

Adapting to Teaching and Learning in Open-Plan Schools

Vaughan Prain, Peter Cox, Craig Deed, Debra Edwards, Cathleen Farrelly, Mary Keeffe, Valerie Lovejoy, Lucy Mow, Peter Sellings, Bruce Waldrip and Zali Yager (Eds.)



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Edited by

**Vaughan Prain, Peter Cox, Craig Deed, Debra Edwards, Cathleen Farrelly,
Mary Keeffe, Valerie Lovejoy, Lucy Mow**

La Trobe University, Australia

Peter Sellings

Federation University, Australia

Bruce Waldrip

University of Tasmania, Australia

and

Zali Yager

Victoria University, Australia



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ACRONYMS

ACARA	Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority
BEP	Bendigo Education Plan
BLPCP	Bendigo Loddon Primary Care Partnership
DEECD	Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (Victoria)
ICSEA	Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program-Literacy and Numeracy
PLEQ	Personalised Learning Experience Questionnaire
SAR	Students as Researchers
SES	Socio-economic Status
SRC	Students' Representative Council
SSC	Student Support Centre
TA	Teacher Advisor

SECTION ONE
OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH

VAUGHAN PRAIN, PETER COX, CRAIG DEED, DEBRA EDWARDS,
CATHLEEN FARRELLY, MARY KEEFFE, VALERIE LOVEJOY, LUCY
MOW, PETER SELLINGS, BRUCE WALDRIP & ZALI YAGER

1. RESEARCHING THE OUTCOMES OF THE BENDIGO EDUCATION PLAN

CHANGING SCHOOL SETTINGS

For many reasons educators in this century are increasingly concerned about how to imagine and enact successful secondary education (Fullen, 2007; Good & Brophy, 2008). This is partly due to broad recognition that education systems play a key role in enabling or constraining individual, subgroup, and national capabilities (Hallinger, 2011; OECD, 2010, 2014). Another contributor to this concern is the rise of comparative accounts of educational success within and between nations in high stakes subjects, such as science and mathematics, leading to calls for new approaches for under-performing cohorts (PISA, 2012; Tienken, 2013). At the same time, multiple uncertainties and contested views about what knowledge, skills, and values might count as evidence of success now, and in the future, influence curricular prescriptions. This is evident in debates about appropriate topics and sequences in national curriculum documents on compulsory subjects, such as mathematics and literacy (Green & Beavis, 2013; Oates, 2011).

Research over the last thirty years has also amplified our sense of how much individual learners differ within and between ethnic and other subgroups, posing increasingly complex demands on curricular design for all students. Within the challenge of achieving equitable educational outcomes, improving regional students' academic performance and wellbeing remains a concern for many education systems worldwide, including in Australia. As often noted, the health and career prospects of these students tend to remain inferior to their metropolitan counterparts, especially in the case of students of low socio-economic status (SES) (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008; Lyons, Cooksey, Panizzon, Parnell, & Pegg, 2006; Thomson & De Bortoli, 2008).

Education researchers also claim that systems and methods developed for a different century's conditions and agendas now seem inadequate to address the new and complex needs of all students, as well as national and global aspirations. This inadequacy results in a widespread rhetoric regarding the need for education systems to be adaptable in producing life-long learners who can team, communicate,

be creative and critical problem-solvers, and have a sense of global responsibility. However, translating this rhetoric into workable curricular practices remains an ongoing matter. In a world of increased unpredictability, techno hyper-connectivity, accelerating social and economic change, highly stratified life chances, and profound concerns about sustainable futures, educators agree on the pressing need to rethink what and how students learn. These new ways include fresh curricular content in some subjects, altered teaching and learning methods, and changes to the physical/virtual settings for secondary education, including up-scaling learning communities into open-plan layouts. All these changes interact in some school contexts to produce predictable and unexpected challenges, opportunities, and necessity for adaptation, and new knowledge about teaching and learning in these settings.

