



The thought that counts



Sunshine Coast Grammar School head of primary puts a premium on developing the ability to think effectively in all situations – for teachers and students.

By Madeleine Regan

Paul Clegg trained as a primary teacher and spent 10 years as a classroom teacher in a range of government schools. As a teacher-leader in Education Queensland, he gave in-services to teachers on the implementation of a whole-school approach to reading and high-level behaviour management strategies. He undertook further professional leadership in a five-member team rolling out the early-years prep curriculum in the Sunshine Coast region of Queensland. Clegg reflects: "This was a great professional opportunity to work with colleagues and see the diversity of schools. It led to my interest in leadership with its challenges and possibilities of influencing change in education at the grassroots."

After a year as assistant head at Sunshine Coast Grammar School, in the suburb of Forest Glen, Clegg became head of primary in 2008. Grammar, a Christian college for girls and boys, enrolls 1220 students, of which 570 are in the primary school. Clegg emphasises this is "a great size to create a strong sense of community". The

community feeling is also evident in the number of staff – 24 primary classroom teachers, six specialists and 14 assistants. Five staff members are on the leadership team. Two affiliated early-learning centres provide a smooth journey for children moving to school.

When Clegg reflects on what characterises Grammar, he refers to the strong sense of community, an image of "big hearts and curious minds" and the college's motto: 'Where passion meets purpose'. The families in the community largely comprise business owners and medical professionals, with many from interstate or overseas.

LEADING AND COACHING

The leadership team meets weekly, both as a team and through one-on-one professional conversations. Coaching conversations are part of the process of developing professional growth, relationships, trust and reflection on projects that are part of their roles. "Leadership team members have become

familiar with coaching processes," Clegg says. "They drill down to the evidence of impact and ask themselves, 'Every minute, every hour, every day, what is my impact?' " The focus on coaching relates to the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) Standards and "it develops a professional growth culture, one conversation at a time", Clegg says.

Leadership team members have worked with a consultant over the last two years to develop the concept of 'self and others' in their role as instructional leaders. The idea is to engage in professional conversations to stimulate thinking, growth and action. Part of the approach has involved selecting scenarios relating to difficult or coaching conversations. Actors and leaders are videoed playing out the scenarios authentically, using different models of conversation. The leaders and a psychologist analyse the interactions. They observe how they 'turn up' during a conversation, and see their body language and the end result of their communication. The leaders acknowledge that professional conversations have an impact, build relationships and reinforce core values that contribute to the learning culture at Grammar. Clegg believes in developing the practice of shared influence in teacher and student learning, and cites the work of John Hattie. He promotes the concept of impact through 'collective efficacy' and the collective ability of teachers to promote successful student outcomes.

A THINKING SCHOOL CULTURE

Clegg says he believes it's important for students to acquire creative, critical thinking, collaboration and problem-solving skills from the first years of schooling. "Teachers are working with students whose entire lives are immersed in a digitally connected, fast-paced environment," he explains. "They have to keep meeting challenges to assist students in preparing for an ever-changing future and to participate in a global digitised world where creativity and critical thinking will be highly valued. Teaching and learning experiences need to allow students to be creative innovators and entrepreneurial in the future."

The first steps in further developing a thinking school culture at Grammar began

in 2013. After an exercise that required teachers to reflect on and evaluate their use of visible thinking strategies, Clegg and his leadership team devised a professional learning program to further develop a thinking school culture. Out of this was formed the Primary School Project Team, which examined contemporary educational researchers whose work outlined the importance of thinking skills for citizens participating in the 21st-century world. They cited the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority general capability of critical and creative thinking and formed a critical relationship with US education consultant Mark Church from Harvard University. Church co-authored *Making Thinking Visible*.

The team used the metaphor of a restaurant to present a 'menu of thinking' for the professional learning project. After introductory sessions, individual teachers and teams selected action research projects to develop active thinking in their classrooms. Examples of topics undertaken by teachers included: developing planning templates with thinking icons and prompts; modifying thinking routines for early-years students; effective questioning to promote thinking; using thinking routines for students to evaluate their processes for learning spelling; design of collaborative, flexible furniture that promotes thinking; and healthy foods that assist with thinking. Teachers and teams published and presented their findings to their colleagues.

When teachers measured their understanding of active thinking after the second action research cycle, results demonstrated the high impact of the menu of thinking on professional learning. More than 85 per cent of teachers reported significant growth in their professional

learning through developing active thinking in their classrooms. Results of student interviews showed a 76 per cent improvement in their ability to articulate thinking strategies and processes and how to make their thinking visible. The professional learning agenda continues to include the development of a thinking school culture. "Thinking is the glue and meaningful link between all skills students need at school and that we all require to thrive in the 21st century," Clegg says.

INVOLVEMENT IN THE PROFESSION

Clegg is an active member of the Independent Primary School Heads Association (IPSHA), Queensland Branch. Since 2013, he has been a member of the Professional Development Committee and is the AITSL representative for IPSHA. He has been a member of working committees for two state conferences, and is on the organising committee for the 2018 IPSHA national conference.

Clegg is also a recipient of a 2015 Principals Australia Institute John Laing Award for Professional Development. He acknowledges the role of mentoring in the context of school leadership. It has been an important aspect of his involvement in the profession. He is now a 'critical friend' and mentor of a new head of a school.

"I believe collegiality is a crucial aspect of professional learning," he says. "There is a collective wisdom among school leaders, and it needs to be shared, especially with colleagues in new roles of responsibility. I continue to learn a lot from other leaders. Our network is our net worth as leaders." ■

Madeleine Regan is a writer at Principals Australia Institute.



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