

Premier’s Curriculum Transition Scholarship

From Primary to Secondary – Leveraging educational opportunities and impacts for students in regional NSW.

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# Introduction

Students moving from primary classrooms to a secondary timetable may suffer from a kind of culture shock as their expectations of school are radically challenged by the pace and siloed structures of faculty education. A negative result of this is that students may find school overwhelming, disorienting and alienating. This can be compounded by strong bonds of local communities in regional areas which are sometimes antithetical to the broad curricular imperatives of globalisation. The cosmopolitan nature of globalised education can be seen to be at odds with the sometimes parochial nature of regional cultures. Distance is a contributing factor, as are problems of access to resources, deficiencies associated with small economies of scale, localised monocultures and the anchoring bonds of family and community. Student engagement suffers and potential for the development of life-long learning dispositions are diminished.

# Focus of Study

The study set out to examine best practice in education such that students in transition retain the high levels of excitement and anticipation that they experience as they leave primary school and enter secondary school. A focus of the study was the examination of middle school models that bridge the transitional years as in many United States schools. Another focus was the ways that students can retain the sense of belonging that contained-class primary schools offer, while opening new levels of challenge and responsibility for learners. Examination of integrated programs, Project Based Learning (PBL) and Expeditionary Learning allow for the development of coherence in program design. The challenges of education in regional areas was also examined to discover methods of maintaining strong local links while fostering engagement with the wider national and global contexts.

# Significant Learning

The scope of the study included schools, educators and universities through North America in Denver, Atlanta, New York, Albany, Champaign-Urbana, Toronto; in The United Kingdom at Doncaster, Glasgow, and Oban; then Singapore. The significant learning throughout was that for students to flourish in their learning a sense of belonging was imperative along with surrounding them with engaging school environments and cultures of high expectations. The binding element was learning that students understood to be relevant to their local culture and stage of life.

## The range of the strange

In Cherry Creek School District, Denver, Colorado. Michael Giles, Assistant Superintendent, Performance Development outlined some of the challenges of teaching in middle schools. When asked about the differences between students entering middle school at Grade Five to the profile of students exiting at the completion of Eighth Grade, he said with a wry smile, “We call it the range of the strange.”. Students who form the range of the strange require dedicated educators who show a clear passion for their schools and warmth for the staff and students within their district. For students to engage effectively through this time, schools need to be developed that allow for a strong sense of belonging, clear structures and relevant programming

Infinity School in Denver was built to foster collaborative learning with many of the classroom walls opening out to a central learning commons. The organic forms of the furniture allowed for collaborative learning. The pedagogical approach was based on inquiry models with visible learning routines. The language of Essential Questions, Learning Intentions and Learning Criteria framed the whiteboard instructions, and students were engaged in the sharing of knowledge and experience in relaxed classrooms. Teachers and students worked together in rooms that were configured to maximise collaboration and interaction with high regard for student voice and a sense that classroom routines were developed democratically.

The learning projects were locally relevant. In a seventh grade geography class for instance, students developed solutions for a proposal to relocate a Denver fun park. The aim was to revitalise a stretch of the South Platte River Corridor. In the lesson students considered elements of place and how humans interact with environments. Specifically, river flows, erosion, amelioration works and habitat were considered. The relevance of the project was its authenticity and immediacy, the local context and the genuine interest that students held for a place such as an amusement park and local landmark.

At the Ron Clark Academy (RCA) in Atlanta, Georgia similar efforts to strike a balance between rigour and engagement were evident, while building an exciting atmosphere. The emphasis is on fun and challenge. Clark’s school is founded on his best-selling book *The Essential 55*; a series of rules that promote mannered relationships, social courtesies, personal responsibility and dignity. Teaching at RCA is a balance and blend of structure, discipline and respect with creativity, passion and enthusiasm. Clark’s methods include a high degree of interpersonal engagement through conversational and expositional protocols, songs, dances, student movement, energetic teaching, frame breaking behaviours, most notably walking on desks and moving through different physical levels and platforms in the classrooms.