THE BENDIGO EDUCATION PLAN

It is one such context and this new knowledge that we focus on in this book. We report on a three-year Australian Research Council study (2011-2013), *Improving Regional Secondary Students' Learning and Wellbeing* (IRL), where we aimed to identify and analyse the outcomes of an ambitious, large-scale approach to address these curricular demands and challenges. The context is a cohort of over 3000 predominantly low SES secondary students in regional Australia. This approach, the Bendigo Education Plan (BEP), was devised by a group of local educators to provide a more effective, innovative, future-oriented secondary education in this city for these students (Bendigo Education Plan Steering Committee, 2005). The Plan entailed many strategies, including designing and building four new open-plan schools, extensive work on curriculum reform to enable differentiation and personalised learning, systematic teacher professional learning, and attempts to link the schools more closely to their communities. Our research also included a comparative study of two like regional schools in Australia with similar socio-economic profiles to the schools in Bendigo, but where students learnt predominantly in traditional classroom settings.

Given the well-known difficulties of improving the life chances of low SES students in many western countries (see Domina & Saldana, 2011), our research is timely in providing new knowledge about enablers and constraints to achieve effective student learning and wellbeing in these settings. Inasmuch as there is an agreed orthodoxy about teaching disadvantaged students, many educators prescribe a singular approach of explicit teacher-directed instruction with minimal student choice on learning methods and topic focus (Halliday & Martin, 1994). These students, these educators assert, are not ready for, or capable of gaining from, any alternatives. However, evidence of success for this singular approach is at best patchy (see Domina & Saldana, 2011). Thus, our study is a complex story of considerable teacher and student experimentation over time with new blended approaches under various constraints and opportunities. We track attempts in these schools to develop effective, diverse practices in open-plan settings where students were expected to engage meaningfully in large groups, smaller subgroups and as individuals.

This question of the ways in which effective collective and individualised learning and wellbeing for both teachers and students can be organised and achieved in these new settings is fundamental to this story, and to education systems more broadly. It is the question of the extent to which institutionalised learning can be tailored to individual, group and community needs, thus meeting multiple expectations in ways that engage and prove workable for participants. In this case, it is a story of varying degrees of effective adaptation and successful learning in an initial transition phase in these new settings. So often in the last ten years, schools have been exhorted to become adaptive, dynamic learning networks (Akinsanmi, 2011; Ledward & Hirata, 2011), and our study highlights one creative, extensive, collaborative, community-building approach to try to achieve this outcome.

In this book we focus particularly on teacher and student adaptation to the idea/practice of an up-scaled learning community in a setting that includes an open-plan layout. While all the curricular initiatives of the BEP posed challenges and demands for teachers and students, and influenced outcomes, the new settings were a significant catalyst to prompt and support teacher change in beliefs and practices. Teachers were compelled to consider how to optimise their potential to enhance student learning, while at the same time minimising potential obstacles or difficulties created by these new spaces. These included teacher/student resistance to change, increased noise levels, student distraction, and lack of a history of proven practices. Our book is a record of what was tried, why, and what participants learnt from these attempts.

In tracking and explaining these changes, our research expands on the limited research literature around the effects of open-plan settings on teachers' practical reasoning, student learning gains, and wellbeing. While there is an extensive research literature on factors promoting successful teacher and whole-school change in traditional settings (Fullan, 2007), our study is novel in looking at how these factors play out in these new settings. Past researchers have claimed only modest gains in such settings, mainly in terms of improved student wellbeing (see Hattie, 2009). However, we develop a case for explaining what, and how, the new settings, combined with the practical reasoning of teachers, contributed to changes to student learning processes, outcomes, and wellbeing, as teachers and students transitioned to productive new practices.

INTERPRETING CHANGES IN THE OPEN-PLAN SETTINGS

Our research team consisted of nine teacher educators with expertise in inclusive education, literacy education, mathematics and science education, curriculum development, and qualitative and quantitative research methods. A research officer and two doctoral students also contributed to our research design, enactment, and analyses. None of us had participated in the design of the BEP, but we were broadly sympathetic to the need for significant curricular change to alter learning outcomes for this student cohort. In characterising and explaining changes to teachers' and

students' beliefs and practices, we saw the necessity to draw on complementary socio-cultural, ecological, pedagogical, psychological, and philosophical theoretical perspectives. We elaborate on each of these frameworks in subsequent chapters, but the following points provide an introduction to our thinking on key aspects of each lens.

