



Alberton

PRIMARY SCHOOL

discovery • success • diversity • well being • belonging

“Achieving the Balance – Being and Becoming”

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Allana Corbin, at the 2007 APPA Conference, pointed out that life is not a trial run, we rarely get a second chance at it. Despite this, for generations we have reinforced the concept of schooling being about preparing for ‘life’, thus somehow discounting 17% - 22% of the average lifespan depending on whether you are Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal. Life is not a trial run so I put the challenge to pre-schools and schools to support young people to ‘be’ now while also preparing to ‘become’.

In 2005, staff at Alberton Primary School believed the traditional model of schooling was no longer working for their community of learners [a high percentage of Aboriginal students and from low socio-economic backgrounds] so in 2006 implemented radical curriculum and organisational changes. Our model of learning is designed to meet the requirements of a dynamic and demanding society, to encourage the asking of questions and seeking of answers and to set young people on a path that leads to ongoing success and a love of learning. As Principal of the P-7 school, I asked myself the following questions in leading our school towards achieving the balance and trying to answer my challenge. Do our structures for student voice honour students as citizens now? Does our curriculum help prepare our students to be leaders towards their preferred futures?

We have a curriculum based strongly on our school values; R-7 student groupings; shared leadership responsibilities; specific wellbeing interventions and development of engaging learning environments. We are supporting the development of thoughtful young people who understand themselves as learners, who are able to communicate clearly and confidently and who understand the real meaning of community.

The restructured curriculum and pedagogy allow students to have power over their learning, input into the processes for learning and to connect their learning to their world-view. This happens through having a lot of choice in the learning activities they participate in. Students choose from 8 fitness options daily. They choose from upwards of 10 choices during Discovery, four afternoons a week, covering the range of curriculum areas, ranging from 1 lesson commitments to weekly commitments for a year. The students are taking more responsibility for their learning through being provided with these daily opportunities to choose learning tasks. We still have a long way to go for all students to make consistently wise choices but the distance travelled by all students makes us optimistic that this is achievable by the time our junior students graduate from Alberton.

It is clear that a growing number of students are taking responsibility for the success of some programs and are contributing more and more to their learning and that of others. Some students now program for and teach during our Discovery sessions each afternoon, some students have built classroom resources and school facilities [The Shed program], some students are responsible for school to community communication [Webmasters and Newsletter Publishers] and most students are peer tutors. The sense of ownership that students have for the school and belonging to it has grown significantly by being allowed and expected to contribute and be – now.

It has been said many times that a picture is worth 1000 words. We work on the basis that an experience is worth 1000 pictures. We try to set up authentic learning experiences that require students to engage in the experience and usually at a deeper level, than if they were learning about. Examples range from simple composting and worm farms with our junior students where they manage the scraps from our daily fruit program and use the compost for the 'Trailblazers' Indigenous plant trail group. We have developed a marine science room that has students setting up the second breeding phase of the repatriation program for Southern Purple Spotted Gudgeon, now extinct in the wild. These students will play a significant role in this incredibly important South Australian project. They will be responsible for the care and breeding of an invaluable fish. The students are active not passive learners and citizens who are skilled up to have the world put back in their hands.

Schools and junior sporting teams are quite possibly the only locations in society where people of the same age only have to work together. So not only do schools not represent the rest of society they also do not prepare students to work with others who have differing ages therefore significantly differing levels of experience. At Alberton Primary School, we group our students primarily in Reception to Year 7 groups. We call them our Magpie groups. The name links back to our school logo. Each of the Magpie groups is a community with great diversity. This has fostered a spirit of symbiosis between the students. Our older students, primarily but not exclusively, bring leadership and mentoring to each group and our younger students bring wonderment and enthusiasm. There are times throughout the day that students of similar ages will come together to work, just as there are other times that students of similar interests will have time to work with one another. There has been a significant growth in awareness of others, empathy, tolerance, care and respect between students since establishing these groupings.

Our students are increasingly becoming aware of themselves as learners also, through weekly reflections and a focus on learning the tools for learning. All students have a journal that they have maintained for up to three years so far. They have the opportunity to record their reflections at any time but there is a specific time allocated most Fridays for directed reflection. Students are taught a range of reflective tools and organisers to help them reflect back on the past week, a specific goal they had set or a specific event within their week. They also have the opportunity to look forward to the next week and set academic, social or behavioural goals for themselves. For many students these journals provide an amazing insight into their learning journeys. As well as their reflection time, students have explored their learning strengths/preferences and areas of greatest challenges through exposure to such things as Gardner's Multiple Intelligences and Hermann's Brain Dominances.

There is a range of leadership opportunities now available for students with and without labels. Students are responsible, with support, for the development and maintenance of the school website, for publication of the school newsletter and maintaining the school's Art room and supplies. We have a Student Governing Council and Nunga Executive that participate in school decisions and problem solving. Their involvement in higher level issues has led them to not get around to organising a disco for a couple of years. Students negotiate with teachers to teach Discovery activities that are carefully planned with learning outcomes and organisational requirements in mind. Students voluntarily mentor others and tutor others as a daily occurrence. A group of 46 students have been identified as Alberton Ambassadors. These students consistently live the school's values, philosophy and implement the keys to success [as per 'Program Achieve']. The ambassadors have the role of informing visitors and mentoring their peers about constructive learning qualities and behaviours.

The concept of - 'Do as I say not as I do!' does not cut it with young people any more. Respect has to be earned by educators and has to be modelled. At Alberton Primary School we aspire towards being partners in learning with the students. However, we also make it clear that there will be times, that as the professionals and with duty of care, we will have to take control. Students do see staff modelling behaviours we reinforce such as respectful interactions, risk-taking, error-making and being human! Management of harassment and inappropriate behaviour is based on a restorative philosophy, ensuring that all situations allow for learning, empowerment and justice.

Children of the 'Y' generation think in more immediate terms than previous generations. Education must therefore be about addressing their needs and who they are now rather than focussing on what they might be in the distant future. However we do work with students to develop a set of skills that we believe to be valuable competencies at present and for any career path they may take in the future. We have developed what we refer to as the 'Tool Shed', a set of skills, attributes and learning tools that we believe students need to develop competency in to manage their life at school and be successful in their pathway beyond school. As our understanding of learning and the changing world improves, new tools are added to the tool shed to ensure all students are equipped for success in multiple contexts. To complement the tool shed, we have identified a set of ten qualities of a lifelong learners that will soon be shared with students. These ideas have stemmed from the work of Guy Claxton and of the International Baccalaureate's Lerner Profile.

To achieve the cultural, organisational and curriculum changes implemented for achieving the balance, staff enact Gandhi's philosophy that "we must become the change we want to see." The staff of Alberton Primary School are involved with vision building, balanced with action. The same philosophy and learning culture established for students is being developed simultaneously for staff. Staff have a strong voice in the directions of the school and are leaders towards their preferred future for schooling. A strong sense of staff community has been established with a diversity of years of experiences and types of experience contributing to an enormous combined capacity. The staff have ownership of the curriculum and its delivery because they created it. The concept of 'leaders without labels' was a teacher's idea to describe the work of all staff. There are a range of staff reflection tools, including a combined journal. A set of beliefs about learning and matching skills/pedagogies has been shared and is being documented and refined.

At Alberton Primary School, each student and staff member is encouraged and given the opportunity to 'Be It' and every student and staff member is also supported to 'Become It.'