
Transforming Pedagogy in Primary Schools: a case study from Australia

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ABSTRACT This article stems from a doctoral study about alternative education around the world and the author's personal journey to identify characteristics of the 'ideal school'. The focus here is a case study of one small primary school in Australia, through which it shows that there can be a larger amount of freedom and self-actualisation available to students in the classroom even when a school is governed by teaching a compulsory state curriculum. By sharing the story of this school, the article aims to enable educators to reflect on how they structure classrooms and to offer ideas of educating differently.

Introduction

This article is a case study of an educational alternative: a school called Koonwarra Village School, in rural Victoria, Australia. Koonwarra Village School, established four years ago, believes that

self-actualisation is best achieved through freedom. Internal freedom – in thought and expression, within an environment that is free from overbearing authority, externally imposed rules and unnecessarily prescriptive courses of study. Such freedoms are provided within the context of a healthy and functional school community. (McKenzie, 2012, n.p.)

Koonwarra Village School is a small primary school that is part-funded by the state and part-funded by parental fees. It is an innovative example of educating differently as it illustrates how one school has radically altered its pedagogy from many of its more mainstream counterparts.

At Koonwarra Village School, the students have learning contracts where they are in control of a great proportion of their own time. They must reach agreed learning goals each week as well as attend focus groups with children of

a similar 'ability level' – regardless of age – on particular subjects, thereby ensuring they meet the requirements of the Victoria State Curriculum. All students are aware of their level and progression, which is similar to the expectations in UK schools. This approach is underpinned by John Hattie's (2008) work on Visible Learning in terms of clearly displayed learning intentions and outcomes.

This case study has been developed as part of a doctoral study of alternative education in which I have used autoethnography to explore ideas of 'ideal' education. In brief, autoethnography, as defined by Spry, is 'a self-narrative that critiques the situations of self with others in social contexts' (2001, p. 710).

One approach that I have used is to become a 'school tourist', meaning that I observe, question and occasionally teach in schools and other educational places. I position myself as a 'cultural broker' (Giroux, 2005), by looking for the 'glow' (Maclure, 2013) that I feel is the different character of each school. This work has involved storytelling and journalling of my experiences of visiting alternative schools around the world.

This article is largely based on my journalling from visiting Koonwarra Village School in February 2016. It describes the school and several key aspects of its innovative pedagogy, and finishes with an argument that other schools might benefit from considering some of these issues in their own contexts. Koonwarra Village School has agreed to be named within this article.

Narratives – Koonwarra Village School, Victoria, Australia

Site Description

It was a beautiful day, hot and dry, with clear blue skies as we drove onto the school site. I saw a school house, some building works and fabulous, tall old trees. It felt like the place was glimmering. We were met by a friendly face and together we helped unpack the organic produce into the school kitchen for the week's lunches. Fiona (the Founder and School Coordinator) took me on a tour of the school site.

Fiona led me to the Sun Room, the space for the Year 1 and 2 children (aged 5-8). It was a beautiful, light and open space, with available resources, comfy book corners, some desks, a large carpet space, and a play corner, looking similar to many carefully thought-out primary classrooms for the younger ages that I have visited. However, the difference, as the class teacher explained, was how she approached the learning and teaching and the children's involvement and motivation. She was about to start with maths where she and her assistant both held small focus groups. In order to work on skills previously introduced, the other children had access to several different Montessori independent-learning resources to extend and deepen their understanding at their own pace.

Teacher as Mentor

Fiona took me to the older children's classroom to meet Sarah and Dan (two of the staff members). They have a large room, a computer room and a small focus-group room. I stayed with Sarah for the first part of the morning, interested to observe how a focused teaching group worked. Koonwarra Village School is different from many mainstream schools that I have visited as the school views the 'teacher' as a 'mentor' helping with the learning process. Sarah was getting the group of nine children to think about skills needed for inquiry-based learning by introducing a group work activity. The children split into two smaller groups and one group chose to work outside. It was really interesting to see the children visibly grow as learners as the group inside realised that by not writing anything down they forgot their ideas. The group working outside realised (with a little help) that their group dynamics had been challenging, as they had not sat in a circle, but at different levels and distances from each other, thus making it easier for one person to take over or another to remain silent.

Development of Skills in Working Together

Teaching group work skills seemed like a really sensible idea as it made me think about the line between self-actualised learning (Maslow, 1943) and democratic learning (Neill, 1960; Greenberg, 1995), understood in this context as child-centred learning. At some 'democratic' schools that I have visited, the idea of offering a formal lesson on developing a particular skill, such as inquiry or group-based skills, might be seen to contradict the philosophy; this is because the students might not have suggested this lesson or even chosen to attend it. I know that democratic education can be implemented in many ways, but I am wondering if by giving the students the skills to work effectively in groups, it could be seen as actually being *more* democratic as they are then able to make a choice to use those skills, thereby achieving a higher level of self-actualisation and freedom.

Personal Contracts and Self-actualisation

The week is organised into blocks of time, with each day starting from 9 a.m. Each child's personalised timetable has specified focus groups that they need to attend throughout the week. At the end of each focus group, the teacher may give some follow-up work and a deadline for when the task is to be completed. When the student is not in a focus group they follow their own personalised timetable to guide them on the work that they can do independently. Students are encouraged to not interrupt a mentor when they are holding a focus group; it is clear on the timetable when mentors are floating and available for individual support. The week's work is clearly available as a display wall in the main room, with subjects and levels and any worksheets or information on resources. Within this plan there is also space for computer usage (including a

free-play/games/Internet allowance) and electives for different afternoons such as craft and sports (including snorkelling).

Each student has to organise their time at school to meet their objectives by the end of the week. Every Friday, the mentors check each student's progress to make sure the work is completed, or if not, what extra support might be needed. Any unfinished work has to be completed over the weekend and an email is sent home to parents so they know what is going on. The contracts are set at different 'autonomy levels', which range from more structured ones to include daily checklists in the Sun Room to more flexible ones where students have almost complete freedom regarding their compulsory workload. This means that if a child chooses to spend the week reading a book instead of completing their set tasks, the mentor waits until the Friday review to discuss this. There is some flexibility to account for individual circumstances, such as where they are not feeling able, for physical or emotional reasons, to engage fully in academic work.

These timetables are complex and I could see they were a lot of work to establish and monitor. Sarah explained that developing them took up most of her Sundays, but that they were important as she really cared about offering personalised learning. I asked some older students working independently what they were doing, and why and how they had chosen particular tasks. One showed me their contract and then led me to the learning wall to show me how they chose their activities and what level they were working at. They told me how much they enjoyed being in charge of their own learning and knowing where they were going next.

Thoughts on the Day

What stood out to me as different from many schools that I have visited was that not all play is continually supervised. Children had the freedom to explore the extensive grounds, with hens, a vegetable garden and space for secretive and adventurous play where trees can be climbed. This was possible as adults were still around and available if needed.

The day had all gone so quickly and at 3 p.m. when I listened to the story in the Sun Room I felt so much warmth from both the students and the staff that I was happy to take up the invitation to go swimming in the sea after work.

Reflection and Conclusion

The pedagogy at Koonwarra Village School challenges 'traditional' pedagogies of many mainstream schools (such as single-age groupings, didactic teaching, extrinsic motivation) but, interestingly, it also sheds light on approaches used in some democratic schools (such as unschooling and child-led learning). As such, it offers a new vision. It creates a story of hope and enables freedom that is not utopian but 'human-scale' where the staff are constantly learning, reflecting and

refining ideas and working with the students to transform education for the future.

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