Socio-cultural Perspectives

We were interested in the effects of a community focus in these schools, where each school was organised into four learning communities of 150-300 students in separate buildings. From an activity system perspective, participants needed to act out new roles, rules, goals, outcomes, and new divisions of labour, drawing on new and old material, and symbolic tools to shape the scope and nature of activities (see Engeström, 1999). In traditional schools, labour is divided in the activity system into hierarchies of control and responsibility in school administration, where the curriculum is 'managed' through tight organisation of time, space, and student movement during the school day. Responsibility for learning normally devolves to teachers who enable and monitor learning and wellbeing in 'private' classes of up to 30 students.

The new up-scaled communities necessitate review and possible take-up of fresh practices, altering both teachers' and students' spheres of influence. In the past, a sphere of influence has been loosely defined in terms of school/community links around influences on practices (see Epstein, 1996). For the purposes of our study, we define spheres of influence as teacher and student perceptions, and exercise of their individual and collective agency. This can be defined both in terms of the degree (amount of influence on, and responsibility for, others in maintaining or changing individual/collective practices/learning over time), and areas of focus (influence on pedagogical decisions around what, when, where, how, why, with whom, and at what pace, students learn). We recognise that both teachers' and students' spheres of influence can also include broader cultural matters such as contributions to the ethos and values that shape (and form the bases for judging) participant behaviour.

In a traditional school setting, a teacher's sphere of influence is usually clearly prescribed, predictable, and often entails reproducing a school's history of practice and ethos around curricular processes, whether these are traditional or innovative. Teachers and students have unfolding individual and collective understandings of what practices are thinkable and doable in the context of their school's culture and history, often embedded in narratives of accepting or resisting externally-imposed or locally-initiated changes. Spheres of influence in the new settings, we argue, are more malleable, especially in the early years of transition. Roles of leader, staff member, student advocate, subject coordinator, student, and school council member are more emergent, improvised, and pragmatically rationalised. The new settings unsettle past expressions of school culture and agency, and

stimulate or necessitate new possibilities. This implies that a sphere of influence is multi-dimensional in terms of areas of application, but also in terms of scale, duration, and stability, or susceptibility, to alteration (both perceived and actual). For example, in an open-plan setting, teachers may exercise a new or enhanced sphere of influence when they (a) team to negotiate levels of noise in adjacent learning activities in an open space during a class, (b) advocate with colleagues for an individual student around a personal or academic problem, (c) design, enact and evaluate a team-generated cross-curricular or co-curricular learning experience, (d) seek, receive and act upon explicit student feedback on the effectiveness of their teaching, and (e) propose changes to the structuring of time and space in their open-plan setting. Students also exercise spheres of influence in many ways, individually and collectively, including when they (a) contribute to effective group learning sequences and (b) make suggestions about changes to, or provide feedback on, teaching/learning and communication practices. The new settings provide scope for community leaders and other teachers to attempt to adapt old curriculum practices and resources to new contexts, or envisage and enact fresh ones.

In theorising teamwork in these settings, we were interested to see the extent to which Edwards' (2011, p. 34) account of "relational agency", understood as negotiated mutual responsibility between expert participants, could explain the character of (and the means to develop) new expressions of agency in these new settings (see especially chapter 3 for elaboration of this case). This raises sharply the question of the degree to which students' 'expertise', including their rights and experiential knowledge of their own learning, should influence school practices and the development of teacher expertise (see chapters 3, 6, 9, and 10 for further discussion). For Edwards (2011), relational agency is about effective co-ordination/integration of diverse professional expertise for the benefit of the student/child, and clearly this applies to teacher teamwork; however, in the school setting students can also support peer and teacher learning.

We were also interested in how these new expressions of agency relate more broadly to change processes. We agree with Engeström (2001, p. 137) that major changes to activity systems can arise from attempts by agents to address perceived internal contradictions and conflicts (see chapters 6, 9 and 10). However, our three-year research identified multiple catalysts leading to both large and incremental changes. These included: individual or group dissatisfaction with the practicability of an approach or organisational feature (see chapters 5 and 10); experiential prompts from working in these new open-plan settings leading to collaborative experimentation (see chapters 5 and 7); extensions of prior teacher teamwork (see chapter 7); external pressures on performance in high stakes subjects (see chapters 7 and 10); staff employment changes leading to advocacy by new staff of imported 'proven' new methods (see chapter 11, and Prain et al., in press); and student inputs to curricular matters (see chapter 10).