The campus at RCA is clearly all about the students. This is a school that looks and feels like a fun place to be. The exterior is built to look like a fantasy castle, its nods to Harry Potter and Tolkien’s fantasy-scapes are obvious and the huge dragon that flies expansively over the basketball arena and gathering hall is spectacular, as is the two storey dragon skeleton that dominates the stairwell in the main building. Each of the rooms in the RCA is painted, decorated and lit in ways that reflect the most interesting aspects of the disciplines. The science room is designed as a mad scientist’s lab; the reading room is themed after Lewis Carrol’s *Alice in Wonderland*. The history room reframes dominant narratives, depicting the civil rights history of the South, and in the language arts space, superheroes abound. Loud music, props, lizard tanks all add to the atmosphere of RCA, but the interplay of order and chaos is balanced in favour of rigour.

In reaching the students the educators at the RCA recognise the importance of including the community in the learning. To this end they focus on the families, communities and business of Atlanta for support, with donors such as Coca Cola, Delta Airlines and the Atlanta Hawks NBA team. There is a clear sense of Atlanta pride and belonging fostered in the school. It is a school that is democratic in nature, empowers kids and communities, develops agency and its values work to develop essential elements of character and efficacy in the students. RCA provides a model for NSW schools to reach into their local and regional communities to contextualise schools and to form entrepreneurial partnerships. The aim of such partnerships would be to develop school environments and enhance school activities for the benefit of students, but also for the whole community for which the school becomes a hub.

At Farnsworth Middle School, Albany NY, the principal, Dr Mike Laster explained that the school developed a deep sense of belonging for all students There was an emphasis on recognising the developmental challenges faced by students in the middle years of school. Belonging as a value was prominent, positive attitudes such as personal agency, consideration of others, teamwork, honesty and positivity were important attributes. Engagements with the local community through integrated projects were important elements of curricula design.

XP School in Doncaster UK, valued fostering strong engagement through the relationship of students and teachers and also through making effective community connections. XP school uses elements of the Outward Bound models of leadership training, with integrated learning as developed in models used at High-Tech High (HTH) San Diego, as well as program models developed by Expeditionary Learning Education (EL Education). The EL model is focussed on mastery of knowledge, character development and high quality student work. At XP this is expressed in a tripartite formula, “Work Hard, Get Smart, Be Kind”. XP has a deliberately low enrolment of about 50 students per year group, so that every student is known. Cohorts are broken down into further small groupings known as crew. These crews of 12 or 13 students meet each morning to discuss where they are in the learning cycle, their perceptions of school and their well-being. Pastoral care of students is an important feature of the school and the daily crew meetings of about 45 minutes are devoted to discussion of matters academic, pastoral and interpersonal as ways of promoting the value of goal setting, reflective practice and relationships. The crew initiative requires adjustments to daily timetabling and routines, but is an achievable goal for NSW schools. Some teacher training and supports may be required, but it is a low cost initiative to develop student engagement.

A feature of student profiles within the range of the strange is a sense of alienation and at times disconnection, unexplained change, a need to be directed and an emerging need to direct oneself. There are many challenges for educators, given the tendency for standardised curriculum and testing regimes to assume homogeneity. In the middle schools visited there was a strong social and emotional learning agenda that sought to contextualise learning locally, seek wider links and foster a strong sense of belonging for their students in their schools.

## Climate and Culture

Important to successful learning in the schools visited was the development of environments that speak powerfully to students about their right to be there. The schools understood the developmental challenges presented to and by their students. The schools recognised that while accommodating the developmental needs of their students, they also had a duty to lead their students and communities into new ways of being and knowing as preparation for new situations in their lives.

At Infinity School, the development of a positive and transformative learning culture was deliberate and purposeful. Principal, Marquetta Thomas took an instructional stance, leading her teachers through inquiry, asking them to form the culture of the new school. Each teacher was asked to reflect deeply upon their purpose as an educator and member of staff. The equity team was a key example of how the school sought to tackle the challenges of promoting a school and society that was inclusive of the variety of students in the community. The teachers recognised the importance of deconstructing positions for equity rather than engaging with the personal emotions of situations. In doing so, their aim was to close the achievement gap for every one of their students by recognising that the identity of their students was determined by the social constructs that affect them. The driving concern of the Equity Team was to develop a professional perspective and code, to take these challenging and considered perspectives into their classrooms and staff rooms every day and to build a new school culture, suitable for this century that did not replicate the tacit inequities of dominant cultures.

