

# School Philosophy

## Introduction

This document outlines the founding principles of the Koonwarra Village School (KVS). It does not deal with the day-to-day expression of these principles, but looks at the beliefs that inform *why* we do what we do. Our holistic form of education is inspired by the work of many educational thinkers – past and present. It is based on the understanding that there is a deeper purpose to life than the role human beings assume through their paid employment. The ultimate goal is to set students on the path to self-actualisation - that is uncovering their identity and the meaning and purpose of their lives.

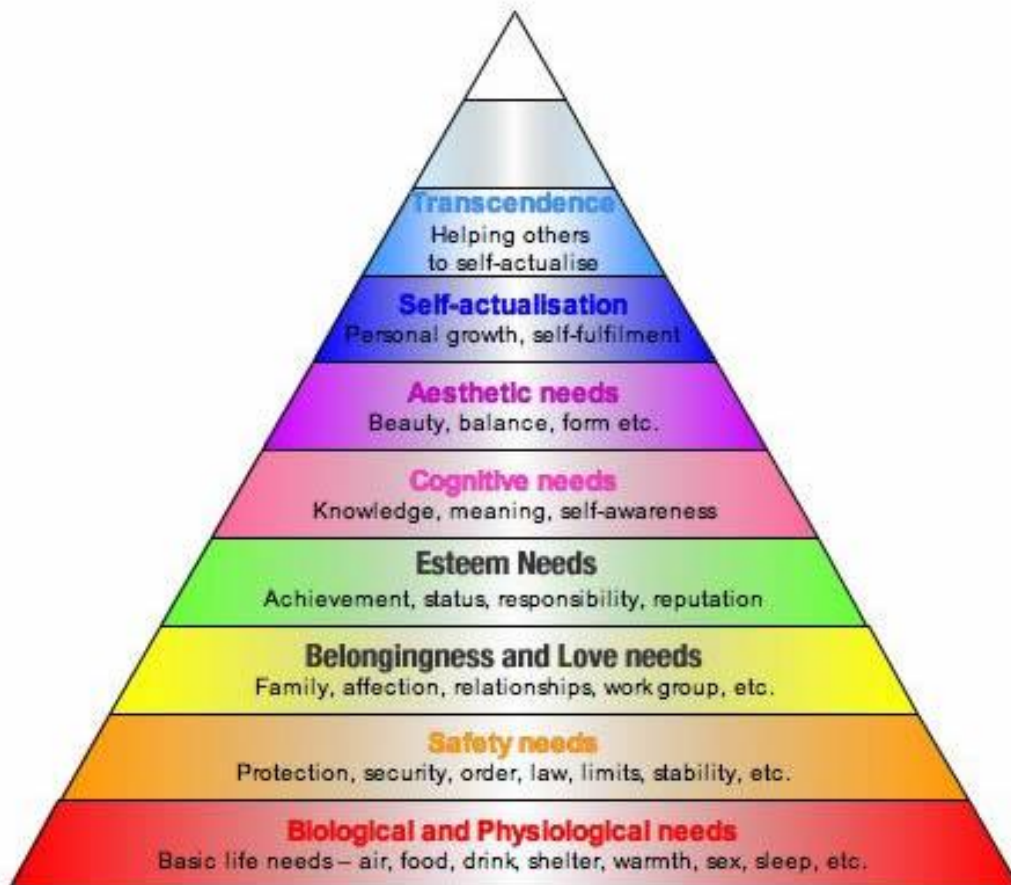
At KVS we believe self-actualisation is best achieved through freedom. Internal freedom - in thought and expression, within an environment that is free from overbearing authority, externally imposed rules and unnecessarily prescriptive courses of study. Such freedoms are provided within the context of a healthy and functional school community as well as positive engagement with society at large. This requires a balance between effective self-management and responsibility.

There are three key aspects of our school culture that are interwoven with freedom and responsibility. These will support students in their journey towards living fully conscious and meaningful lives. The first of these is social and emotional intelligence - allowing students to know themselves, have empathy with others and communicate effectively. The second is autonomy and shared decision-making – ongoing opportunities to practice making decisions that affect each individual personally and the broader school community. The third is connection – to nature, people and the rhythms of life – through real-life activities such as spending times in all forms of nature, learning from a wide range of people – younger and older, and engaging in celebrations and rituals that reflect important events in their lives.

While some of these key aspects may seem like a significant distance from the emphasis of conventional schooling, they reflect a subtle, yet profound shift in priorities. These priorities are our response to a world that is changing more quickly than ever before, a future that will require highly adaptive survival strategies, in conditions that will provide new and wide-ranging possibilities. KVS will facilitate this unique educational experience within the context of government requirements relating to schools as well as by incorporating the best of contemporary knowledge about teaching and learning.