Ecological Perspectives

We were interested to explain how interactions between participants and physical/cultural resources and tools influenced adaptive and interactive practices in these settings. In explaining these reciprocities, we drew on affordance theory (see Gibson, 1986; Greeno, 1994) (see chapters 7, 8 and 10), and on Dunbar's (1993) account of optimal scales for community building (see chapters 3 and 5). Drawing on Gibson (1986), Greeno (1994) Norman (1999) and others, we define affordances as features in the environment that prompt and sustain an agent's or team's goals, where primary affordances such as increased visibility and larger space enable secondary affordances such as reconfigured group sizes. By 'features', we mean both physical properties, (such as a large open-plan space as an affordance for curricular differentiation, by enabling complex, temporary, flexible groupings of students working with a team of teachers), and also properties of culturally-designed objects (such as a computer program feature that affords teachers opportunities to customise/constrain/expand circulation of feedback by controlling recipient access of online messages to particular students, their parents and relevant teaching staff). We well know that the concept of 'affordance' has been stripped of explanatory power in recent times by being applied to anything that can be understood as an enabling effect or object (eg. my foot is an affordance for walking). Thus we use this concept in our study to interpret precise influences of features, as discussed above, on adaptive changes to curricular enactment.

Pedagogical Perspectives

The settings prompted many new insights for us and the participant teachers into curriculum development in these new settings, but in this study we were particularly interested in how differentiation and attempts to personalise learning were understood and enacted (see Prain et al., 2013). In seeking to conceptualise effective learning in this context, and account for teacher development of a curriculum with depth, and provision of differentiated learning tasks and experiences, we develop our case for how personalising learning can be understood and experienced. We claim that personalising learning should be understood multi-dimensionally, and include academic, social, and cultural dimensions (see Prain et al., in press).

Philosophical Pragmatism

As individual researchers, we use different but related frameworks to guide our insights into curricular design and effects. These include feminist critical discourse analysis (Farrelly, O'Brien, & Prain, 2007), phenomenological studies of participant meaning-making (Keeffe & Andrews, 2011), and socio-cultural and socio-semiotic theories about learning and meaning-making (Alterator & Deed, 2013; Tytler, Prain, Hubber, & Waldrip, 2013).

However, in interpreting teacher and student adaptive processes and experimentation to address problem-solving around curricular design and enactment, we draw broadly on pragmatist theories of meaning in this study. By ‘pragmatist’ perspectives we do not mean common-usage understandings of actions based on expediency or compromise. Rather, we view a pragmatist theory of meaning as understandings produced by and for participants through their engagement in cultural/material practices and their analyses of these practices’ effects in a particular historical context (see Dewey, 1996; Wittgenstein, 1972; Peirce, 1931–58; Engeström, 1999; Edwards, 2005; Billett, 2006; Vygotsky, 1986). From this broad umbrella of cultural/historical perspectives, new knowledge is understood as justified beliefs derived from analyses of past accounts of knowledge/values/practices, and their application to attempted new practices and subsequent outcomes. Following Dewey (1996), we conceptualise teacher adaptive processes in this context as a pragmatist sequence of problem/value recognition, analysis of key elements, creative development of possible solutions, trialling, and review.

Our own form of inquiry paralleled these teacher processes as we aimed to understand and explain changes to participant practices, beliefs and outcomes in these learning communities. We adopted this approach because it provides both fine-grain and larger perspectives and methodologies for interpreting teachers’ and students’ practical reasoning around new roles, altered activities and interactions, and their effects. The approach is also inherently flexible for interpreting fresh practices in the context of mainstream schooling, and the rationales for changes to, or maintenance of, practices over time. In focusing on adaptation, we do not presume that these new activity systems are moving teleologically to an ideal version of schooling practice, or that past approaches/structures are always inferior approximations. The idea of an optimal learning community as the basis for conducting effective schooling has a very long history in educational theory/practice (Lee & Smith, 1997; Battisch, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997). In the BEP, up-scaling the human and physical resources is the way in which an optimal learning community has been conceptualised. In this book we track the practices, participant reasoning, and learning and wellbeing outcomes arising from these new conditions for schooling for this student cohort.