Schools that build their cultures self-consciously and deliberately seem to succeed. In older established schools such as St Stephens of Hungary, and Loyola School, New York NY recognised that while tradition may have a significant bearing on culture, responsiveness to the needs of the students, families and their communities is what keeps schools growing. Jenn DeSpirito of St Stephens explained that the school was still growing. This was due to its responsiveness to students’ age and stage. To manage the range of students from pre K- Eighth Grade and to cater to learning needs for different stages of life, the school develops approaches appropriate to groups of connected year levels. Up to the Third grade, students conduct their classes in contained classes, with one teacher taking them through the common core. In Fourth and Fifth Grades some specialisations begin to emerge in combinations of maths and science, or English Language Arts (ELA) with religious education or social studies. By Grades Six, Seven and Eight, students transition to the familiar faculty or department based model found in most high schools. A clear aim of the different group composition and styles is for students to develop academic stamina as they develop their capacity for concentration and learning over longer time periods.

Academic stamina is an interesting concept, and one that frames education as a kind of marathon to be endured and the transcript, a goal to be sought as the discrete finality to school. Adam Lewis at Loyola observed that the American system is heavily weighted to content with the aim of testing as assessment method. This can cause a content churn, with a focus on the mechanics of learning at the expense of the analysis required for greater depth or for the development of relationships within the learning journey. The NSW Syllabi can sometime seem to direct this way too. Teachers need to self-consciously select content, frame the emphasis for the local community and cohort, as well as using the cross-curriculum perspectives and general capabilities when planning units of work.

As students moved into high school, Loyola organised the students into mentor groups in a similar way that XP school forms the students into crew groups. This was a method used in RCA and Farnsworth, to form what Dr Laster referred to as a school within a school. All of these organisations work to develop inclusive cultures in which students are known individually. Loyola builds their mentor groups prior to the commencement of the academic year. As students make the transition to Loyola, they are supported through an accepted students’ night which is designed to welcome students and their families. This is followed up at the commencement of a school year with three to four days of orientation where they might meet peer leaders, learn the ropes of the school, develop a sense of the expectation and begin to understand what leadership opportunities become available. These can be implemented in NSW schools as part of welcoming orientation sessions prior to the commencement of formal classes.

At Oban High School in Western Scotland, Principal Peter Bain, explained that as a response to having the largest student catchment area in Scotland, the school offers the broadest education possible. The school implements a house system, contextualised as clans, and have implemented a transitions program that runs prior to the commencement of the school year. The Summer Sensations program helps students from different areas and schools to make a smooth transition. The program includes sports, inside orienteering, arts and crafts. The program was designed to get students mixing in new friendship groups and to come to know their school. The success of the experience was for students to develop a strong sense of belonging and knowing that people are there for you in the inclusive culture.

Youth worker Jo Reynolds recognised the power of a proactive culture and inclusive climate in bridging the attainment gap for students. In this way, like the approach of Marquetta Thomas at Infinity School, the culture sought transformation. At Oban the aim was to build personal pride and resilience as a method to break cycles of regional marginalisation and endemic poverty. School climate and culture is an important determinant of learning. It frames the moral imperatives for learning, develops a transformational agenda and takes learning beyond the mechanics of content acquisition. School culture and the people in schools are important elements in developing powerful learning partnerships. The organisational units of house, crew and clan are form relationships and a sense of belonging within schools. Successful transitions and engagement are linked to student well-being and a well-developed sense of belonging. In NSW schools, smaller organisational units allow for the development of student leadership and agency such that students coming in to large schools are not left to work their way through the years, but have a recognised place within the school at all age level.

## Research and policy partners

For schools to maintain currency, have confidence in their approach, and be able to measure success, they need research and regulatory partners. Some of the partners encountered were the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, and its Essential Elements: Schools To Watch (EE: STW) program, Illinois College of Education, Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE) consortium, Education Scotland and Republic Polytechnic Singapore. The major threads from these entities was the need for ways to support schools in their developmental endeavours and an urgency to embrace educational change.

