalyi (2008), is an optimal psychological state that people experience when engaged in an activity that is appropriately challenging to one’s skill level, often resulting in immersion and concentrated focus on a task. This can result in deep learning and high levels of personal and work satisfaction.

The hubs and stages are not static structures, and there are many opportunities for cross hub/stage work. Through dedicated programs, students in the year 3–6 hub can just as easily work with kindergarten students or older students in the years 7–8 or 9–10 stages.

The cross-stage hub structure allows for the development of autonomy amongst staff and helps to create independent, creative, and critical learners. Collaboratively, teachers have the agency to determine arrangements that suit the students they are responsible for - they don't have to wait for permission from above to make decisions about what is appropriate for the students in their care.

This unique structure requires flexibility in timetabling and a fundamental shift in learning design. The school uses a learning management system called CANVAS to allow students to both receive and post their work. It enables staff to monitor progress closely and to adjust the learning process where necessary. It also allows for students and parents to receive formative feedback on an ongoing process rather than via a report card a few times a year.

In 2021, the school focus was on embedding established processes into daily practice, ensuring that each student was at the front and center of the learning process. Using human-centered design thinking processes (Zhang & Dong, 2008) the school sought to embed shared practice to ensure a collective understanding and consistency in pedagogical practice, rituals and routines.

4.4. Refining vision and values

In 2022 the school revisited the original vision, values and code of collaboration statements that had been developed with the community at the school's opening. A second cycle of community consultation including staff, students and parents resulted in a series of succinct vision statements and values which articulate the ultimate realization of the LLV Educational Model. A big picture and longer-term horizon vision have been developed, which states the aim "To create a school which changes the educational landscape and influences global educational thinking". This was complemented with a more immediate vision "To make school better for every student every day".

Values which underpin the school's culture around shaping mindsets and directing actions and intentions were also defined. Each value was examined in relation to the latest educational research, to investigate how they could be embedded into practice. The school's six values are:

- hold lightly, tread lightly;
- be the change you seek;
- be curious and then curiouser;
- be radically candid, expect radical candor;
- be playful, creative and brave;
- assume best intent, be optimistic.

5. Aligning vision, values, pedagogy and space

5.1. Learning space

When you walk through this school you won't see rooms with 30 desks with students sitting facing the front, rather you will experience the energy of students engaged in a variety of learning activities - in large groups discussing ideas with their Learning Guides, in small groups working on projects together, or sitting in intimate corners doing individual work (Figure 7). The spaces at LLV cater for a diverse range of learners and learning styles, supporting the pillar of student directed individualized learning. In addition, the range and choice of spaces support the notion of an inclusive environment in which all learners can feel safe and have agency over their own learning.



FIGURE 7 – A TYPICAL LLV LEARNING HUB⁸

The relationship between pedagogy and space has been a critical influence and consideration in the development and ongoing evolution of LLV. The original spaces provided an excellent footprint to accommodate the innovative educational approaches of the school today. To ensure that the building would accommodate the school's pedagogical vision, a project reference group including architects, project managers and education and infrastructure experts worked with the School Principal to explore the adaptations that needed to be made.

A deep analysis of the building revealed the potential to accommodate a range of configurations and learning settings. “Campfires”, “Caves” and “Waterholes”

⁸ Photographer: Tyrone Branigan. Architect: DesignInc with Lacoste+Stevenson.

were introduced as a lexicon to align understandings of how spaces could support the different pedagogical modes. “Campfires” are used for group learning such as masterclasses (Figure 8); “Caves” support small groups (such as pop-ups) or individual learning (Figure 9); and “Maker spaces”, rich with learning resources, are associated with “Waterholes” (Figure 10).



FIGURE 8 – “CAMPFIRE”



FIGURE 9 – “CAVES”



FIGURE 10 – “WATERING HOLE”

The staged building works allowed for a school population that has grown incrementally. This has enabled time to rapidly prototype and test spaces and furniture as part of the development process, ensuring that good design decisions are made for the longer term.

5.2. Community space

Parents and the community of Lindfield Learning Village are an important factor in the school’s success. The clarity in which the school has articulated its vision, values and Educational Model, transparency in its pedagogical approach, and inclusion of the school community in the life of the school has engendered a strong and supportive community.

A parent-led group, Friends of the Village (FOTV), formed when the school started. Aligning with the vision of the school, FOTV activities range from community events (new family inductions, buddy systems, picnics and camping trips), school support (fundraising and environmental sustainability initiatives) as well-as “Parent University”, a knowledge sharing forum around research in pedagogical practices.

The “Bitter Pea Café”, a much loved, comfortable, and inclusive space at the heart of the school, was developed by FOTV in partnership with the school (Figure 11). It is furnished with a range of second-hand domestic furniture, further bridging connections between school and home. The school actively encourages community connection, inviting families to the café on Wednesday mornings enabling parents to drop in, have a coffee and to get to know each other. A current school initiative

in development is a “Work from School” space, where in exchange for some form of contribution of services to the school, parents can work from the school site.



FIGURE 11 – THE “BITTER PEA CAFÉ”

Conclusion

Schools based on non-traditional organizational and pedagogical structures are few and far between. Deviating from educational norms can often be misunderstood, drawing skepticism and controversy amongst critics of alternative approaches to learning. However, despite doing things differently, an independent review by global education experts has demonstrated LLV’s excellence in evidence-based pedagogy and learning outcomes (Hattie & O’Leary, 2021). Even prior to this review, the school’s extensive waitlist highlights a broader appetite for more innovative approaches to schooling.

There are multiple and interconnected elements which can be attributed to the success of the school, although four key components stand out. These are:

- collaborative and inclusive approach to design and implementation of the Educational Model. This process was characterized by openness, transparency and high levels of communication generating widespread support, buy in and a sense of ownership from an emerging community;

- continuity of key personnel. Although it took several years to navigate the fruition of this new school, there was continuity in personnel from initial Educational Model development to the enabling of day-to-day practices;
- intrinsic nature of pedagogy and space throughout the design and implementation process. The innovative design of the original building provided a unique catalyst from which to consider new ways of redesigning school practices. As well, the building provided an adaptable palette to enable the organizational and pedagogical approaches developed as part of LLV's ethos;
- a culture of continual improvement characterized by reflection, ongoing evaluation, and the willingness to evolve. Learning has been central at LLV for students as-well-as teachers, who have needed to adapt their pedagogical practices to more active and collaborative scenarios and spaces. In addition to supporting new ways of learning, new assessment processes have had to be devised and implemented, enabling teachers, students, and parents to understand each student's unique learning contexts.

Common aspirations parents may have for their children's schooling experiences are for them to be happy, safe, and engaged. Rather than designing a school from the top down, which all too often results in increasing levels of student disengagement (Goss, Sonnemann & Griffiths, 2017), at the heart of LLV and how it operates is the student. The ecological approach of LLV characterized by soft systems (such as strong teacher-student relationships, authentic real-world projects, and highly differentiated learning enabling choice for the individual student) and hard systems (such as defined learning hubs, diversity of learning settings and formative assessment platforms), converge to enhance student's sense of purpose, engagement and wellbeing.

The depth of thinking behind LLV's practices and the connected and collaborative approach in which they are applied, highlight that to make school better for each student every day, it takes a village to educate a child.

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