Sociocultural Theories about Distributed Leadership

We draw on Gronn’s (2002) notion of hybridised, distributed leadership, and on Andrews et al.’s (2011) account of the principles of parallel leadership to examine the way that leadership in these schools is enacted and links with a sense of belonging, trust, and school-wide capacity to enable learning (see chapter 6). Our study explores the way that traditional boundaries of leadership between teachers and students become blurred by pedagogical principles determined by the co-construction of knowledge, the differentiated curriculum, and student autonomy. As teacher and student agency develops in each learning community, the momentum turns towards leadership as a form of personal and professional autonomy. A hybrid

form of distributed leadership is required that gives constructive support to teachers, colleagues, and students as they practise and share decision-making in complex educational contexts. The influences of pedagogical change and the affordances of the open-plan settings inform the transition from top-down, hierarchical leadership to more democratic and distributed leadership. Gronn (2009) describes the co-existence of a centralised authority and collegial, democratised, shared interests in leadership activities and responsibilities as a form of hybridised leadership that develops over time. The schools in this study, experience this form of leadership as an emergent process that fluctuates from traditional and reactive to flexible and responsive leadership in various phases and contexts. Student voice, for example is an emergent feature of changing patterns of leadership that challenge school structures for an authentic place and purpose. Keeffe and Andrews (2011) emphasise the importance of a school-wide pedagogy that is core to all leadership actions and decisions, particularly as it relates to a shared vision of learning. It is in this space that the link between school leadership and learning is made explicit and explored.

THE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT OF THE BEP

The BEP was devised in 2005 to address concerns typically associated with a predominantly low SES regional secondary student cohort. These included low rates of school attendance, modest student academic performance when compared with metropolitan counterparts, and persistent signs of poor student wellbeing (BEP, 2005). These are evident in high rates of teenage pregnancy, bullying, high levels of psychological distress, and disengagement (see Bendigo Loddon Primary Care Partnership Population Health Profile, 2013). The real retention rate in 2005 from Year 7 to Year 12 was estimated to be approximately 75% (BEP 2005). (In 2011, when we began this study, the student retention rate from Year 7 to Year 12 had fallen further to approximately 72.6%, below the state average of 82.6%). Average study scores for the Year 12 Victorian Certificate of Education at the Senior College (Years 11-12) over the period 2002-4 had been static in the modest range 29.5 to 29.7 out of 50, and below a like school average of 31. The Plan also entailed the demolition of five Years 7-10 schools, and rebuilding four Years 7-10 schools, with each school structured into four open-plan communities. The four Years 7-10 schools have a significant number of students in the lowest SES group, as judged by youth allowance payments (ranging from 32 to 52% per school). These payments are part of an Australian government scheme to provide financial support to low income families to meet student education costs. Very few students from the Years 7-10 schools enrol in higher-level mathematics and physical science subjects at the Senior College. In the Attitudes to School Survey 2004-2005, reported in the BEP (2005), students rated highly the quality of teacher instruction and feedback, while teacher effectiveness, fairness, firmness, energy, and willingness to help with personal problems were consistently rated less positively. Students rated their connectedness to peers, motivation to learn, and self-esteem highly, but rated connectedness to

school and teachers lowest. The BEP was formulated to address these conditions, and was developed over two years with input from various steering committees for each school, and from the Regional Office of Education, with input from local university educators, principals, teachers, community leaders, and health service providers.

Aims of the BEP

The BEP aimed to improve educational outcomes by ensuring:

- substantial improvement in student retention from Years 7–12;
- significant increase in the range of subjects available to students in Years 9–10;
- significant improvement in student attendance in Years 7–10;
- greater challenge for all students, particularly high-achieving students;
- improved student engagement and interest in subjects, particularly for average-achieving and low-achieving students, and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds;
- improved teaching methods, classroom management, discipline and wellbeing of students.