In New York state, Brian Sherman is a member of the EE: STW leadership Team. EE: STW apply to the program developed by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle School Grades as a method of school improvement. In an age of schools’ regulation, teacher accreditation and inspectorial regimes like the UK’s Ofsted accreditation scheme, the strength of the STW program is that it is voluntary. Middle school educators demonstrate a particular dedication to their students who they know to be in some of the most difficult growth phases of their lives. STW educators seek to make the experience of schooling something that is relevant to young people, but which says most of all, you are worthy and you belong here.

STW schools adhere to seven Essential Elements and build their improvement agenda around a four-part rubric:

1. academic excellence
2. developmental responsiveness
3. social equity
4. organisation structures and processes are learning organisations that establish norms, structures, to support excellence.

EE: STW model collaboration, prefer inquiry learning to direct instruction, integrate programs, choose locally relevant projects, incorporate service learning and partner with connected agencies and institutions.

The development of connected learning for the 21st Century was the driving force in ideas encountered at Illinois College of Education. Australian expats Professor Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis promote New Learning as the subject of their educational research and development, New Learning looks to the architecture of knowledge itself. New Learning sets out as a meta-discipline, re-positioning education as the discipline of disciplines which can be used to find the foundations of human knowledge and identity as the source of other disciplines. Cope and Kalantzis recognise that the complementary forces of globalisation, social diversity, information technologies along with the rise of agentic learners and knowledge makers will continue to change expectations of the role of education.

In New Learning, teachers are not expected to transmit knowledge to students in a traditional way, but to redesign their teaching and spaces such that students are provided with clear scaffolds that will allow them to develop simultaneous peer learning dialogues of which the teacher is a part. This democratises knowledge and the learning as students become active knowledge producers. The learning ecology allows for continuous formative assessment in ways that replicate learning discourses in realms of experience outside of classrooms and school environments. The inclusive partnering of students becomes a sustainable possibility through developing a focus on the process of learning rather that products of learning. New Learning is scaffolded and regulated on rubrics, designed to be forward looking prompts rather than backward judgements of product produced.

Essential to the development of New Learning is the acquisition of strong foundational skills. Sandra Mirabelli and Michael Corcoran, working with the Ministry of Education in Ontario and the CODE consortium have been developing educators’ capacities to develop student literacy across disciplines. Through the Science Literacy Network (SLN), there has been a special focus on literacy in science, but they are developing exciting approaches across disciplines making unconventional curricular links between art and science for instance. This opens many possibilities; aside from the development of technical literacy skills, the program develops important critical literacies and subject content knowledge in an integrated way. Taking that approach further, the program brings Harvard’s Project Zero, Artful Thinking protocol to work. Students are encouraged to consider reading artworks and visual texts as a scientist might.

The SLN monitoring report shows demonstrated gains in student achievement of 10% along with better equipped students and more confident teachers. The reflections used throughout allowed teachers to articulate their thoughts on their learning, making visible transfer of student learning, frequency of observed student behaviours and evidence of changing practices.

Integrations were prevalent in many of the schools visited, projects such as Infinity School’s Geography Project and Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) leadership, Farnworth’s Pond Rehabilitation science project and single use plastics survey, or the highly crafted expedition’ of XP school. Singapore’s Centre for Educational Development at Republic Polytechnic (RP), Uma Letchumanan and Assistant Director Dr Abdul Khalid explained their approach to the development of gold standard problem and PBL.

At RP, inquiry is seen as the natural way of teaching and learning in order to foster lifelong learning. The inquiry approach is formal and directed to allow for recurrent learning and skills mastery. RP's iterative approach is also designed to accommodate learners through differentiated approaches that allow for individual learning trajectories. Letchumanan and Dr Khalid explained that because the students are involved intrinsically in the process to solve the problem set, they take active steps in the creation of knowledge.

Concurring with the work of Cope and Kalantzis, assessment is largely formative, conducted through the problems and occurring at daily or weekly points through the learning cycle. There are still summative assessments in the form of exams at course completion, but there is a current shift toward the production and assessment of portfolio and capstone projects.

While RP and Illinois College of Education develop their programs for tertiary contexts, the underpinning theory accords with much of what middle and secondary schools do so well. There are opportunities to scale the learning design in ways that could work for younger students.

