

The Case for Capabilities

The move towards capabilities

The education state is leading the way when it comes to curriculum design that targets 21st century skills or 'capabilities'. We are the only state that has developed a full k-10 curriculum around contemporary 'general capabilities' such as 'critical and creative thinking', 'personal-social capability', 'ethical and intercultural understanding'. This work has been and continues to be informed by exciting research into the role this paradigm shift might play in reforming our education system. Papers such as [The Paradigm Shifters: Entrepreneurial Learning in Schools](#), [Key Skills for the 21st Century](#), [The Capable Country: Cultivating Capabilities in Australian Education](#), note the growing importance of capabilities in the Australian schooling context and the 'invaluable' role capabilities play for children experiencing socio-economic disadvantage. This research is supported by the recommendations of the [Gonski 2.0 Report](#) which calls for greater focus on capabilities to better prepare our young people for the contemporary work setting.

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But as the **Foundation for Young Australians** (an organisation driving this agenda) notes, this is [not translating into everyday practices in our schools](#). The uptake is slow, with the Department of Education and Training aiming for 25% more year 10 students to achieve the highest levels of critical and creative thinking. Public schools are struggling to integrate these capabilities and at best cover them in short programs tacked on to an already overloaded curriculum. Add to that careers programs, Respectful Relationships, literacy and numeracy interventions and teachers genuine fear that we risk losing discipline-specific content knowledge and skills. We at Global Village School propose a solution that ensures students have both the 21st century capabilities they are going to need along with a strong grounding in disciplinary knowledge. By focusing on these capabilities as core themes, we can cover content in a much more relevant, engaging and applied ways. A values-based model emphasising what qualities we want our students to walk away with rather than a discipline-based model. Our model suggests creating subjects based on themes, or topics that connect to these general capabilities and then teaching a discipline (or multiple disciplines) within these. As I write this article I am drafting a year 9 History-Civics unit covering the Industrial Revolution and Democratic rights through the lense of the ethical understandings capability. I might call it The Ethics of Human Progress. I'll see what the students think. But by focusing on ethical frameworks (eg utilitarianism vs. virtue), my year 9s will be able to make judgements about phenomenons such as child labour, worker's rights, the environmental impacts of industry and gendered occupations. Suddenly the Industrial Revolution has a contemporary meaning and value and to be frank, sounds a lot sexier. Some public schools have already advanced upon this journey and indeed the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority have endorsed such approaches including ours.

And our perennial question...how might this help at-risk students?

Here is an example of how the 'personal and social capabilities' can be taught in a context of disadvantage. A quick note that I haven't made the argument for *why* to teach personal and social learning. I could real off the evidence-base on the impacts upon achievement, I could highlight the developmental challenges students from socially disadvantaged households often bring into the

classroom, and I could cite the educational stalwarts who have always emphasised the teacher's role in developing the whole child...but hopefully this story will speak for itself.

Girl's Secure Welfare is possibly the most confronting teaching environment there is. Short-stay, extremely vulnerable and often drug dependent young women forced into a secure facility for their own protection. Despite this, Parkville College somehow manages to run a school that for a moment in time distracts these young women from the chaos of their lives and on occasion, gives them hope for something better. As a teacher this is a dynamic and emotionally charged learning environment where the students, despite being few in number, can enter the conflict or the emotional crisis zone at any moment. Realising this, my structured PE classes quickly turned into dance, yoga, circus or free play. When presented with the opportunity to deliver an afternoon VCAL oracy class it occurred to me that I had an opportunity to teach some badly needed personal and social skills. These girls loved to tell their stories, but were so caught up in their own narratives (survival mode) that any advice or stories from their peers often fell on deaf ears. I decided to combine the oracy curriculum with the personal and social curriculum to create a class I called 'Storytelling'. But, instead of monologues with often inappropriate content, my objective was to gently introduce boundaries and to explicitly teach social-emotional skills to the conversations already happening.



In one particular class, I decided to focus on the skill of 'maintaining and repairing relationships' (skill 13 in the personal-social rubric below). I began the class with a 'parking-lot' activity where everyone (staff included) wrote down current thoughts, feelings, distractions that they wanted to just forget about for the next hour so they could fully enjoy the lesson. This was a great way to settle, emotionally regulate and for me to see where the students were at emotionally. I had two young women and one youth worker this day. I explained that maintaining relationships isn't actually that easy but that with the right skills, you can keep friends rather than ditching them or them ditching you...I had their attention. I turned to one girl, sensing she was in a good space and, using her pseudonym (a common practice amongst these young women who don't trust many adults) I said 'yesterday you and I had a bit of a disagreement about something and I wanted to apologise for what I did, I was wondering if you'd feel comfortable us using this discussion as a way of me showing how to repair relationships?' She responded with 'yeh I remember that, sure whatever'. I then proceeded to talk us through a restorative conversation: what I/you were feeling when the argument happened, what effect the argument had on each of us, what you/I have thought since then and what you/I would like to do to fix things. The youth worker, myself and the other young woman were blown away by this girl's maturity and willingness to own her role in the argument which followed from my admission that I had judged her and I shouldn't have. Following this wonderful modelling of a real restorative situation, I invited the girls to make a plan for a conversation they would like to have with a person in their lives they'd fallen out with. Both worked almost in silence for around 15 minutes with some guidance from us. One was willing to share her plan to have a conversation with her father about her drug taking behaviour and acknowledge the harm it had caused to their relationship. I wrapped up the lesson by getting out the parking lot and saying, how did we go forgetting about these things for the lesson? The response said it all 'I totally forgot about all that shit for the first time in weeks! I think this is the first school lesson I've actually learned something in years'. Could this scenario be translated into a class of 25 students? Why not? **See how we've broken down the Personal-Social capabilities into a developmental rubric [here](#).**