Given the educational context, we consider this set of aims appropriate for this education system, and a reasonable starting point for characterising success, even if precise accounts of how gains were to be measured were not specified in the Plan.

BEP Strategies

To achieve these goals, the BEP writers proposed major strategies as well as a range of curricular innovations. The major strategies focused on (1) rebuilding four schools using contemporary design principles, (2) curricular reform leading to a more explicit, differentiated curriculum that replaced a traditional age-based curriculum with a stage-based one, based on the state-mandated curriculum; and (3) the development of teacher professional knowledge to enable effective teaching, learning and student wellbeing in these new settings. The budget for implementing these strategies included capital investment in building the new schools on existing school sites (\$94 million 2005-2012), and recurrent additional staffing and teacher professional learning investment in curricular change (\$600000 annually in 2007, 2008, 2009). While each strategy is complementary in principle, they represent collectively a significant change to schooling practices in this context, and posed major challenges to teachers' professional knowledge and adaptive skills.

Drawing on Nair (2006), the design principles for the new schools entailed building large flexible spaces to allow teams of teachers to work with up to 125 students at a time, where each school consisted of four self-contained learning communities, each with two learning neighbourhoods per community. The idea of up-scaling the traditional classroom community of 30 students (by five- to ten-fold) was based on several considerations. These included a belief that the larger community-based

organisation of schooling was justified, based on Dunbar's (1993) anthropological claim that there was an optimal community size of 250 people for building personal relationships and achieving bonding. This design was intended to maximise student access to a rich communal learning environment, where every student would know, to a greater or lesser extent, the members of their learning community, as well as learn how to be an active, integrated member of that community. The students would have more freedom of contact with a larger group of teachers and students, facilitating more informal learning. Spaces were designed to accommodate multiple users and multiple purposes concurrently and consecutively, with use of formal and informal furniture pointing to possible usage. In these neighbourhoods, ICT access was intended to be ubiquitous, where movable furniture would further enhance usage and support flexibility. The buildings were to be designed to integrate previously discrete functions, so that eating areas and formal/informal areas could support sharing and learning throughout the school day. Design features and functions were intended to enable optimal teacher-student relationships, with open staff rooms, visual links between all areas, and minimal exclusion zones.

In 2013 the four schools vary in size from 553 to 1223 students, but the following diagram (Figure 1.1) represents an initial blueprint of how these principles were translated into the design for a typical learning community. The design was intended to accommodate a minimum of 150 students and seven community-based teachers as well as visiting teachers for specialist subjects such as language learning. The design included a welcoming open area (see Einstein foyer), and the total space of the community was expected to provide flexible settings and opportunities for formal and informal learning. These included not only the large open-plan areas for learning neighbourhoods, but also smaller spaces, such as the Socratic Studio with

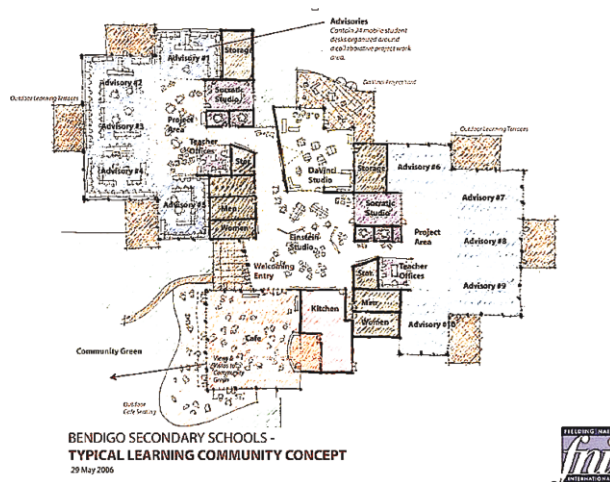


Figure 1.1. Proposed design and usage of a typical learning community.

its traditional closed classroom space, the Da Vinci Studio (the science/art areas for specific subject study), and smaller interview rooms for group-work and meetings. Teacher offices were open areas attached to neighbourhoods. Each school design also had new technology and performing arts buildings as separate learning areas.