# Conclusion

Effective transitions for children moving from primary to secondary school occur when their stage of life is acknowledged explicitly within learning design. Students in the transitions range respond favourably to middle school models in which they are known individually and in which emotional, physical and social changes are understood and treated with empathy by teachers, school leadership and school design. Students respond to schools that are democratic in tone, when programs are integrated, are locally relevant and which inspire a sense of fun while maintaining high expectations of student behaviour and standards of achievement.

To develop positive learning cultures and to maximise the developmental potential of children in the transition phases of their lives, schools and school leadership should purposefully examine the dominant culture of their local, regional, and national situations for structural inequities. When students are made aware of positive measures to open new worlds of experience, they become engaged in wider realms of experience and empowered by the possibilities presented. Learning design, interpersonal relationships, school architecture and purposefully directed aesthetics become powerful determinants of learning dispositions.

The middle schools visited demonstrated a preference for collaboration, inquiry learning integrated programs, and locally relevant content, incorporating service learning and partnerships with connected agencies and institutions. Project and problem based learning focussed on currency and student agency through active knowledge making become important approaches for student engagement.

In regional areas, schools are important hubs of community identity that develop not only economic life, but also cultural identity and community well-being. It is important that regional schools are funded in ways that recognise their unique value in rural, remote and regional locales.

In the 21st century, schools and students are connected, scrutinised and assessed in new ways. There needs to be high levels of support through online, theoretical and policy support. Partner programs like EE: STW recognise that good schools are those that set an improvement agenda; voluntary initiatives that are developmental, rather than inspectoral produce positive outcomes.

Globally connected students require new architectures of knowledge that can be afforded through the theoretical and practical application of New Learning and multi-literacies as presented by Cope and Kalantzis, Project Zero, Artful Thinking and the Science Literacy Network. Professional learning for teachers should be directed and iterative programs which anticipate emerging approaches so that teachers are able to remain current in their work and maintain relevance for transitions students.

Throughout the scholarship I have shared news and stories of the scholarship with local news outlets, within my school community and schools’ system. I maintained an extensive blog giving account of each of the visits made during the study tour. These were shared through my professional networks on Twitter and Facebook. Since returning I have made presentations to the staff in my college, I have presented to the Catholic Education, Canberra Goulburn (CECG) Southern Region Principals’ meeting, and will present to the CECG Assistant Principals’ Network during Semester 2 this year. I have also submitted an article to Education Review about the possibilities for Middle School education in Australia. Using the learning developed through the tour, I will be joining the CECG evidence forum program that seeks to develop best practice across our system of schools. I am grateful to the Premier’s Department and NSW government for the opportunity to make this study and would be happy to contribute to fora as required.

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**Schools and Universities and Site Visits**

1. Cherry Creek School District, Denver, Colorado. Michael Giles, Assistant Superintendent,
2. Infinity Middle School, Cherry Creek School District, Denver Colorado,<https://www.cherrycreekschools.org/Infinity>
3. The Ron Clark Academy, Atlanta Georgia, <http://www.ronclarkacademy.com/>
4. St Stephen of Hungary School, New York, NY., <https://www.saintstephenschool.org/index.cfm>
5. Loyola School, New York NY., <https://www.loyolanyc.org/>
6. The National Forum To Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, <https://www.middlegradesforum.org/>
7. Essential Elements: Schools to Watch, Recognition Program, <http://eestw.org/>
8. Farnsworth Middle School, Guilderland School District, Albany NY., <https://www.guilderlandschools.org/farnsworth-middle-school/>
9. Illinois College of Education: New Learning, <https://education.illinois.edu/epol/programs-degrees/ldl-nl>
10. The Council of Ontario Directors of Education, <http://www.ontariodirectors.ca/index.html>
11. Edugains, <http://www.edugains.ca/newsite/HOME/index.html>
12. XP School Doncaster, UK, <http://www.xpschool.org/>
13. Education Scotland, Glasgow, UK, <https://education.gov.scot/>
14. Oban High School, Oban UK, <http://www.obanhigh.argyll-bute.sch.uk/>
15. Republic Polytechnic, Singapore, <https://www.rp.edu.sg/learning-and-teaching>