## Self-Actualisation

While the concept of self-actualisation has been around for thousands of years, across cultures and within spiritual traditions, the term has come to prominence most recently through the 1950s work of Dr Abraham Maslow. It is based on the premise that human beings are drawn along a pathway towards achieving their highest potential by satisfying a series of fundamental human needs. Often represented in a pyramid diagram with our most basic needs at the base and the highest need – helping others to achieve self-actualisation – at the peak, each level of need must be satisfied before the individual can properly focus on the ones above.



### Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Starting with the most basic of needs - food, clothing and shelter, humans then need safety and protection, stability and limits before they can consider their needs for belonging and love. The fourth level of needs relate to an individual's esteem – self-esteem, achievement, mastery, independence and responsibility. In an educational context, the theory suggests that you can't expect a child to focus on their reading while they are hungry; that they can't benefit from the experience of running a class meeting when they don't feel a sense of belonging to the group. All children will operate somewhere within these first four stages based on the circumstances of their physical environment and the social structure in which they live. Most educational environments (and society as a whole) work to ensure the needs within these first four levels are met and then often feel that their job has been done.

At KVS we raise the focus to include the next four stages of the self-actualisation pathway. These growth motivators are far less commonly expected in conventional schools. They relate to our intrinsic need for knowledge and meaning; and an appreciation and search for beauty, balance and form. The seventh stage of the journey – self-actualisation - is the realisation of our personal potential through self-fulfillment and the seeking of personal growth and 'flow' experiences. The peak of the pyramid is the desire to help others do the same.

Each expression of human behaviour and its motivation can be placed somewhere in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. At KVS we provide an environment and structure that fosters progression along this pathway for both the adults and children involved with the school. Indeed we consider it to be a life-long journey, with stops and starts, steps forward and back. Individuals who are operating in the later stages of this theory demonstrate a range of personal characteristics that we encourage in all members of the school community.

Self-actualising individuals:

- are often motivated by a strong sense of personal ethics and responsibility. They enjoy solving real-world problems and are often concerned with helping other people improve their own lives;
- value their privacy and enjoy solitude. While they also love the company of others, taking time to themselves is essential for personal discovery and cultivating individual potential;
- do not conform to other people's ideas of happiness or contentment. This original perspective allows the individual to live in the moment and appreciate the beauty of each experience;
- display a thoughtful sense of humour. They are able to enjoy the humour in situations and laugh at themselves, but they do not ridicule or make fun at the expense of another person's feelings;
- accept themselves and others as they are. They tend to lack inhibition and are able to enjoy themselves and their lives free of guilt. Other people are treated the same regardless of background, status or other socio-economic and cultural factors.
- have a few close intimate friends rather than many surface relationships;
- have a tendency to be open, unconventional and spontaneous. While these people are able to follow generally accepted social expectations, they do not feel confined by these norms in their thoughts or behaviours;
- excited and interested in everything, even ordinary things;
- creative, inventive and original;
- are able to experience 'flow' when they are engaged with things that are meaningful to them. 'Flow' is when you are so deeply immersed in an activity that you lose track of time, when all thoughts and inspiration about the activity come together in that moment, when there is a perfect melding between the activity and your higher purpose.

Human motivation and behaviour is more complex than a simple linear progression along a pathway and there is always the possibility of moving backwards along it, usually in response to the changing circumstances of our lives. At KVS we contend that self-actualisation is a need that is within all of us. We make this a focus for our school because the implications of moving towards our highest potential profoundly influence the quality of our lives and contribution we make to the lives of others and our community.

### *Social and Emotional Intelligence*

It is very difficult to move beyond the third stage of the self-actualisation pathway ie. the need for belonging and love, without some level of social and emotional intelligence. When we look at today's society we can see that many people struggle in this area of their lives. By spending time working with our children on this aspect of their lives we can significantly influence their success and happiness as young people and adults. At KVS developing social and emotional intelligence is considered essential to the effective expression of practical and intellectual intelligence as well as progression along the self-actualising pathway.

There are five sets of skills that have been identified as central to social and emotional intelligence. They are:

- Self-awareness—accurately assessing one's feelings, interests, values, and strengths; maintaining a well-grounded sense of self-confidence.
- Self-management—regulating one's emotions to handle stress, control impulses, and persevere in overcoming obstacles; setting and monitoring progress toward personal and academic goals; expressing emotions appropriately.
- Social awareness—being able to take the perspective of and empathise with others; recognising and appreciating individual and group similarities and differences; recognising and using family, school, and community resources.
- Relationship skills—establishing and maintaining healthy and rewarding relationships based on cooperation; resisting inappropriate social pressure; preventing, managing, and resolving interpersonal conflict; seeking help when needed.
- Responsible decision-making—making decisions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, appropriate social norms, respect for others, and likely consequences of various actions; applying decision-making skills to academic and social situations; contributing to the well-being of one's school and community.