The listed possible activities in the open areas point to the vague, aspirational aspects of the design. They did not specify precisely what the relationship between the types of seating layout and intended activities could be, including the advisory groupings. The regimentation of the indicated seating layout in some areas pointed to traditional models of the classroom as a mini-auditorium where learning was focused through a teacher out the front using a whiteboard, while other areas were presented as informal. The conceptual or practical justification for this division of space usage, and transitions between kinds of usage, was left tacit, or for teacher experimentation. The prescription that art and science classes should share the same space represented a major break with traditional practices, and implied significant capacity for professional collaboration and learning by teachers in each subject. These communities were also designed to promote potential sharing of a range of facilities with local communities and to create environments that prompted more learner freedom and creativity.

This early template points to an innocent trust that questions of structure of the syllabus, student transitions between activities, protocols of student behaviour, and expectations of student roles could be easily established through a combination of ‘open’ and ‘closed’ spaces, and shared perspectives by all participants. However, our research indicates that these new up-scaled learning communities posed many challenges around organisation of time and space, community leadership, teacher teamwork, decision-making about space use, student behaviour protocols, and actual and desirable teacher and student spheres of influence. These challenges were addressed in multiple ways, as noted in subsequent chapters.

CURRICULUM RENEWAL

While the new buildings were a major catalyst for possible changes to schooling practices, the BEP writers envisaged a new, more robust, differentiated curriculum as a crucial symbolic tool to achieve student learning and wellbeing gains. Drawing on Tomlinson (2005), Seaton (2002) and others, the BEP aimed to replace an age-based curriculum with a stage-based one, where the curriculum was differentiated to address the needs and capabilities of all learners. For Tomlinson, a curriculum is differentiated when students are given both group and individual tasks that enable learning experiences at different levels, so that all students can engage at a level and pace appropriate to them. The BEP (2005) also claimed that an effective curriculum had the following features:

- developmental needs of all students are addressed;
- higher-order thinking is integrated into all subjects;

- student perspectives and learning styles are addressed;
- students participate in negotiating aspects of content, modes of learning and assessment;
- principles of social justice and equity underpin the curriculum;
- curricular areas are integrated where appropriate;
- strong links to the community promote student independence, interdependence and self-motivation;
- strong relationships between teachers and students are developed;
- a variety of progression pathways is available to all students;
- criterion-referenced assessment methods are used to determine learner readiness for the next stage;
- curricular breadth and depth is sustained for all students.

For Seaton (2002), an effective middle years curriculum entailed a fundamental focus on learning, trans-disciplinary investigations, community development activities, and personal learning projects.

The BEP (2005, p. 18) argued that these curricular features could be achieved if students were able to personalise their learning, where students participate in planning and evaluating instruction, and where “experimentation and experience ...become the basis for learning experiences”. The Plan also acknowledged the developmental needs of adolescents, and that schools needed to afford students a range of opportunities to negotiate relationships, experiments with new social roles, and develop a social consciousness. Following Kubow and Kinney (2000) the Plan noted that this requires a more democratic approach to learning, where students participate actively, self-assess their efforts, set goals and reflect on learning outcomes, leading to strategic gains in new learning tasks. In place of the traditional structuring of the curriculum (fixed syllabi, age-based education, annual student progressions, and one teacher per class), the BEP proposed the development of sustainable learning communities through teaching teams and more customised approaches to individual student progress and wellbeing.

To address wellbeing needs of students, a teacher advisor program (see chapter 10) was devised whereby each teacher in a learning community was allocated as an advisor to 15-16 students and a weekly program was set up, entailing regular meetings to plan, enact and evaluate personal learning goals. This teacher was also to act as an advocate for their students in relation to general curricular and personal issues. In one school a formal developmental curriculum around social and emotional learning within a community over four years was established, and considered topics such as risk-taking, bullying, and developing skills to become an organised learner.

While these prescriptions about curricular content and methods are broadly persuasive and align with many current orthodoxies, they also represent major challenges in terms of disciplinary expertise, teacher professional knowledge about differentiation, and the ability of teachers to plan, enact and evaluate team teaching. The design and implementation of a robust stage-based curriculum where students