The skills of social and emotional intelligence are learned through interaction with and observation of the people around us. Through personal experience and guidance from others we develop an emotional framework through which we attempt to meet our needs and in time, the needs of others. Some of the habits we bring to our relationships work effectively for us and others require refinement - particularly as our social experiences become more complex.

At KVS we understand that social and emotional intelligence takes time to develop and practise. While these skills can be taught in a theoretical context they are most effectively learned when opportunities arise to apply the theory and reflect on the outcome. Initially

this will mean adults taking a lead role in helping children work through issues and situations but overtime children will develop their skills enough to be able to help each other, thus doubling the learning. Student wellbeing is seen as a whole-school responsibility and an essential element in the progression along the pathway of self-actualisation.

### *Autonomy and Shared Decision Making*

Autonomy is a fundamental aspect of moving towards the higher order stages on the self-actualisation pathway. Without the opportunity to make decisions about our lives, regardless of our age, our personal growth becomes stunted and our ability for independent thought and confident action are diminished. Adults often become nervous when we talk about shifting the power balance between adults and children imagining scenes of anarchy and chaos. At KVS we believe that human beings don't always need high levels of externally imposed control in order to form a socially cohesive and highly functioning society. In the broader community no one has absolute freedom. We are all required to modify our behaviour so as to fit in with the agreed norms of the group - it is the same at KVS. At times, all children, staff, parents and volunteers may be required to modify their behaviour to fit in with the agreed guidelines and principles of our school. The adults and children will decide on the group's 'rules' together.

The balanced framework of freedom and responsibility provides the students at KVS with many opportunities to develop and utilise their autonomy and to take an active role in decision-making. These opportunities allow students to exercise their social and emotional intelligence skills as they consider options and consequences. Autonomy / self-determination in relation to curriculum tasks can be highly motivating and is solidly grounded in constructivist theories about learning. There is overwhelming evidence to suggest that children learn far more effectively when they have had some say into the what, how, where and when of their work. This may mean deciding how to approach a topic, who to learn with, how to demonstrate what they know. It may also mean deciding where to study and when to take a break, when to eat and when to seek solitude.

### *Connection to Nature, People and the Rhythms of Life*

Human beings live in a world of interdependence. Without clean water, fertile soil and a biodiversity of plants and animals the continuation of our relatively comfortable lives is at risk. We each have a responsibility to consider how our actions affect the health of our natural environment and the things that live within it – both locally and globally. As our modern lives become busier and more 'virtual', we risk losing our connection with the things that sustain us. Without this connection we become detached from our natural environment and increasingly unmindful of it's delicate balance. Within the KVS community we work hard to foster amongst our community a deep understanding of, and respect for, our natural environment and it's resources. Sustainability and minimum impact are our vision and this guides many of our programs and activities.

This document has spoken of the importance we place on the positive connection with others in the school community but we also apply that to the broader community. By focusing on real-life activities that engage students with individuals and groups in the

immediate community of Koonwarra as well as the surrounding towns we aim to help students develop awareness of their place within the whole. By utilizing public resources such as libraries, recreation centers and parks we can appreciate their value to community life and by participating in community activities and events we can contribute in real ways to the quality of our community.

With the pace of life increasing it can be hard to find the time to recognise and enjoy the rhythms that are evident in all of our lives. Beginnings and endings, personal milestones, failure and success are all intricate parts of what it means to be human. Taking the time to recognize each one in a way that is meaningful for those affected provides depth and richness to the human experience. At KVS we develop rituals and celebrations to mark significant moments in the life of the school and members of its community. In doing so we look to the past at established traditions and lore for inspiration and then reflect on how these relate to our current time and place. Rhythms in our natural environment, such as the seasons, also inform the pace and flow of school life.

## Conclusion

This document forms the basis of the philosophy that guides KVS. As a new school it is important that there is a solid foundation with clear principles that can direct the day-to-day activities and the development of our school culture. It is an abstract, big-picture view of what we hope to achieve that is then grounded by practical application in the Features of School Life.

Each aspect – social and emotional intelligence, autonomy and decision making and connection to nature, people and the rhythms of life – are essential parts of the higher purpose we all have in life, to achieve our fullest potential. It redefines the grind of day-to-day existence into a longer term, more meaningful expression of what it means to be human. In a world and society that is changing so quickly the philosophy of KVS is a combination of getting back to the essence of life while integrating the many positive things our world has to offer. It is a journey for all of us, children and adults alike.